

A Traditional Institution surviving in a Modern Setting?

The Reinterpretation of Caste in the Indian IT Industry

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Philosophy in Sociology

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ABSTRACT

This thesis aims to explore and understand the changes to the social institution of caste that arise from the ongoing modernisation of Indian society. The research setting is the IT industry in Bangalore and Hyderabad. As the Indian IT industry is the economic sector most exposed to globalised modernisation, it has come to represent a social milieu deemed particularly modern in India. The thesis discusses the social role of the IT industry in India; the rise of the new middle classes, and the specifics of the locality of Bangalore. It is argued that caste as a social institution systematically connects three different dimensions of human existence; the economic (caste-wise division of labour); the biological (rules concerning exogamy and endogamy); and the ideational (various rationalisations for caste). While the economic dimension of caste is increasingly losing its meaning, caste endogamy remains largely intact and is rationalised in forms much more compatible with modernity. This composite model of caste is then contrasted with a model of modernity based arguments presented by the most relevant sociologists, from Max Weber to Peter Wagner. In the analysis here, the contemporary, ‘quasi-ethnic’ reinterpretation of caste appears still to conflict with the implications of modernity. Even though caste provides actual benefits for those who employ the concept and practise it – ranging from political to economic to private – its rationale nevertheless contrasts with the motives that are generally attributed to modernity.

The empirical research, employing qualitative, semi-structured interviews, participant observation, and hermeneutic interpretation of first-hand sources, produces a complex picture. The interviews with more than 70 IT employees of various caste backgrounds (including over 40 from SC/ST categories – underrepresented in the industry) indicate that caste is seemingly irrelevant in professional settings. In support of this conclusion, additional research hints at the prevalence of widespread anonymity in the IT industry and limited understanding of caste amongst IT employees. By contrast, participant observation during seven months living amongst IT engineers suggests that caste still matters: In private, the consequences of the practise of caste are still apparent, even though ritual restrictions are waning in importance. Thus, a pronounced caste-wise compartmentalisation of Indian society remains visible even amongst young IT engineers. The thesis concludes that caste is not disappearing from Indian society; rather, it is dramatically adapting to modern circumstances.

Positional Statement

Academia in general and sociology in particular is supposed to be the place where bright and honest minds are able to research and discuss the great problems of mankind in a free and open spirit. Unfortunately however, contemporary sociology suffers from some serious shortcomings; the discipline has, historically, had an uneasy and sometimes hostile relationship with the natural sciences, and seems even today largely unable or unwilling to acknowledge recent advances in closely related disciplines, ranging from psychology to human biology. Yet, within the subject, there is perhaps more infighting than consensus. An overly-prescriptive obsession with methodological ‘purity’ and ever-more fastidious compartmentalisation glosses over the fact that most sociologists are not prepared to accept challenges to their entrenched world view. Consequently, sociology is increasingly losing its relevance in the public eye; what began as a promising discipline some 150 years ago is now in danger of becoming a laughing stock.

This thesis has been written in full knowledge of these problems, but is – at the same time – compromised by this situation. An under-resourced and inexperienced researcher, who tackles a topic traditionally seen as being at the fringe of the discipline (and hence left to social anthropology), can, after all, only be expected to deliver less-than-ideal results. Unfortunately but inevitably, therefore, this thesis is beset with all the typical shortcomings of a PhD thesis; while it tries to cover far more ground than is feasible, it is, at the same time, both over- and under-referenced (depending on particular topic). Since it takes a new theoretical approach, there are few empirical sources upon which to base critical analysis and discussion. In particular, there are no sociological sources that take the biological argument within caste into account, and the thesis is forced to enter unknown territory in this regard. Last but not least, and hardly surprising in such an ideologically divided discipline, getting adequate supervision for this (potentially) controversial research topic proved to be challenging, to say the least.

Nevertheless, one particular aspect of this thesis deserves attention. While most sociologists would confine themselves exclusively to references from within their own discipline, this thesis draws upon an eclectic range of sources – and hence deliberately trespasses into non-sociological territory. Furthermore, whereas many sociologists would balk at the very idea of acknowledging (human) biological facts, this thesis unashamedly accepts such facts where and when necessary. In the manner in which it puts the research topic first and questions of disciplinary boundaries second, it tries to rescue the subject of caste from the self-inflicted limitations of contemporary social sciences. The obvious outcome of this approach is predictable: This thesis will be condemned by those who value established sociological conventions and methodological purity. However, for those who dare go beyond the merely conventional or who wish to challenge their pre-conceptions – that is, those who have a genuine interest in the topic – this thesis would be an interesting and thought-provoking read.

Value Judgements

The question of value judgements is almost as old as sociology itself. In *Science as a Vocation*, Weber famously makes the point that (social) scientists misuse their power if they include normative preconceptions in their academic writings. This point was valuable then; it is invaluable now. Unfortunately, this value free ideal of science is impossible to achieve in practice; scientists are, after all, human and humans always have their biases, perspectives and prejudices. Therefore, it is necessary to clearly indicate my own position: While sociological research can potentially *inform* political discussion, it should under no circumstances be equated with political debate itself. These distinct ‘value-spheres’ follow their own respective rationales, and any conflation of scientific knowledge and political judgement would corrupt them both. All (social) scientists should, therefore, avoid value judgements in situations where they are acting as scientists. Yet, despite this clear position, freedom from value judgements is not fully possible for the reasons stated above. The only meaningful way to deal with this dilemma is to reflect upon one’s own value system and publicly disclose it. I will therefore openly state my own beliefs and opinions on the most problematic issues touched upon by this research.

First and foremost, Human Dignity is non-negotiable; it is a natural right of all human beings and must be treated as the ultimate aim of all political endeavour. Furthermore, I believe that a democratically legitimised combination of a thriving capitalist economy and a strong and comprehensive welfare state – epitomised by the Western European nation states – is the best practical means to achieve the ideals laid down in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. Most Human Rights can only be honoured once a certain stage of economic development is reached. In my opinion, enlightened capitalism offers the best way to achieve this end. That does not imply that capitalism is an end in itself nor that it is beyond legitimate critique. Nevertheless, this does suggest that it makes more sense to contemplate alternatives to capitalism in a *developed* country rather than in a *developing* one, where capitalistic modernisation is badly needed to raise standards of living beyond the subsistence level.

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Prof. Anand Imbanathan and Prof. Manohar S. Yadav from ISEC provided time and goodwill for this project, and their comments helped me further develop my ideas. Dr. Srikant Patibandla, at this time a PhD candidate himself, made Indian society and Bangalore accessible to me, shared insights and stories and proved a friend whenever I needed one. Prof. Martin Fuchs, first at the University of Canterbury and later at the Max Weber Centre, committed a tremendous amount of time to this thesis and his contributions are valuable in more than just the obvious ways. Terry Austrin guided me through the final stages; not even a devastating earthquake hindered his commitment. Last but not least, this thesis would not have seen the light of the day without additional invaluable assistance. Krishne Gowda and M.V. Shobha transcribed the interviews, and this was a hell of a job. Finally, Patrick Michael Whittle did all the proof-reading and helped me solve not only linguistic, but also methodological and argumentative problems. While without him this thesis would be less readable, please forgive the occasional lapse.

Glossary

Backward Caste term for socio-economically deprived castes, in most cases identical with →Low Caste

BPO Business Process Outsourcing – alternative name for →ITES

Forward Caste colloquial, but sometimes officially used term for →High Caste

Gotra traditional kinship classification, patrilineal gotra-exogamy prevents inbreeding

HDI Human Development Index

High Caste traditionally castes associated with *Brahmin*, *Kshatriya* or *Vaishya* varna, also called “twice born”

IHDS Indian Human Development Survey <http://ihds.umd.edu/>

IT Information Technology, in the context here an economic sector centred on the design, development and maintenance of computer software,

ITES IT-enabled Services; analogous to BPO, all services that are outsourced by using Information and Communication Technology between customer and service provider

Jajmani traditional crop-sharing system within a village community, economically linking different castes

Jati in most of the literature seen as the actual caste today, most Jati have vague affiliation to one of the four Varna categories

Low Caste traditionally all castes associated with *Shudra* Varna, or no varna affiliation at all

MNC Multinational Corporation

OBC Other Backward Classes; official administrative classification of castes and communities eligible of affirmative action, but outside of SC or ST

Panchayat village council, comprised of elder representatives of the major castes in the locality

Untouchables (derogatory) term for those castes below the Varna scheme, today called Scheduled Castes (officially), Harijans (euphemistically) or Dalits (politically, self-identificatory)

SC Scheduled Castes – official administrative classification of (mainly) former Untouchable Castes

ST Scheduled Tribes – official administrative classification of India's tribal population

Varna the Vedic precursors of today's castes; *Brahmins* (priests / teachers) *Kshatriyas* (rulers / warriors) *Vaishyas* (merchants / traders) *Shudras* (labourer / servants)

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Introduction

India's relationship with modernity has not always been smooth and easy, but at least since 1991 this country has been modernising with ever-accelerating pace. Given that India consistently achieves an economic growth rate of up to 8 per cent per year, it is almost certain that this nation will soon be fully integrated into the developed world. Already a democracy, India's eventual embrace of capitalism removed the only obstacle in the way to becoming a fully-fledged modern nation state. In the decades to come, it will more and more resemble the developed nations of the OECD. Or so it seems. There are a number of possible alternatives paths India could follow on its own route towards modernity, and it is not yet clear if India will get where it wants to be. As scholars from all academic backgrounds try to assess the changes that India is going through, an especially thorny set of questions are being asked about India's social customs, including its religious traditions.

While Hinduism is generally not seen as a major hindrance for the modernisation of India, more detailed analysis regarding certain practices may reveal difficult issues. One set of particularly vexed questions concerns the survival of pre-modern institutions in the context of socio-economic change, with the social institution of caste a key concern. Long perceived as a phenomenon that carries essentially anti-modern values, caste's apparent survival in modernising India poses questions that do not allow simplistic answers. On the one hand, there is clear evidence that caste is adapting to modern socio-economic conditions and that the conflict with modernity is at least partially resolvable. However, a deeper analysis will show – and this will be discussed in the thesis – that the very idea of caste is never fully in sync with the underlying values of modernity. For this reason alone, caste will always have a frictional and discordant relationship with modernity and with the values that are understood as underlying any notion of modernity. Moreover, the values that are intrinsic to caste are not consistent with scientific evidence about human nature – another reason to look at this phenomenon more closely than has previously been done. The more contradictory the topic appears the more rewarding possible research projects will be.

In regard to the academic background, this thesis will try to balance several different elements: It will bring together one of the most discussed topics in sociology – modernity – with one that has been relatively neglected or 'outsourced' to social anthropology – the institution of caste. Even though neither phenomenon is fully understood, and both remain controversial, the sociological literature about modernity could fill libraries whereas the (theoretical) literature on caste would fit on a single shelf. And while there are numerous empirical studies about actual caste relationships, the theoretical understanding of caste itself is still in its infancy. The explanation for this state of affairs is obvious: Social anthropology, and the mostly theory-adverse forms of sociology that have dominated this field in the past, see caste primarily as an old, primordial and localised tradition; scholarly research, therefore, has concentrated on historical aspects in general, and local village studies in particular. However, empirical

evidence clearly shows that caste is not merely an institution of remote villages, but that it is practised in modern, urban settings as well. Caste plays a powerful role in India's political system and in its economy – thus it is all the more bewildering that relatively little attention has been paid to caste relations within modernity.¹ It is here, at the very interface of caste and modernity, that the theoretical neglect of caste and the previous researchers' obsession with the past have left a great gap that would be a Herculean task to fill.

Fortunately, the situation has recently improved, and there are now studies and approaches in several fields that are beginning to fill the void. While a real theoretical understanding of caste remains up in the air, there are ever more studies analysing caste in relation to modernity. Again, this should not come as a surprise. Against the backdrop of globalisation, both topics are increasingly interconnected, with the ever-faster integration of India into the world economy posing new questions on an almost daily basis. Moreover, the dominance of social anthropology and closely related forms of sociology has finally been broken, with economists, psychologists and other researchers now enthusiastically addressing the topic. Although these developments are unlikely to result in a unified, let alone comprehensive, theory of caste, they increase empirical knowledge immensely and provide a clearer perspective on this social institution. Thus, while both modernity and caste are still mired in controversial debate, this thesis does not have to start from scratch. Rather, it first has to order the known facts and theorems before relating them to empirical research. The first and second chapters, respectively, tackle the theoretical aspects of caste and modernity, while the subsequent chapters approach the relevant issue empirically.

Analogous to the theoretical disputes over caste and modernity, the empirical reality is anything but straightforward or uncontroversial. As the interconnection of caste with modernity is the central question here, the Indian IT industry has been chosen as the research setting – essentially, because it is the most modern sector of the Indian economy, with an enormous influence on wider society. However, while the decision to concentrate on caste in the Indian IT sector is certainly justifiable, it comes at a cost. As the sector that is the most modern and the most open to (modernising) influences from the West, IT offers a unique perspective on caste, yet at the same time it is considerably removed from the social reality of the majority of Indians. Thus, while the analysis can hope to provide insights that are pertinent to India's future, it cannot claim to be relevant for the rest of India today. What is apparent in this elite segment of society could either be a distant glimpse of the future for the rest of society or, alternatively, carry no meaning at all. Caution is therefore advisable: As no one can predict the future, the choice of IT as a standard bearer for the further modernisation of India could, in fact, be a mistaken one, and India's modernisation process could take other, unforeseeable paths instead. Nevertheless, the choice of IT as research setting is not unwarranted and if one concentrates on the sector itself, the least that one can expect is to find a unique and highly nuanced setting for the current practice and interpretation of caste in contemporary India. Thus, even if any attempt to generalise its results proves

¹ Modernity is understood as a specific concept here (see chpt. 2), so those studies from the post-independence era (think of Milton Singer, M.N. Srinivas or the Rudolphs) could serve as a reference, but start from a different perspective on modernity.

problematic, it should nevertheless provide an interesting and insightful analysis of an emblematically important case.

As should be apparent by now, this thesis is an ambitious one, perhaps even overambitious; therefore, it is only to be expected that some areas will be covered only superficially. Of course, the aspirations of a PhD thesis are always constrained by the limited resources available, and this thesis is no exception. Especially because large scale quantitative sampling was not permitted by the industry, the empirical foundation of some of my arguments are not as firm as would have been the case in more ideal circumstances. At the same time, however, the qualitative methods used here allow clear, if as yet provisional, conclusions to be reached, even if final confirmation is still required in some cases. Understandably, this thesis will not be the last word on the issues that it addresses, and in many instances it asks more questions than it could ever hope to answer. Despite these limitations, the thesis' vaunting ambitions provide perhaps the greatest potential of this work: This project, and especially the theoretical model developed within it, could be profitably used as a springboard for future research. All academic enquiries, after all, remain valid only until newer research renders them obsolete; yet it is hoped that this endeavour will at least provide a spark that ignites a more vigorous and less sterile debate on caste in the future.

1. Towards an adequate theory of Caste

1.1. The conventional interpretation of Caste

1.1.1. Introduction – the problem with a theory of Caste

Anyone attempting to understand caste sociologically faces a vexed problem: Despite decades of research, a striking contrast remains between a wealth of empirical knowledge on the subject and a dearth of theoretical understanding. There are countless anthropological studies on caste in empirical settings, innumerable writings on caste relations in villages or restricted localities and numerous personal insiders' descriptions, in addition to more scholarly accounts. A large number of scholars have earned their stripes in this field, and hundreds, if not thousands, of case studies have been added to the existing knowledge. Unfortunately, this abundance of empirical information does not correspond well with a theoretic understanding of caste as a unique social institution (for an overview, see U. Sharma 1999). In particular, no comprehensive theory exists that would help to understand caste in modernity.² This issue is all the more pressing as a great many issues surrounding the phenomenon demand clarification, especially the fact that caste does not appear to vanish with modernisation. For the moment, it is a telling statement for our discipline to acknowledge that a full sociological penetration of caste is thus far absent. Hence, a theory that might help bring order to the complexity of known facts is urgently needed, particularly as the caste puzzle becomes more baffling the more it is exposed to competing social concepts within India, as well as within a globalised Indian Diaspora.

Of course, theories of caste have been articulated before – but aside from a few notable exceptions, the resulting theories have never fully left the descriptive fold (Quigley 1993, chpt. 1-3; U. Sharma 1999, chpt. 2). If a more systematic approach has been tried, it has often failed to find approval in the eyes of critical empiricists. The result is a contradiction: Whereas Louis Dumont (Dumont 1980; Khare 1971) is still considered the most eminent (if not undisputed) theoretician in this area, most empirical researchers tend to disagree with the consequences of his systematic approach to caste: Where he sees a caste *system* as a pyramid-like hierarchy based on religious ideas that are shared by everyone, empirical fieldwork does not seem to support the holistic unity that he postulates (Barnett et al. 1976; D. Gupta 2000; Madan 1999, 2001; M. N. Srinivas 2002 [1984]).³ But instead of replacing Dumont's theory with an account of caste that is more in sync with contemporary empirical findings, most scholars in this area have simply abandoned the theoretical field altogether, often in favour of empirical findings that are piece-meal at best and a mass of contradictory facts and details at worst. This plethora of empirical

² The historical origin of caste is still not fully understood and no time should be wasted here contributing to further speculations upon its genesis. Perhaps there will never be a conclusive answer to this question, especially as its scientific value is doubtful at best. How would an exact account of caste's ancient history help to understand this institution in the 21st century?

³ Historical accounts of the colonial era do not seem to support Dumont's view either: Frank F. Conlon, 'Caste, Community, and Colonialism', *Journal of Urban History*, 11/2 (February 1, 1985 1985), 181-208, Nicholas B. Dirks, *Castes of Mind: Colonialism and the Making of Modern India* (Princeton University Press, 2001).

findings does not add up to a better understanding of caste and it is therefore not surprising that the wealth of field research is yet to result in a theory able to accommodate anomalous facts – that is, those facts that do not fit neatly into the Dumontian scheme. The question “What is Caste?” can still be interpreted and answered quite differently, depending on the methodological preferences of individual researchers. Nevertheless, this question is a legitimate one, which needs to be answered systematically. Audacious as it may sound, this chapter is a first attempt to re-write a theory of caste and to develop one that is compatible with the empirical findings about caste in modernity.

1.1.2. Conventional theoretical approaches to Caste

Despite the difficulties, a theory of caste is not unattainable. Sound and comprehensive definitions of caste as a social institution have been tried several times before, with a number of useful versions as proof of this endeavour. Unfortunately, the inherent contradictions of caste are more often than not neglected or even ignored in these definitions,⁴ although they can at least be used to filter those elements that are deemed essential for caste as a social institution. Thus, by looking at conventional definitions of caste, one can isolate the building blocks that could be recombined to produce a workable theory of caste.

Conventional definitions of caste can be broadly classified as (quasi-)deductive or (quasi-)inductive. The former starts from abstract principles and comes to a theory by logical deduction; the latter begins with empirical observations and tries to find a common denominator in these findings that then qualifies as a theoretical postulate. The definition of caste given by M.N. Srinivas – perhaps the best-known empirical scholar in this area – belongs clearly to the indicative fold, and sums up much of the conventional wisdom about caste:

Caste is a hereditary, endogamous, usually localized group, having a traditional association with an occupation, and a particular position in the hierarchy of castes. Relations between castes are governed, among other things, by the concepts of pollution and purity, and generally, maximum commensality occurs within the caste. (M. N. Srinivas 1962: 3)

An alternative approach, and clearly in the deductive fold, is formulated by Dumont himself (essentially based on the definition developed by Bouglé (1971 [1908]):

The caste system divides the whole society into a large number of hereditary groups, distinguished from one another and connected together by three characteristics: **separation** in matters of marriage and contact, whether direct or indirect (food); **division** of labour, each group having, in theory or by tradition, a profession from which their member can depart only within certain limits; and finally **hierarchy**, which ranks the groups as relatively superior or inferior to one another. (Dumont 1980: 21 emphasis in original)

⁴ Abundant reasons for this can be found: Since most theorists of caste have also been concerned with an explanation of its origin, any definition necessarily takes a fundamentalist turn (i.e. becomes strongly aligned to one position or another). In exploring the ‘true nature’ of caste, any such definition involves an alignment with the prevalent academic and non-academic camps that dominate the field. By looking for an ultimate ‘one-and-only’ answer, the scope and diversity of the phenomenon is easily lost to a rather narrow, reduced or truncated interpretation. By siding with one camp or another, alternative perspectives are lost and a false harmony disguises the theoretic and empiric fault lines that characterise caste.

With these two definitions, one has already a good overview on caste, within which all the basic elements of caste – the buildings blocks for a theory – are formulated. Both the definitions and the theories they project need qualifying, but both are nevertheless useful for a basic understanding of caste. Srinivas' definition is perhaps too vague and not selective enough to separate caste from other phenomenon.⁵ Dumont's approach, meanwhile, has attracted the most academic controversy. His theory of a system that encompasses the whole society, and which forms a clear hierarchy based on the concept of pollution, is convincingly elegant; however, it is characterised by empirical contradictions, and has been much criticised by fellow anthropologists. The controversial discussion of whether Lower Castes accept or challenge their low status, for example, still fills books (D. Gupta 2000; U. Sharma 1999: chpt.4). As this theory implies that all members of caste society share the basic notion of hierarchy, itself attached to concepts of purity and pollution, Dumont appears to be contradicted by empirical findings that such values are not shared by all, let alone a majority.

Still, the problem with Dumont runs deeper than this: Because he sees castes as a religiously-inspired system, he deliberately projects it as an indivisible entity. Whenever there is a discrepancy between his theoretical assumptions and the empirical reality, this is explained away as a failure to properly implement the concept of caste in that particular context. And even where he takes account of non-systematic developments within caste – he calls it *Substantialisation*⁶ – he is unaware of or unreceptive to underlying frictions imminent in the institution of caste. For Dumont, caste is a solid system, governed by principles that are relevant for all members of a society. This contradicts with an empirical reality, described by countless scholars (see references above), that indicates less continuity, much more conflict and, above all, an underlying tension within caste itself.

To take these tensions into account, one would need to formulate a theory that acknowledges this conflict and places it in the centre of analysis, instead of rejecting it as an idiosyncratic empirical discrepancy. Fortunately for the development of a comprehensive theory of caste, there is at least one approach that reflects these underlying conflicts. For Declan Quigley, caste results

from an uneasy stalemate between the pull of localised lineage organisation and the forces of political, ritual and economic centralisation encapsulated in monarchical institutions. (Quigley 1994: 25)

With this simple formulation, and for the first time, caste is defined not as a monolithic institution, but as one that systematically connects a number of different elements. The centrality Quigley attributes to the monarch⁷ (or king) might not be fully shared by other scholars,⁸ but his definition has wider implications. His 'stalemate' implies that caste is not an institution that rests on stable foundations but

⁵ His definition is mainly designed to bring in all empirical forms of caste, thereby undermining its usefulness for a more discriminatory theory of caste.

⁶ The substantialisation theorem was originally developed by G.S. Ghryre, but is mostly attributed to his student M.N. Srinivas today.

⁷ The relevant research took place mainly in Nepal, a long-time official 'Hindu-Kingdom' where the interconnection of caste with worldly power is much more pronounced than in officially secular India.

⁸ Quigley was strongly, and often unfairly, criticised for his unorthodox approach; for an example see Mckim Marriott, 'Review: India without Hindu Concepts?', *Journal of the American Oriental Society*, 118/3 (1998), 377-80.

one that sits uneasily on conflicting ones. For him, these two essential, constitutive elements of caste are governed by conflicting rationales: The centralising one of legitimate authority, on the one hand, and the dispersive or splintering effect of social alignment on ethnic lines, on the other. The defining stalemate thus indicates the contradictions and conflicts that lie beneath caste's surface. Following Quigley, caste is seen as a social compromise, made up of conflicting elements. His elements might be open to dispute, but the very formulation of this conflict provides us with a model to which may be added additional elements. Unfortunately, Quigley does not elaborate further on his own theory of caste; he asks more questions than he answers and when he leaves the theoretic field for the empiric, he leaves unfinished business behind.⁹

1.1.3. The building blocks for a theory of Caste

However inconclusive the conventional definitions of caste might be, they at least provide the basis for a more convincing theory. Based on the available literature, one is equipped with all the ingredients for a theory of caste. If the elements from Srinivas' and Dumont's definitions are distilled, caste would consist of the following:

- a hereditary element within caste, resulting in endogamy;
- a traditional association of each caste with an occupation, resulting in inter-caste division of labour;
- a notion of hierarchy – whether or not shared by all;
- a concept of purity and pollution, one that informs interactions between castes;
- a complex system of inter-caste relations, between commensality (see Srinivas) and separation (Dumont);
- a form of rationalisation, that is either merely traditional (Srinivas) or taken from religious values (Dumont).

If this is combined with Quigley's analysis of caste in relation to underlying conflicting elements, what arises is a theory of caste that is both more analytical – and therefore more receptive to the tensions within caste – and more applicable to different circumstances, since it is abstracted from concrete, empirical findings.

⁹ Declan Quigley has always been treated as an outsider to his discipline, social anthropology. Unfortunately, in 2002 he left academia for good – a great loss for the theoretical understanding of caste.

1.1.4. Transcending the conventional Models of Caste

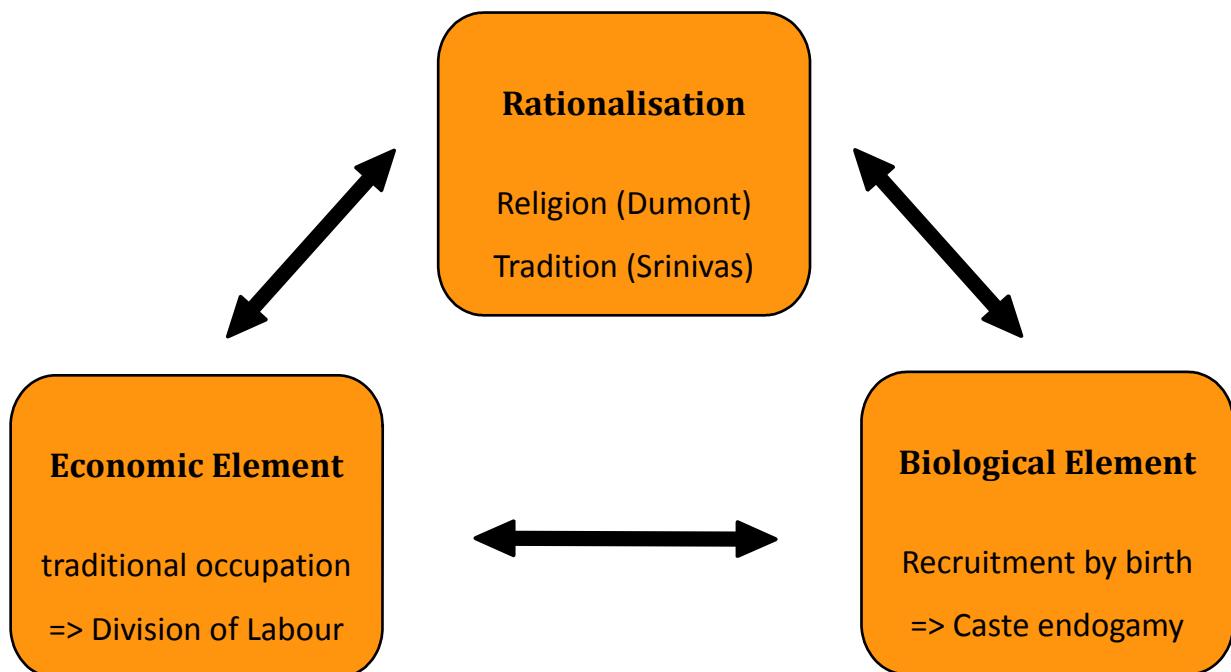
It is important to recapitulate what has thus far been established, and to discuss what is at stake. The conventional models of caste have failed to establish a consensus on caste in modern circumstances. It would be futile to add another chapter to the old conflict between those who locate the study of caste at the crossroad of sociology and Indology (Dumont and others) and those from the historical school (Dirks 1997; Inden 1986), who see caste as a historically informed entity, formed by colonial or post-colonial knowledge systems. Similarly, it would be pointless to follow the fragmented findings of contemporary sociological and anthropological schools. The numerous contributions from sociologists and social anthropologists should not be ignored – there are some accounts that are very useful for a theory (Raheja 1989) – but their findings are too often simply not abstract enough for a viable theory of caste that is independent of local context and accessible to scholars outside the discipline. The study of caste is too important to leave to a single discipline; thus, the hegemony of social anthropology and its numerous idiosyncrasies needs to be challenged at the same time that its empirical contributions should be duly acknowledged.

For these reasons, a completely new theory would need to be written in order to synthesise all the established knowledge about caste. While this is a daunting task, it is possible once a high level of abstraction and an open mind are combined. The six elements distilled from the literature are important ‘building blocks’ for a theory of caste, but they require further consideration. Not all elements are relevant at the same time, and most are not abstract enough to be incorporated into a comprehensive theory. It is therefore necessary to take them one by one, assess their relevance and their deeper meaning, and combine them anew. The building blocks will be taken to a higher level of abstraction first: ‘hereditary element’ will become ‘biological element’, ‘caste-wise division of labour’ will henceforth be ‘economic element’ and the numerous forms of making sense of caste will simply be called ‘rationalisation’ or the ‘ideational element’. The second step will be the recombination of the central elements and the formulation of a new model of caste. While some of the ‘building blocks’ (1.1.3.) are central for any analysis of caste, others are only relevant in specific interpretation of caste.

One possible result of this process is discussed below, but alternative models of recombination are conceivable. The specific nexus between economic and biological assumptions is very much characteristic of caste, and is differently legitimised by narratives that pertain to the religious sphere (or at least transcend daily life). Since the belief system that binds economy and biology is contextual, the resulting amalgam can, in fact, be mixed differently. Nevertheless, caste would not be caste if one of these ingredients were missing.

1.2. An abstract model of Caste

In the following, it will be argued that caste arises from the intersection of three main elements that sometimes conflict, but nevertheless make an essential contribution to this institution. In its most fundamental form, the institution of caste systematically connects the economic and biological livelihood of people with a specific form of rationalisation:



1.2.1. The economical nexus – Caste and traditional occupation

Caste is associated with traditional occupations, even in the present day. This does not mean that every caste member was or is employed in this occupation, but that caste as an economic unit is, in the eyes of its members and in those of observers, symbolically connected to a specific profession. This is incontrovertibly established in the literature; the connection of *Jati* and *Varna* with a traditional occupation is almost universally seen as essential for caste (Dumont 1980: chpt.4; Karanth 1996). Every community still associates (and is associated) with a traditional occupation, however symbolic or weak this link might be in real economic terms (Sahay 2004). The empirical proof is equally simple and plausible: Even today, after considerable change and under fundamentally altered economic conditions, their traditional occupation is still known to caste members and others living in local proximity.

Although the exact historical events cannot be reconstructed, this connection between caste and occupation is seen as steeped in tradition, at least in popular opinion. Likewise, traditional village institutions like *Jajmani* or *Panchayat* appear to indicate the long-established nature of caste. According to the *Jajmani* system, every caste has a place in the economic structure of a locality. Within this locality, a variety of castes with distinct and indispensable functions constitute a mesh of mutual dependencies.

However deep this interconnection might be in the specific circumstances, the very fact of this specialisation suggests that caste can only exist in the plural: Wherever one caste exists, it needs exchange with other castes to survive economically. However, individual members of a particular caste are not necessarily required to work in the associated profession, and women do not invariably perform the same tasks that men do; thus, it might well be that considerably less than half of a caste's population actually practised their calling, even in pre-modern times (Rocher 1975).

For the theoretical model of caste, the economic dimension is of particular importance as it is a source of hierarchisation – itself a building block for the theory. With the division of labour, the hierarchical nature of castes is already pre-established: Not only are members of every caste publicly associated with a particular profession, they are also crudely ranked according to the prestige given to the tasks that have to be performed within their occupation. Without any further consideration of religious, ritual, mythological or ideological rationalisations, the underlying economic structure promotes differences that are easily ranked into stages of prestige and hierarchy: Before any (ritually established) notions of purity and pollution come into play, a general disdain for physical labour and a high regard for administrative and intellectual work are evident from the outset. In other words, a hierarchy of different professions precedes the hierarchy that bases itself on notions of purity and pollution. Of course, the ranking of occupations is intrinsically connected to the status attached to this occupation, and this status is charged with ritual and/or cultural values. In social practice, then, the ranking is done in conjunction with a rationalisation of the ritual elements of caste. But since this rationalisation can be done differently (see 1.2.3.), the economic element within caste has an importance for hierarchy that cannot be underestimated.

What are the consequences of this for an empirical analysis of caste? First, caste is based on economic presuppositions. It can only be sustained in a society with differentiated divisions of labour, a high degree of economic specialisation, and a level of development that can sustain 'unproductive' parts of society.¹⁰ As Quigley notes, caste cannot exist in subsistence economies and it loses its grip on society wherever marginal areas do not support more than a basic form of economic survival (Quigley 1994: 39). Second, a caste is very easily and clearly distinguishable from a tribe, even though the latter might share some of the other essential elements. While a tribe is, at least potentially, a self-sustaining unit which could survive relatively well in economic isolation, a caste relies upon the existence of other castes. The often-heard narrative that caste is an institution designed for a village society is not totally wrong, although it fallaciously implies that caste is a traditional, primordial institution. The economic element, by contrast, tells a different tale: Caste cannot have a tradition that extends back beyond a certain level of social development. It is also misleading to think of caste as 'organic' or 'traditional'; it should rather be seen as an elaborate and sophisticated institution that needs a complex set of requirements to sustain itself. With regard to the economic element at least, caste is a relatively modern phenomenon; it

¹⁰ That is, castes that are specialised in areas that do not directly produce added value; most notably – of course – priests and intellectuals.

tells of a professional differentiation that pre-dates industrialisation, but one that cannot have arisen in a primitive or ancient society based on subsistence economy (cf. Washbrook 2007).

1.2.2. The biological nexus – Caste as a quasi-ethnic social unit

With the division of labour, caste has one essential precondition. This is undisputed and hence uncontroversial within the scholarly field. The separation of labour between castes, though, is insufficient to explain the phenomenon.¹¹ A ‘biological’ element that complements the economic element is also needed to explain this institution theoretically. Caste is simply unthinkable without a deep-seated notion of inheritance and social separation on the basis of birth. Generally, there is no recruitment into a caste other than through birth, with the prevention of inter-caste marriages guaranteeing the exclusivity of this arrangement. Whether or not this biological separation is strictly enforced in practice, the very idea of caste rests upon there being essential differences that must be maintained by separation. This notion is already captured in the very first description of caste as *Varna*: The *Rig Veda* tells of the genesis of caste by explaining the origin of the four *Varnas* out of different body parts of *Purusa* (Bayly 1999: 13). Thus, although the different *Varnas* originate from the same source, it is from qualitatively different parts of it. Inevitably, they are separated qualitatively and this separation can only be maintained by preventing their members from mixing their bloodlines. For *Jatis*, meanwhile, there is no such thing as a religious narrative concerning origin. However, as *Jatis* are the ‘everyday units’ of castes, and a mixing of *Jati*-bloodlines is a far more realistic possibility, the genetics of caste are rigorously enforced: To this day, *Jati* only constitutes *Jati* if membership is exclusive to born *Jati* members.¹² In fact, caste has no institutional ‘recruitment’ process at all; it grows organically with the reproduction of its actual membership.

Although the biological element of caste is established in the literature, it is not described as a ‘biological element’, with this nomenclature making it far more controversial than it would be otherwise. This needs some discussion: No serious scholar would contend that caste is not hereditary and that caste endogamy is not central to the institution. Both Dumont and Srinivas define caste as hereditary (see 1.1.2.), and therefore clearly acknowledge that caste carries biological connotations. In the early days of Indian sociology, it was anything but controversial to discuss caste in the context of race – and therefore biology.¹³ The classic work of G.S. Ghurye, *Caste and Race in India* (1932), treats caste as a primarily defined by endogamy and later rationalised in cultural terms (cf. Celarent 2011).

Today, however, the underlying biological element is largely lost in the academic discourse and the very

¹¹ If division of labour was the only element of caste, it would resemble a guild, given that entry into the guild-protected profession is not attached to birthrights.

¹² With the notable exception of hypergamy, where caste membership follows patrilineal patterns while variation is permitted on the maternal side, one cannot join a caste unless both parents are already members of it. That there are exceptions to the general rule of biological separation between caste, has been discussed in the literature since a very long time: Pierre L. Van Den Berghe, ‘Hypergamy, Hypergenation, and Miscegenation’, *Human Relations*, 13/1 (1960), 83-91.

¹³ In biological terms, the concept of race is even more dubious than the concept of caste. However, both share the same belief that individual and social differences have their base in inherited traits. So, even while both concepts have an uneasy relationship with scientifically established facts, they share basic features in elective affinity.

mention of a *biological* element to caste can cause reactions ranging from mild head-shaking to outright moral indignation.¹⁴ The explanation for this is complex, but can be broadly classified in two ways. Firstly, the biological element is hidden behind the term ‘ethnicity’ – or kinship – and is therefore simply not understood by those who narrowly understand ethnicity as merely cultural. Secondly, and more problematically, there is a general reluctance – especially in some quarters of the social sciences (Skinner 2007) – to even consider biological claims as worthy of discussion (S. C. Michael 2005).¹⁵ The very term ethnicity is cleansed of its intrinsic biological connotations and restricted to the ‘cultural field’, thereby taking the ‘political sting’ out of it (B. Anderson 1991; Eipper 1983; Smith 1992: 438).¹⁶ Thus, while the ethnic side of caste is readily acknowledged, its biological basis is either not noticed or is ignored for normative reasons (cf. U. Sharma 1999: 71-73). Nevertheless, any unbiased analyst would accept the fact that ethnicity has a biological side and that caste, in turn, is inconceivable if the biological aspect (or claim) is not taken into account.

What exactly is meant by the biological claim? Essentially, that caste endogamy reflects the idea that different castes have different inherited characteristics,¹⁷ and that those different characteristics need to be kept biologically separate in order to preserve them.¹⁸ If this were not the case, recruitment into castes could be via simple entry rituals, based on aptitude tests for the profession that the specific caste is associated with. Instead, caste membership is inherited and castes are vigorously kept apart in biological terms, most notably through restrictions on inter-caste marriage (Chowdhry 2004; Tanabe 2006). Depending on context, numerous rules concerning exogamy and endogamy govern a system that is based on the premise of inherited – that is, ‘genetic’ – differences between castes, even if this is not explicitly expressed. Even though – or perhaps because – almost no caste apologist would phrase it in such blunt terms, caste thrives on the conviction that social characteristics have their basis in inherited differences, that a person is ultimately formed and limited by his or her genetic endowment. As striking the implications are for the view on the human condition, as central it is for the concept and practise of caste. If this belief would not be in place, recruitment into a caste could be done by aptitude or

¹⁴ The question of whether caste has real-life ethnic dimensions is a heated one in India, not least because it carries political consequences. See: Deepa S. Reddy, 'The Ethnicity of Caste', *Anthropological Quarterly*, 78/3 (2005), 543-84. However, this chapter is not concerned with the question of whether castes are indeed biologically distinct ethnicities, but whether caste as a theoretical concept is based on a notion of biological separation, resembling ethnicities. Unfortunately, those who are not able to distinguish the difference between these approaches often tend to react with unwarranted hostility.

¹⁵ This is perhaps due to misguided notions of ‘Political Correctness’ - if social concepts are analyses in terms of their biological claims, they are often seen as egregious or hurtful for human equality. See, for example, the use of the social concept ‘race’ in contemporary social-science debate; Michael Banton, 'The Vertical and Horizontal Dimensions of the Word Race', *Ethnicities*, 10/1 (2010), 127-40. and in medical context: Koffi N. Maglo, 'Genomics and the Conundrum of Race: Some Epistemic and Ethical Considerations', *Perspectives in Biology and Medicine*, 53/ 3 (2010), 357-72.

¹⁶ Compare with the statement on ‘Race’ – issued by the American Anthropological Association in May 1998. Troy Duster, *The Sociology of Science and the Revolution in Molecular Biology* (The Blackwell Companion to Sociology: Blackwell Publishing Ltd, 2008) 213-26.

¹⁷ This is intrinsic to caste, and not necessarily to the view of the author of this thesis.

¹⁸ Caste, in connecting the economic and the biological, could even be seen as a crude form of pre-modern eugenics: If endogamous groups of people have a connection with a profession by birth, it would be easy to assume that these groups are pre-destined for that particular profession because preferred traits have been literally bred into them over generations. This is, of course, scientifically suspect. But biological consequences of the caste-wise division of labour are apparent in – among others – differing, caste-specific body sizes: Rajesh K. Gautam, 'Traditional Occupations and Nutritional Adaptation among Central Indian Caste Populations', *Journal of Biosocial Science*, 40/5 (2008), 697.

inclination. The absurdity of a ‘training period’ for anyone to become a *Brahmin* or a *Vaishya*, for example, clearly indicates the strong belief in (proto-)genetics.

As hinted above, with the biological element there is an apparent gap between what is easily understood by abstract, logical reasoning, and what is believed by the people who practise caste. On an analytical level, the whole complex of marriage rules and restrictions has its function and legitimization in the preservation of the gene pool of the group. But a ‘gene pool’ (or its equivalent) is never mentioned in any writing on caste and most caste members would not even understand any such discussion about the biological claims of caste. In fact, caste members tend to give very different explanations for this biological separation, mostly in traditional or cultural terms (cf. Tanabe 2006: 773). In theoretic terms, this gap is easily explained: First of all, the biological element is part of an abstract theoretical model of caste, and this finds no fully congruent transliteration into the every-day rationalisations of caste members. Second, caste itself developed in pre-modern time; it pre-dates any scientific findings on biology or genetics. For this reason alone, it would be surprising if caste would be rationalised in terms of modern biology, let alone genetics.¹⁹ However, a basic comprehension of animal breeding that was available when caste became endogamous (according to legend²⁰) seems to be reflected in the rules that govern caste in terms of marriage and inheritance. Finally, since those disciplines that are concerned with the study of caste – mainly social anthropology and related social sciences – are not receptive to biological claims,²¹ the systematic study of possible biological elements is neglected at best and ignored at worst.

For all these reasons, one is again faced with a dilemma. Logically, there is no doubt that caste indeed has a biological side: If caste rules and regulations are scrutinised, a crude but powerful piece of reasoning about biological coherence appears. In fact, the belief that different castes are constituted by qualitatively different people lies at the very heart of this phenomenon. But the academic discussion has ignored this so thoroughly that almost no literature about it exists. Furthermore, there is almost no

¹⁹ Caste rules are not fully compatible with what is understood by geneticists today. Given the pre-scientific character, the resulting rules are relatively crude and sometimes even counterproductive in terms of modern genetics. But considering the state of available knowledge, some rules seem surprisingly useful. For instance the prevention of inbreeding by the rule of *gotra-exogamy* might have helped to sustain a group that would otherwise be endangered by a restricted gene pool. Other rules, and especially endogamy for very small populations are more likely to be counter-productive in the long term. As it is hard to establish how strict these endogamous rules have been implemented historically, it would be interesting to see if there are genetic traces of this separation visible in the Indian population today. Recent research shows a mixed picture. Without going into detail, it could be stated that against the backdrop of an overwhelming genetic unity of India’s population: (Gutala Venkata Ramana et al., ‘Y-Chromosome Snp Haplotypes Suggest Evidence of Gene Flow among Caste, Tribe, and the Migrant Siddi Populations of Andhra Pradesh, South India’, *European Journal of Human Genetics*, 9 (2001), 695-700. Partha P Majumder, ‘Ethnic Populations of India as Seen from an Evolutionary Perspective’, *Journal of Biosciences* 26/4 (November 2001 2001), 533-45.) minor traces of caste separation are identifiable (Ws Watkins et al., ‘Genetic Variation in South Indian Castes: Evidence from Y-Chromosome, Mitochondrial, and Autosomal Polymorphisms’, *BMC Genetics*, 9/86 (2008), Tatiana Zerjal et al., ‘Y-Chromosomal Insights into the Genetic Impact of the Caste System in India’, *Human Genetics*, 121 (2007), 137-44.) although these traces are often negligible (Analabha Basu, Namita Mukherjee, and Et Al. Sangita Roy, ‘Ethnic India: A Genomic View, with Special Reference to Peopling and Structure’, *Genome Research*, 13 (2003), 2277-90.).

²⁰ As said before, there is no historically exact account about the origin of caste, and speculation about it is rather futile in the context of this thesis.

²¹ The tendency in anthropology and related disciplines, “to privilege the cultural as the key diacritic in many practices” (Appadurai, Arjun (2000), *Modernity at large : cultural dimensions of globalization* (Minneapolis,: Univ. of Minnesota Press),11) is largely to blame for it.

direct relevant empirical work available, while empirical study (cf. Mahalingam 2003)²² only brings up indirect proofs of the biological claim, for reasons discussed above. While this dearth of knowledge is frustrating, there is at least some hope on the horizon: As soon as the theoretical connection between caste and biology is fully understood in academic circles, empirical studies about it are bound to arise.

While academia has largely ignored the biological side of caste, there is one notable exception to this rule: The work pioneered by B.R. Ambedkar. Although this connection is rarely mentioned, let alone scrutinised theoretically over the last 90 years, Ambedkar makes strong statements regarding the ethnic characteristics of caste as early as 1916²³ (Ambedkar 2002, 2002 [1916]). He sees caste clearly resting on a biological foundation, and he provides powerful arguments about why the practice of caste is inseparably connected to biological assumptions. Whilst he does not undertake a large empirical study about the social translation of biological concepts, he proves it indirectly by scrutinising caste endogamy with regard to its consequences. In turn, within these consequences, he finds an explanation for both the biological side of caste and its translation into social praxis. Ambedkar's argument is thus worth brief discussion.

Most scholars take endogamy for granted, without further concern about its implications. This absence of analysis is all the more surprisingly when considering the consequences of endogamy. That is, if caste is based on the separation of endogamous units that bear a resemblance to tribes, the survival of these units is nonetheless much less assured than that of a tribe. Whereas tribes live, more often than not, spatially separated from potential admixture with outsiders, castes are not insulated by distance or absence of social contact. As all castes are by their very nature (see 1.2.1) forced to live in daily contact with other castes, the chances of sexual liaisons between members of different castes, and therefore genetic admixture, becomes an imminent threat. As a result, sexual control and containment are crucial tools for the survival of a caste:

[T]here is a tendency in all groups lying in close contact with one another to assimilate and amalgamate, and thus consolidate into a homogenous society. If this tendency is to be strongly counteracted in the interest of caste formation, it is absolutely necessary to circumscribe a circle outside of which people should not contract marriages.(Ambedkar 2002 [1916]: 247)²⁴

Here lies a test for the biological aspect of caste: With the very notion of endogamy and the situation of many endogamous units living in close proximity and in daily social contact, strict control of reproductive sources, a non-permissive moral coding of sexuality and a severe sanctioning of violations are to be expected, if caste is indeed based on biological separation.

And these rules are indeed visible wherever caste is of any concern. There is no doubt that a non-

²² Mahalingam's example is primarily based on the essentialist view on caste – even if he calls it class. Given the dearth of relevant studies, however, it provides a notable exception in the way that it empirically researches the theoretical premise in question.

²³ This is no coincidence. Ambedkar was writing at a time when 'Political Correctness' was of no concern – hence his freedom to see the obvious and to discuss the consequences.

²⁴ For Ambedkar, marriage was a precondition for sexual reproduction. However, it should be clear that there is indeed the option of sexual reproduction prior or outside of marriage contexts.

permissive sexual ethic governs all members of ‘respectable’ castes, focusing most especially on women (K. Banerjee 1999; Kapur 2001; S. Radhakrishnan 2009). The reasons for this can only be explained by invoking the biological foundation of caste: As any other social entity that bases its membership on birth, caste has to have a strong concern about the group’s chances of reproduction. As caste membership is defined by birth, the survival of caste depends on the successful reproduction of its members as all alternative modes of recruitment would inflict upon caste endogamy. In order to secure caste endogamy (that is, biological exclusivity), the caste can only draw from a limited pool of members (of reproductive age), with a particular caste’s survival as a social group dependent upon their reproductive success. Consequently, norms regarding the control of sexuality, and the vigorous enforcement of these norms, are needed to uphold caste endogamy and, in turn, caste itself as a biological unit. The idea of caste and the practice of caste endogamy can therefore help to explain the prevalence of non-permissive norms regarding sexuality in India.

Moreover, caste endogamy and its consequences could also help to explain the variance of norms between particular castes. Generally, sexual restrictions (or the sanctions for their violation) become more severe the smaller the group is, as biological survival, which in turn determines cultural survival, becomes ever more daunting the smaller the resources are (cf. Etzioni 2000; Hexmoor et al. 2006; Kolstad 2007). Two major possibilities could imperil the survival of a caste: Either caste members could simply fail to reproduce or they could conceive children with outsiders. In the latter case, the caste could ostracise the violator and the child, and thereby lose two members, offspring and parent. Since this may be a serious loss to a small group, a compromise would be to accept the child into the caste; mostly patrilineal examples of this practice exist in the form of hypergamy (Gray 1980; Van Den Berghe 1960; Varma 2000). The norm, however, would be to exclude this inter-caste child or, better still, prevent any violation of endogamous caste rules from the very beginning.

As already stated, these rules are gendered, with more restrictions placed on women (Ambedkar 2002 [1916]: 248/49).²⁵ Since women are far more important for the biological survival of any group than men, they are the main focus of moral attitudes regarding sexuality. The very fact that the chances of reproduction are limited by the number of fertile female caste members gives them a special status. That does not necessarily reflect on their social status and prestige, but it nevertheless entails protection and containment to various degrees. Fertile, unmarried women are seen as the most valuable and vulnerable part of the group, consequentially they face the greatest restrictions.²⁶ This is confirmed, for

²⁵ A simple example highlights why this makes sense under the given circumstances: If a caste member conceives a child with an outsider, this reduces reproductive opportunities, albeit differently depending on gender. First of all, a child takes up more resources from its mother than from its father. Moreover, under patrilineal norms, the offspring of a male caste member could be integrated into the fold, the child of a female caste member would be lost, since it either joins the caste of the father or gets ostracised from both castes. In any case, an inter-caste relationship is worse for the woman’s caste, and consequentially more sexual restrictions are placed on women.

²⁶ This seems to be in contrast to the emphasis on the male bloodline that is prevalent in much of India: Leela Dube, ‘Seed and Earth: The Symbolism of Biological Reproduction and Sexual Relations of Production’, in Leela Dube, Eleanor Leacock, and Shirley Ardener (eds.), *Visibility and Power: Essays on Women in Society and Development* (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1986), 22-53. However, a biological explanation, underlying the cultural one, directly points to the difference between men and women in regard to their reproductive potential; thus, the bottleneck is necessarily with females.

example, by the empirical observation that unmarried women are generally separated from unrelated men and are monitored in all situations that involve contact with adult males (Desai and Andrist 2010; S. A. Raman 2009; Sodhi et al. 2004).²⁷ To ensure their reproductive potential is channelled into the family and caste group, and to prevent disputes about paternity, women traditionally get married at a very early age. Moreover, within marriage, they face stronger controls and more restrictive moral expectations than men (Ahmed-Ghosh 2009). In cases of extra-marital sexual relationships, sanctions are more rigorously applied to women than they are to men. Should a child be born from an illegitimate relationship, it is usually the mother who faces the more severe consequences that the group puts on this violation of norms.

All this would not make sense if caste was just a social institution without a biological element. If membership of castes was not through birth, the recruitment base would be much larger, and the control of reproductive resources much less significant. Of course, the control of reproductive resources is of concern in basically all ‘traditional’ societies, but the basis of this varies widely. For caste in India, the units for any such control are the most salient indicator of the biological aspect of caste. The single caste, *Jati*, is seen as the basic unit for sexual reproduction; hence the control of reproduction takes place within the caste in opposition to all other castes. Thus, wherever there is empirical evidence for a preference for intra-caste reproduction, coupled with restrictions on inter-caste reproduction, the biological foundation of caste is clearly manifested.

1.2.3. The ideational nexus – the rationalisation of Caste

Caste does not exist without a narrative that transcends the empirical facts to provide an explanation for its existence. This narrative comes in various shapes and forms, but it is highly unlikely that caste is practised without any reflection upon its meaning. From the classic ‘Brahminic’ tradition, which traces this phenomenon back to the *Rig Veda*, to the most simple ‘us versus the rest of society’ attitude, caste is also a belief-system that would not exist if this element were missing. Obviously, this is a truism: No social institution exists without some form of rationalisation. But since this rationalisation can vary, a variety of consequences are theoretically imaginable, with a great diversity empirically observable.²⁸ In the case under consideration, it might appear as if there is a spectrum, ranging from a very orthodox, religiously inspired caste ideology, to a liberal approach that sees caste as only related to the family. Nevertheless, if there is a spectrum, it is at least bipolar – the fundamental distinction is not between a strong and a soft version of the same idea. On the contrary, the ‘holistic version’ of caste as a religiously inspired system fundamentally contrasts with the ‘substantial view’ that caste is basically the extension of a family into a kinship network. In both versions there might be scope for deviation or dilution, but the difference is that they take their legitimisation from different sources. If one contrasts the basic

²⁷ Known under the name of ‘Purdah’ – this practise is not at all confined to India’s Muslim minority, as the name would indicate.

²⁸ Analytically, there needs to be a distinction between a reflected and a non-reflecting rationalisation of caste. The academic rationalisations often find scant or no correspondence in the everyday rationalisations of actual caste members. This fact alone helps to explain a great deal about the controversy surrounding Dumont’s theory of caste.

distinction between a holistic, systematic approach – the ‘book view’ most famously associated with Dumont’s theory – with the alternative, a view of caste that starts from a specific empirical caste constellation – the ‘field view’, associated with M.N. Srinivas – then a number of issues arise.

The religious interpretation of caste is perhaps best known as the ‘book view’, ‘*Brahminic* interpretation’ or ‘holistic approach’. Since Hinduism is not based on a central, constitutive text, it is always contentious to trace caste ideologies from religious teachings. Its ‘remarkable flexibility in assimilation of even contradictory religious and philosophical concepts’ (Jaiswal 1998: 225) makes it impossible to categorically assign caste to a single source. Within the variety of teachings summarised as ‘Hinduism’, there are justifications for both an egalitarian society and a worldview that is based on caste differences. Perhaps the most prominent source for a religious legitimisation of caste is the *Manusmriti* (part of the *Dharmaśāstras*);²⁹ but even here the concept of caste is primarily one of *Varna* instead of *Jati*. The text tells of the division into four categories of people and the hierarchy between them, along with their religious and day-to-day duties. It is not a description of the division into *Jatis*, and it lacks the category of sub-*Shudras* or Untouchables altogether. The religious rationalisation for caste is therefore selective and patchy at best, and is not easily deducible from religious texts or practises. Dumont has tried to find a solution for this dilemma (1.3.1), but even he concedes that religion cannot fully explain caste in all its aspects (Dumont 1980: 24-29).

The opposite perspective, associated with the ‘field view’ (R. Guha 1989), would have it that caste is analytically a kinship system; an extended family network with a distinct cultural tradition. Since every family network has very different and incompatible cultural traditions, marriage partners from different caste backgrounds are unacceptable because they would interfere with the proper upbringing of the next generation. In order to preserve the family’s traditions, marriages have to be within this network of shared norms and values, especially as culture is acquired by birth and birth alone. If the family is the underlying unit of caste, then caste does not originate as a system from above, but begins with single castes in a local context. Understanding of caste outside the locality is limited, and religious notions of caste duties are a vague idea in what is primarily a self-centred reference system.

The consequences of different rationalisations of caste are apparent: One of the most salient factors that distinguishes these contrasting views is the relationship to hierarchy. If the ‘*Brahminic*’ version is adopted in a sociological analysis, as in the prominent case of Bouglé and Dumont, caste is a system that subdivides and organises the whole of society into one hierarchy. *Brahmins* come at the top, while castes with menial occupations and/or polluting habits find their place at the bottom of the social scale. Every hierarchical level in between is allocated according to the purity/pollution distinction, with the accident of birth being justified by the concept of *Karma*. The individual members of each caste accept the

²⁹ Most clearly, a caste ideology becomes established in the text known as Laws of Manu, or *Manusmriti*. Here the hierarchy is clearly established between the veneration of the *Brahmin* and the contempt for the *Shudra*, with the duties of the *Kshatriyas* and *Vaishyas* in between. But the *Manusmriti* are not a descriptive source for the understanding of caste. The very possibility that these texts were written in order to strengthen a certain position, to proclaim a holy order or to influence a debate, should put a sceptical brake on use of them as historical sources.

mechanism of the system, even if they would challenge their own caste's particular position within the hierarchy. By contrast, the alternative view can fundamentally function without hierarchy. In its most condensed form, this rationalisation thrives on a distinction between in- and out-group, which does not necessarily involve hierarchy. Rather, it implies that one caste's value system can at least be contrasted with a generalised 'other' and that, consequently, society is made up of exclusive, mutually repellent social units. Indeed, this could be fully rational even if all castes considered themselves on the same status level, although in reality there is often a tendency to rank one caste in comparison to another. The result is not a comprehensive hierarchy that has validity for the whole society but rather a wealth of competing claims to status without much connection to the whole. This is, in essence, what is found most often in empirical studies about caste, hence the popular tag 'field view'.

It needs to be kept in mind that this distinction into the *Brahminic* interpretation of caste and its 'ethnic counter version' are analytical abstractions. Between these two extreme positions, rationalisations of caste can have all kinds of phenotypes. An overwhelming majority of narratives feature some kind of hierarchy, but never one that can be viewed empirically as uncomplicated or undisputed.³⁰ The purity/pollution scheme seems to offer a rough guide for most caste members, but what constitutes pollution seems to be answered differently according to context. Different local traditions – for example, the challenge arising from left-hand ideologies (Appadurai 1974; Mattison 1982), or of deviating rules for public and private spheres – all complicate any attempt to rank castes into one single hierarchy. To see this as the result of empirical deviation from the classical text would be over-simplistic. Whether the classical text sources of Hinduism are known and/or relevant to the wider public is already doubtful (Hatcher 1999; Ramanujan 1989); that they hold the final explanation for caste hierarchy is unlikely, to say the least. And however useful the religious texts may be for the theoretical analysis of caste, the religious rationalisation is only one of a number of options that could explain the existence of caste. Empirically, an explanation or justification of caste will most likely draw on religious as well as ethnic or purely traditional motifs. For the model developed here, the rationalisation can be analysed with more clarity in the concrete interpretations of caste discussed below.

³⁰ The most common indicator of status, the assumption that a vegetarian lifestyle corresponds to high rank, is only partially useful. Certainly, the perceived purity of vegetarianism, including abstinence from alcohol and sexual pleasures, is seen as an ideal that is widely admired amongst devout Hindus. But it does not automatically correspond to high status per se. The earliest mention of the *Varna* scheme in the *Rig Veda* already undermines any naïve interpretation of hierarchy based on purity since it gives a high position to the *Kshatriyas*, even though their lifestyle is anything but vegetarian. No matter that *Brahmins* or *Kshatriyas* are seen on the top of the social pyramid, an alcohol-consuming, meat-eating, sexually permissive *Kshatriya* is authorised in the classical texts to claim a higher status than a teetotal *Vaishya* or *Shudra*. Rather than a hierarchy based on a single principle, the *Varnas* offer a compromise between religious and political authority, although this is still a vague concept.

1.2.4. Implications of this model of Caste

The model thus far is a theoretical skeleton which needs to be fleshed out and any discussion of its implications would, therefore, need to employ empirical examples. As far as this thesis is concerned, this will be done in greater detail in the empirical chapters to follow. From the very design of this model, however, a number of consequences are already obvious.

Caste, as depicted here, is not a homogeneous phenomenon, but a systematic connection between elements with often quite contrary rationales. This helps to explain the intrinsic inconsistencies of caste, those that make it so difficult to establish one and only one rationale for caste. To take a simple example: The Ezhavas of Kerala, researched in great detail by Osella and Osella (2000), are traditionally a toddy-tapping caste at the lower end of the traditional social order. However, in the last century, and due to their changing occupation within modernisation, they have climbed the prestige ladder considerably; today often representing the respectable, even dominant community in their area. But since caste endogamy is still largely intact, there are two perspectives on their upward mobility: Either, when emphasis is put on the economical nexus, they are recognised in their new, elevated status, or, when the biological element is taken into account, they are still seen as members of a lowly, unclean caste. Both perspectives are invoked on different occasions, but only the competing nature of these elements of caste made their upward mobility possible.

Examples aside, on a theoretical level it should be clear that there are frictions between the elements of caste. This internal friction is the source of most of the disputes regarding caste, be it between actual castes or between scholars arguing over caste. A prime example is the social mobility of castes, situated exactly on the fault line between the relevant elements. Sanskritisation (Charsley 1998; M. N. Srinivas 2002 [1956], 2002 [1967]) can only work because the rationale of the economic element competes with that of the biological element: If a caste takes up a ‘cleaner’ occupation and changes its lifestyle, the rationale of the economic element would validate this change, while the biological side remains unchanged. Because the rationality of the economic elements gradually overturns the biological one, social mobility is possible in the form of Sanskritisation. Max Weber, for example, who did not see this internal conflict in caste and over-emphasised the biological rationale, rejected the very idea of social mobility for castes (Weber 1958), and was justifiably criticised for this mistake (Fuchs 1987; Kantowsky 1986). As this model implies, anyone who sees caste as an institution with only one underlying rationale underestimates the complexity that exists between the elements central to caste.

As already suggested in the example above, one central question that can be solved by this model is that involving hierarchy and caste. This has been a vexed problem for most scholars in this area, resulting in a flood of inconclusive research (D. Gupta 2000, 2004b; U. Sharma 1999: 52-58; M. N. Srinivas 2002 [1984]). The model developed here, by contrast, offers an elegant, yet still complex, solution. Rationalisation aside, only the economic element has an intrinsic relation to hierarchy, the biological element is fundamentally based on autonomy, not hierarchy. Thus, whenever the biological element

receives more emphasis than the economic one, hierarchy is less of concern, and vice versa. This would explain a number of examples, even more so since it is captured in the modern interpretation of caste (discussed under 1.3.3). If, for example, a Low Caste family rejects a marriage proposal from a High Caste bridegroom for one of their daughters, it also rejects the principle of hierarchy. The explanation for this can only be found in the biological element of caste; manifested in the fact that this family values endogamy higher than hierarchy. This minor example points to an issue that is attached to caste in all empirical situations: For every caste-related empirical problem, there are competing rationales that are the logical result of the elements described. In every concrete situation these competing rationales could be invoked, with the result often not fully predictable. This explains the different interpretations of caste (the main ones to be discussed below) and the controversies surrounding this social institution.

1.3. The competing interpretations of Caste

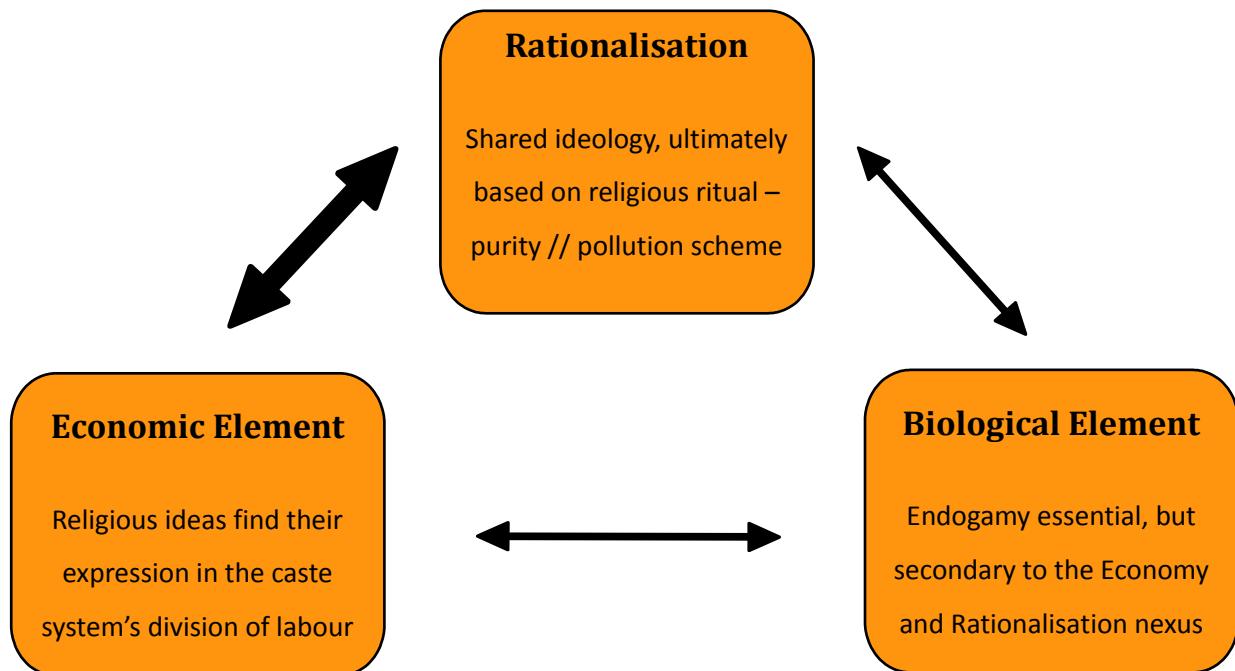
According to the model developed here, caste is a systematic connection between economic and biological elements, coupled by a specific form of rationalisation. So none of the three elements discussed above makes up caste in isolation; instead, the interaction of all three constitutes the institution known as caste. In fact, caste can be actively re-interpreted in numerous ways using these three elements. As the rationalisation process is already quite fluid, a number of interpretations of caste are imaginable. But above all, it is mainly the emphasis given to these elements that determines which particular theory of caste is adopted. It is clear when examining the literature that individual scholars emphasise these elements and their reciprocal inter-connections differently, and that their positions are, in turn, the result of these differences in emphasis.

Herein lays the value of the model developed above. Being a very abstract version of caste theory, or even a meta-theory of caste, it allows us to analyse the positions that have been adopted by scholars in the field. More specifically, it allows us to differentiate the positions within the scholarly field according to the emphasis they attribute to the separate elements of caste.³¹ In the following, the three most relevant interpretations of caste will be analysed, using the model developed here as a theoretical framework.

³¹ Furthermore, the model also helps to highlight the parallels caste has with other social phenomenon, such as race, class and the like. In no other historical circumstance has something like caste evolved. So any comparison with race, class, estate or guild is limited beyond a very abstract level. However, with the model's essential elements and their interconnections, it is quite easy to indicate where possible parallels to other social institutions could be found.

1.3.1. The Classical interpretation of Caste – Dumont and the 'book view'

The interpretation of caste famously associated with Dumont (already alluded in 1.2.3.) will here be systematically analysed. This model of caste presents a strong connection between the economic element and a (religious) form of rationalisation, and while the connection to the biological element is present, it is systematically weaker than all others:



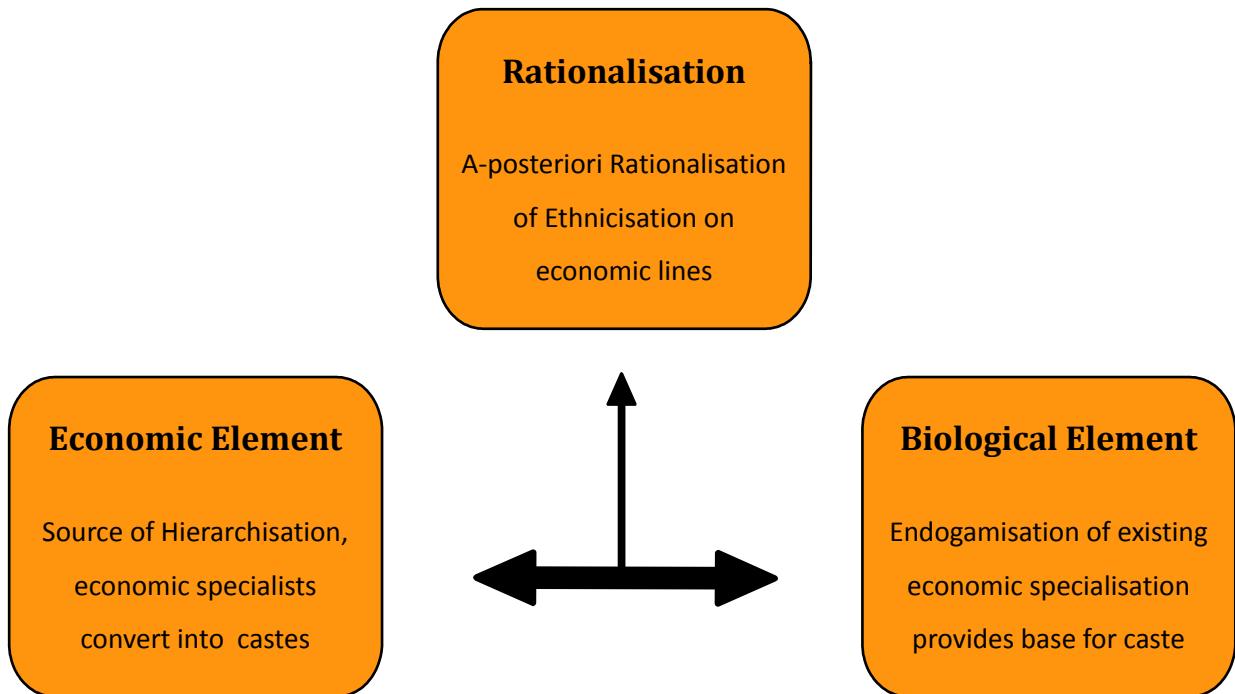
According to this scheme, caste is essentially a belief system that finds its empirical expression in a system of economic organisation; that is, the division of labour between the castes (cf. Rocher 1975). In Dumont's and Bouglé's view of caste, the conflict between lofty ideas and brute realities is resolved in favour of imagination over economic reality (or biological dictates). In the words of Bouglé, "all observers are agreed on this: caste is basically a religious institution" (Bouglé 1971 [1908]: 65). In contrast to more materialistic interpretations of the phenomenon, the role of Hindu religion and the reality-shaping power of beliefs in hierarchy based on purity are emphasised, with other aspects mentioned only in passing.³² According to Dumont, caste is essentially a belief system that generates and ranks different stages of ritual purity, which then finds its expression in the labour market. Moreover, caste is not simply "a state of mind" (Dumont 1980: 34) but is itself unthinkable without a permeating sense of shared values, an ideology that refers to society as a whole. The biological element is indeed mentioned as it is part of the 'separation' element, but it does not feature as essential for the constitution of caste. Even the economic element is regarded only as an outcome of the prevailing mindset, with Dumont seeing a mere symbolic nexus of castes with their traditional occupation. Here, caste as a phenomenon is taken to be primarily in the ideational world.

³² Apparently, the emphasis on purity and pollution does not seem to be entirely justified with reference to the classical texts: Patrick Olivelle, 'Caste and Purity: A Study in the Language of the Dharma Literature', *Contributions to Indian Sociology*, 32/2 (November 1, 1998 1998), 189-216.

As logically consistent as this is, it is still an active interpretation of reality, one guided by the interests of those employing the concept. It is not just by chance that Dumont, who interprets caste primarily as rooted in the religious or spiritual sphere, bases himself on *Brahmins'* accounts – hence this interpretation is called the “*Brahmins'* view on caste” (Berreman 1971). This perspective emasculates the concept of caste by greatly reducing its potential for conflict. For Dumont this might simply create an elegant theoretic system, while for *Brahminic* interpreters it offers a legitimisation of a system that provides them with an elevated social position; from both perspectives, it covers fault lines by reducing stumbling blocks. When caste is based on shared notions of purity and pollution, membership in castes is not only voluntary but also natural: Castes in this interpretation are mere expressions of already existing moral beliefs. If everyone shares these beliefs, there is no scope for opposition, and caste can be seen as a harmonious way of organising society in line with shared understandings. Moreover, if these caste notions find religious legitimisation then any opposition is not merely immoral but also heretical. Allocating caste to the ideational world negates the power struggles and the economic and biological necessities that complicate the phenomenon theoretically, and drag it into the muddle of the real world. Instead, all conflicts and frictions, and all converging claims about caste, arise only from the imperfect implementation of an intrinsically harmonious system. Understandably, in this perspective caste is conceived rather than enforced; and ultimately, is a social ideal rather than a moral scandal. The contrast to the ‘subaltern’ interpretation (discussed below) could not be greater.

1.3.2. The Subaltern interpretation of Caste – Ambedkar's version

This interpretation of caste, developed by B.R. Ambedkar in his earlier writings (Ambedkar 2002 [1916]), develops a model in which the connection between economy and biology is of central concern. The rationalisation is still essential for this model, but it comes second – it is an *a posteriori* rationalisation of precedents that have been created in the materialist sphere:



For Ambedkar, caste developed primarily from the solidification of professions on hereditary lines. Starting from the *Brahmins*, who first made entry to their profession exclusive to born *Brahmins*, Lower Castes were gradually excluded as other professions isolated themselves through endogamy. Religious explanations are thus a means to cover up this enforced *Ethnicisation*, which went hand in hand with the division of labour that pressed weak members of society into menial professions and status categories.

We shall be well advised to recall at the outset that the Hindu society, in common with other societies, was composed of classes [...] this was essentially a class system, in which individuals, when qualified, could change their class, and therefore classes did change their personnel. At some time in the history of Hindus, the priestly class socially detached itself from the rest of the body of people and through a closed-door policy became a caste by itself. The other classes being subject to the law of social division of labour underwent differentiation, some into large, others into very minute groups. [...] This sub-division of a society is quite natural. But the unnatural thing about these sub-divisions is that they have lost the open-door character of the class system and have become self-enclosed units called caste. The question is: were they compelled to close their doors and become endogamous, or did they close on their own accord? I submit that there is a double line of answer: *Some closed the door: Others found it closed against them.*

(Ambedkar 2002 [1916]: 256-57)

From this perspective³³, caste is neither an incarnation of an abstract idea about an ideal society nor a manifestation of pre-existing moral or religious notions that existed before any social setting could invoke them. Rather, it is the result of a concrete (i.e. materialist) interaction between interests that evolved gradually. Thus, economic specialisation results from the development of the material base of society, while the endogamous element represents the very real need for groups to protect their means of income.

By situating this institution in the midst of real-world interest struggles, it is automatically exposed to scrutiny and potential critique. It is hardly surprisingly, therefore, that B.R. Ambedkar favoured this perspective. Against a '*Brahminic*' perspective, that instead hides the interests of the castes involved, here the interests behind the ideal-typical actors are exposed. Caste is no longer an ideal system, but the result of power differences, with negative consequences for the losers in the social struggle. On this view, any idealised rationalisation of caste (as in the classical interpretation) is consequently expounded as an apologist legitimisation, with little to do with real-world consequences. The '*Brahminic* version', therefore, is not much more than a thin veil to cover up the brutal use of force – the repression and economic exploitation that is central to caste. Of course, this is a normative component of Ambedkar's interpretation of caste, as part of a political struggle for the revision of the social position of his own community – those who had been classified by mainstream society as 'Untouchables'.³⁴ But while this normative component is not central for an analytical model of caste, Ambedkar's version nevertheless has immense value: He provides a materialistic interpretation of caste, which in turn provides a critical perspective on it (A. Sharma 2005). Furthermore, since the rationalisation of caste is seen as secondary to the economic-ethnic nexus, a variety of interpretations are possible, all of which tend to be more compatible with empirical research.

1.3.3. The Modern interpretation of Caste – Caste as quasi-ethnic entity

The previous interpretations were both explicitly formulated and associated with well-known scholars in the field. Unfortunately, this cannot be said for the third interpretation, despite it being perhaps the most relevant for any analysis of caste under modern circumstances. It is not that this interpretation is unknown, but rather that it has yet to be explicitly formulated. However, as most scholars have not invested much effort into a theory of caste, one is left with writings that all tend to criticise Dumont (though much less Ambedkar, whose theory is much less known and discussed), but which do not formulate an alternative theory of caste themselves:

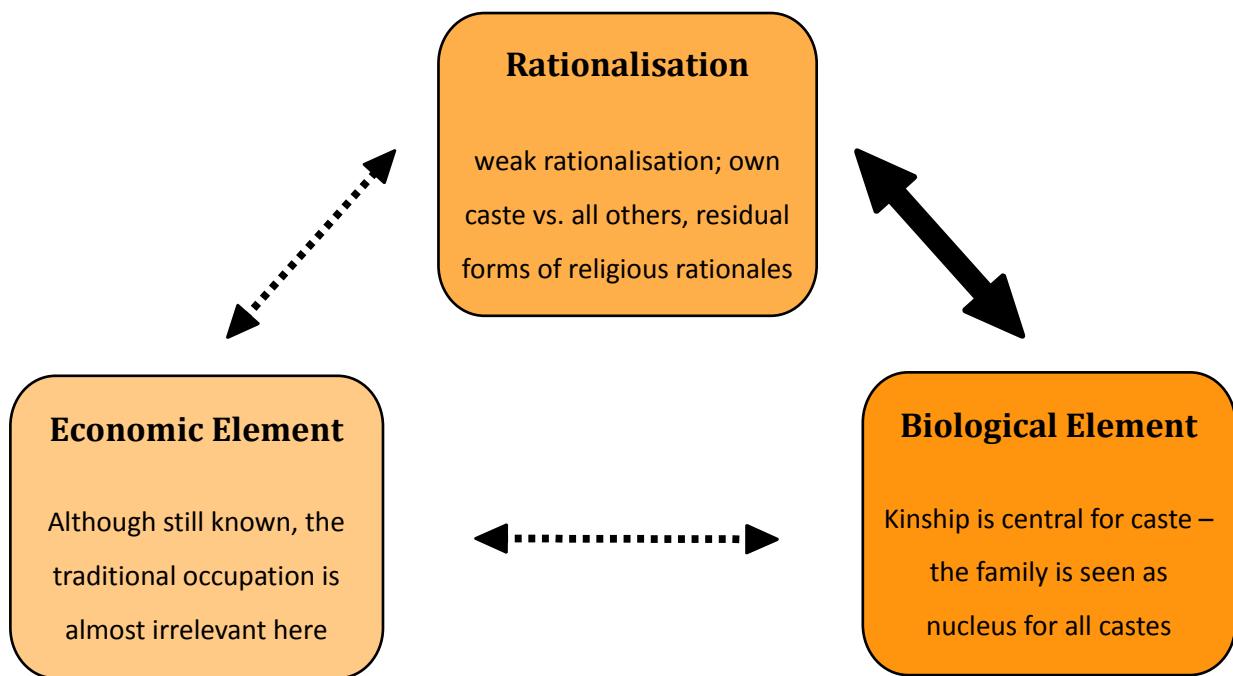
If modern scholarship on India is united in its chorus against a religion-based hierarchy in Indian caste structure, it fractures into a cacophony of sounds when it comes to defining the nature of caste in modern India. While few scholars claim a demise of caste, there is an increasing tendency to view caste as a form

³³ Obviously, Ambedkar's is not a historically exact account, but rather a pointed and highly abridged version of the origin of caste. Nevertheless, whatever the actual historical circumstances, it is a logical construct with great theoretical cohesion and important consequences.

³⁴ For a disambiguation of the concept of 'Untouchability' see: Simon Charsley, "'Untouchable': What Is in a Name?", *The Journal of the Royal Anthropological Institute*, 2/1 (1996), 1-23.

of ethnicity in which castes compete with each other for power and proudly brandish their own narratives of origin, with even the lowest castes claiming a place in the national history characterized by valor and accomplishment. (Desai 2008: 19)

This view, a synthesised abstract of contemporary accounts on caste, will here be called the modern reinterpretation of caste; even though it does not as yet add up to a consistent theory of caste. Presenting a more comprehensive model for caste in modernity is therefore one that will be attempted for the first time here. The framework is straightforward: Caste here is basically an extension of the family, with a binding notion of shared cultural norms. Endogamy is practised and rationalised under the premise that the family's cultural tradition needs to be preserved. The traditional profession is still known but has no practical relevance, and notions of hierarchy or purity/pollution are diminished (although they do reappear in certain situations). In this model, then, caste would be analysed in the following way:



The biological element in the form of ethnicity is the most central element in this interpretation, with scant reference to economic reality, which provides only a weak backdrop. Any rationalisation of caste is primarily done by invoking family traditions rather than through religious justification, even though religion provides a frame of reference for these family traditions. Here, caste is based primarily on the connection between the ideational element and the biological one, with the economical element lingering in the background.

This leaves few, if any, options for a rationalisation of caste that takes the whole society into account. The question would be what kind of rationalisation could be adapted to act as a justification for the separation of society on quasi-ethnic caste lines. A religious justification would find almost no support within the Hindu fold. Certainly, the religious texts within Hinduism were not written with the idea of *Jati* as substantial, independent units of society in mind. As the binding factor of shared beliefs and

values vanishes from caste as idea, so too do religious interpretations diminish. A fully autonomous, ethnic interpretation of caste cannot be explained by a religious notion that rests upon a common link between the castes. So if a sense of religious tradition is invoked in the rationalisation of caste, it is not thoroughly thought through by those who employ the concept of caste. While caste here appears a crude and often contradictory mishmash of beliefs, this is hardly surprising given that this is an everyday, not academic, rationalisation of caste.

What remains is the rationalisation of caste that starts from the family and sees it as an autonomous unit of socialisation without a hierarchy or necessary economic interdependence. With the concept of *Substantialisation*, described by Fuller as the “breakdown in hierarchical interdependence between [...] two castes” (Fuller 1996: 14), the interpretation of castes as structurally independent units is not entirely new or unusual. The process is discussed by Dumont (1980: 222) and has featured in the debate ever since. In describing the decreasing interconnectivity between castes, it involves the loss of a shared notion of hierarchy and the de-legitimisation of religious explanations for caste. It also implies that economic specialisation of specific castes becomes largely irrelevant, as the traditional occupation loses its economic importance. After caste has left the web of mutual interdependence, it takes the form of largely self-sufficient, mutually repellent and economically competing entities in a society that survives without a shared notion of caste hierarchy.

This perspective also equates well with the more commonly shared notion of caste that can be found in the field among Lower Castes, as expressed in M.N. Srinivas’ definition of caste (see 1.1.2). Here, caste is not necessarily a system, with a number of different explanations possible to account for its existence. Often, little is known about the customs of other groups, but one’s own group is defended in terms of ritual, habit or professional tradition. Caste is not seen as part of a comprehensive system, although it is still situated in relation to a variety of other castes.

From a theoretical standpoint, however, this interpretation is surely the weakest of the possible interpretations of caste. The distinction between caste and tribe is almost non-existent here since the crucial distinctive feature, the division of labour between endogamous groups, fades into the background. A great deal depends on the shared notion of traditional occupation. As long as the link between a caste and a traditional occupation remains perceptible, caste has not expired. But the weaker this link gets, the closer castes comes to absorption into the larger fold of ethnic-based social groupings. This would not mean that caste no longer has impact on people’s life – even under this premise, caste considerations can still be vital, especially when marriages and family connections are concerned – but its theoretical significance would be diminished; it would have lost its unique characteristics. When caste is based on the convergence of the three elements described here, the absence of one would undermine the whole. The question then becomes: To what extent is caste still caste when one of the essential elements is weakened beyond recognition? Certainly, a truncated version of caste would no longer represent the full meaning of the institution. Nevertheless, it does not automatically imply that caste

itself is weakened in empirical terms, although it does indicate that caste is losing its unique features and is taking on the characteristics of ethnic units such as a tribe.

This development inevitably opens the debate on the future of caste. Does this reduction in theoretic complexity already anticipate the dissolution of caste as a social institution? In other words; is caste surviving in modernity? As Béteille (1996) points out, especially amongst the influential new Indian middle classes, caste has largely lost its legitimacy. When it is practised, it is with regard to the family and not seen as a hierarchical system within an economic field. The traditional nexus to a profession is replaced by an emphasis on professional qualifications within the ideology of meritocracy. But this is still compatible with the model of caste developed here. This model helps reveal more clearly the development that Béteille identifies. Within modernity, caste is first and foremost centred on the element of ethnic separation. However vague the rationalisation may be in the empirical case, caste stands and falls with the practice of endogamy. Thus, an empirical test for the ‘vitality’ of caste in modernity should not centre on its legitimisation or on the rationalisation of caste,³⁵ but instead on the practise of endogamy. And as long as 94 per cent of marriages in India take place inside the caste (Desai et al. 2007), any speculation about the end of caste is premature. Caste is not about to vanish anytime soon; rather caste is re-interpreted and practised under modern circumstances. The more modernisation takes hold in India, the more the modern interpretation of caste is likely to replace the previous models.

1.4. Conclusion: The use of this conception of Caste

That the model developed above is theoretically coherent should be clear by now, as is its potential use in guiding empirical research. But the specific circumstances in which it may be valuable to research on caste needs some final consideration – first, with regard to caste studies in general, and second, in relation to the specific topic of this thesis.

1.4.1. The model’s relevance to an understanding of Caste

In its theoretical design, this model offers an opportunity to understand caste quite differently from that presented by conventional definitions. It breaks the institution of caste down into its essential ingredients, and, in the analysis of specific arrangement of these ingredients, it allows for a theoretical account of caste in more than just one way. Hence, it can provide the theoretical tools for a meta-analysis of all interpretations of caste: All previous scholarly accounts of caste can be analysed by using the three-fold scheme discussed here. While this is perhaps an academic exercise in the sociology of knowledge, there are other inherent implications of this model. With its wide scope, it allows for an interpretation of caste that can be adapted to more than one situation. The ‘building blocks’ of caste (see 1.1.3), those that are conventionally seen as essential for caste, can be appraised analytically with

³⁵ The practice of caste does not necessarily rely on an official legitimisation; indeed, caste is most often practised without invoking any consistent moral or religious justification. (cf. chpt. 3).

regard to their specific value for caste in differing circumstances – an analysis that has never been done before. The most salient result of this re-appraisal has been that some of those ‘building blocks’ – notably the notions of hierarchy and of purity/pollution – are not essential for caste in all cases, but only under specific interpretations (1.3.1 and 1.3.2) This has, in turn, far-reaching consequences for the understanding of caste both inside and outside academia.

In the interpretation labelled ‘modern’ (chpt. 1.3.3), a theory of caste is visible that is not based on hierarchy, and which does not invoke the purity/pollution scheme. It is, in a sense, freed from traditional ritual-based connotations and is much more adaptable to the requirements of modernity, even if it is still not fully compatible with modernity in its widest sense (chpt. 2.3.3). Inside academia, this offers a theoretical basis for all the empirical works that indicate a weakening of the ritual foundation of caste (V. Das 1990; D. Gupta 2004a); in addition, it also reconciles these findings with the fact that caste in its de-ritualised form still seems practised in modern India. Outside academia, this interpretation provides an account of caste that transcends the usual contradictions – that is, the fact that that caste seems to be weakening and yet still practised at the same time. Instead of just stating this obvious discrepancy, this interpretation invites a new perspective: Caste itself is not weakening; instead caste gets a new interpretation in which the ritual side – that mainly involving the purity/pollution distinction and the consequent hierarchy – is greatly diminished to the point of irrelevance. Only time will tell if this is confirmed by other scholars, but in the scheme developed above, the possibility of a complete new perspective on caste is laid out.

1.4.2. The model’s relevance to this thesis

For the thesis at hand, this theoretical model of caste will be employed, in general terms, to make theoretical sense of the empirical findings to be discussed in the respective chapters. At a more concrete level, it will be used to provide a theoretical frame for the changing practice of caste against the wider background of modernisation. The interpretation of caste discussed under 1.3.3, in particular, will be central to all further proceedings; however, it would be pre-mature to conclude that this is the last word on caste in modernity. First, this theoretical model is only an outline map with which to explore the field, and not the final answer to all theoretical problems. More work has to be put into a general theory on caste in modernity, and the model discussed here can only hope to be the first step. Aside from these meta-theoretical considerations, there are also problems concerning the relationship between caste and modernity. In the following chapter, modernity and modernisation will be discussed in more detail, and the compatibility of caste with modernity will be sketched out. Thus, if this chapter has established the intrinsic tensions within caste – originating from the competing elements of caste – the following chapter aims to establish the tension between caste and modernity.

2. The Concept of Modernity; India and Modernity; Caste and Modernity

Modernity remains one of the most highly contested concepts in the social sciences; theoretical approaches to the subject are multi-dimensional and often contradictory, with any real consensus still a distant prospect. In addition, India is unique in its trajectory towards modernity. It is therefore beyond the scope of this thesis to consider modernity in its entirety, or to analyse the relevant historical, political and socio-cultural aspects of modernity in any great detail. Nevertheless, there are certain elements of modernity – or conflicts within the modernisation process – that are relevant to the present context. Examining how features of modernity/modernisation impact on the lives of contemporary Indians would be especially insightful here. The specific question of caste and modernity will be discussed at the end of this chapter. As caste is clearly a relevant phenomenon in modernising India, the theoretical implications of caste in modernity need to be sketched out. Subsequent chapters will then apply the theoretical considerations raised below to the empirical realm.

2.1. Main elements of Modernity / Conflicts of Modernisation

Depending on approach, modernity can be described and interpreted as a concrete historical epoch or, to the contrary, as an abstract ideational process, independent of any particular empirical society. Some scholars, with Habermas perhaps the most outspoken, see modernity as a normative concept; the majority view, however, is either unaware of the normative implications of modernity, or deems them irrelevant. Following Foucault (Foucault 1984), it is possible to argue that modernity is primarily an attitude and perspective, rather than a concrete event. An alternative perspective, though, would see modernity in its empirical forms as simply incomprehensible without acknowledging the influence of the 18th century European Enlightenment (Venn 2006) and later Industrial Revolution (Beaudoin 2000; Ward 1994). The challenge in the following, therefore, lies not in the want of relevant perspectives, but much more in the lack of clarity, given all those contradictory arguments.

Of course, the concept of modernity is too complex to be squeezed into a 10-page overview without a high level of abstraction and some adjustments are necessary to keep this section within manageable limits. The following, therefore, will not be a comprehensive overview on the sociological use of the term modernity. Rather, it will attempt to explore modernity by reconstructing the main arguments – or theoretical fault lines – that appear to characterise modernity and to inform the process of modernisation. Since modernity is understood quite differently within academia, there is no shortage of theoretical and empirical arguments.³⁶ The five conflicts/disputes that have received the most

³⁶ This, in turn, is mirrored in the empirical world, for an example see: Peter Wagner, 'The Resistance That Modernity Constantly Provokes: Europe, America and Social Theory', *Thesis Eleven*, 58/1 (August 1, 1999 1999), 35-58.

sociological attention will be sketched out here, plus an additional concept that presents a plausible, yet unchallenged hypothesis. All of the theoretical conflict zones are interconnected and occasional cross-reference will try to establish the most obvious links. The discussion cannot claim to capture all theoretical arguments within the concept of modernity, but by breaking modernity down into five areas of dispute it aims to provide the theoretical framework to access modernity in India.

2.1.1. Individualisation vs. Standardisation

The value of human equality, based on the concept of the individual, has been projected in the ideational sphere and then the political arena since the Enlightenment and the French Revolution respectively (Castoriadis 1990; Post 2006). Although, empirically, the egalitarian ideal has always been challenged,³⁷ it nevertheless remains a key element for modernity in its normative dimension.³⁸ In analytical terms, the social perspective that takes individuals, and not groups, as the basis for society is empirically very much connected with the heightened role of the individual within modernisation. In fact, individualisation is itself a hallmark of modernity, albeit not one that goes unchallenged either (Jordan 2005). At the same time, the economic changes that accompanied modernisation historically have also resulted in a visible increase in standardisation (Kratzer 2005; Wagner 1994).

From the very beginning of sociological debate, the tensions between individualisation and modernisation's anti-individual tendencies have been much discussed. When the Enlightenment movement put the liberation of the individual at its heart, historical developments appeared to follow suit. Ferdinand Toennies' "Gemeinschaft und Gesellschaft" (1887), for example, describes a society that changes its primary mode of interaction from one based on emotional bonds between persons known to each other, towards one that is connected by impersonal and goal-oriented interactions between strangers. Amongst other things, this implies the weakening or disappearance of the traditional bonds that keep an individual tied to social customs, traditions and the influence of social peers. For Émile Durkheim, the changing economic mode of production within modernity means that a "mechanic solidarity" is increasingly replaced by an "organic solidarity" (Durkheim 1964 [1893]). The "organic solidarity" that entails under such circumstances is not founded on similarities between people, but on functional differences, and on the mutual dependency that economic specialisation brings with it. Individuals who were controlled and protected in the pre-modern society are now left on their own; such individuals are therefore much more vulnerable, potentially prone to drop out of society if they fail to fulfil an economic function. One of the results of modernisation, therefore, can be seen in a higher rate of suicide, which Durkheim deemed the result of anomie (Durkheim 1997 [1897]).

³⁷ From the beginning of modern democracy, voting rights were awarded to only a few, economically privileged citizens. Full elective franchise, including women, was only achieved much later. For an overview on the discourse of citizenship, albeit written in a slightly different context, see: Abowitz Kathleen Knight and Harnish Jason, 'Contemporary Discourses of Citizenship', *Review of Educational Research*, 76/4 (2006), 653.

³⁸ Equality is surely one of the most contested concepts within the debate of modernity. In the discussion here, this issue will be sidelined for the simple reason that a normative discussion is not the focus of the thesis. Analytically, the notion of equality is both the basis for the concept of the individual here, and is behind modernity's affinity with democracy – discussed in 2.1.3.

The individual in modernity, according to Georg Simmel, is partially liberated from the demands of tradition, but, at the same time, is increasingly at the centre of overlapping social responsibilities and competing identities. With his “Kreuzung sozialer Kreise”(Simmel 1955 [1922]), Simmel states that the individual is continually oscillating between different, and at times competing, social roles and identities, and that the society that provides the individual’s point of reference is, at one and the same time, more stable, more in flux and more open to individual choices. In modernity, society becomes increasingly complex and contextual, and is not – contra Karl Marx – reducible to a single dimension, even if the economy and the place of the individual in it is the most prominent factor. In “die Grossstaedte und das Geistesleben”(Simmel 1903), Simmel further observes how the plethora of information and sensory inputs in the modern metropolis gives rise to a detached and ostensibly disinterested personality state, one that he deems characteristic for the human condition under modern conditions.

However, as indicated above, there is also a strong counter-current of ongoing standardisation that is as much a part of modernity as is individualisation. Max Weber early recognised the friction between the liberation and the subjugation of the individual in modernity. The individual, liberated from the waning influence of tradition, religion and irrationality, becomes trapped in the “iron cage” of ever-increasing control of all aspects of life. The puritanical forms of Protestantism that, according to Weber, have worked as unintentional midwives for the birth of modern, industrial capitalism (Weber 1958 [1905]) have, subsequently, extended their reach, with human beings themselves no longer excepted from the rational subjugation of the world. While Weber shares with Durkheim a deep scepticism about the consequences of modernity and modernisation on the individual, he sees the fundamental threat coming from the opposite direction: The individual is not so much challenged by the absence of structures that bind and guide the individual, but rather is entrapped in a new cage of dependencies, which go much deeper because rationalisation has not kept its promise of liberalisation.

The dialectics of the individual’s liberalisation and subjugation have been strongly connected to the process of modernisation from its very beginning, and have shaped it ever since. Peter Wagner proposes the following rough timescale for the Western countries where modernity first took hold: From the French Revolution until 1890, he sees the rise of individual liberalisation, with standardisation taking over between 1890 and 1970. More recently, contingency and the autonomy of the individual have returned to the fore (Wagner 2010b). And while this is only one attempt to order the facts, it indicates that this tension remains fundamental for modernity – a fact that features more or less indirectly in the subsequent discussion.

2.1.2. Rationalisation, Secularisation vs. Traditions

Also stemming from the Enlightenment, and intrinsic to modernity, is the concept of rationality – that all knowledge must be based on methodologically assessed empirical facts and logical argument (Honneth 1987).³⁹ Neither the capitalistic takeover of the world nor the industrial revolution would have been imaginable without a rational basis in cost/benefits calculations and the worldview that enabled it (Gates and Steane 2007). Famously, Weber (Weber 1958 [1905]) discerns a deeper and more crucial reason for the rise of rationality and capitalism in the Occident: The *Worldly Asceticism* most prominently heralded by puritanical forms of Protestantism, such as Calvinism and North-American religious sects. By asking why the ascent of rationality, exemplified by empirical science and universal rational reasoning, has historically only occurred within the Western hemisphere, Weber systematically scrutinises the other so-called ‘world religions’ – Judaism, Confucianism/Taoism, Hinduism/ Buddhism and Islam – for their potential to develop equal or similar forms of rationalising elements. Condensed in the “Vorbemerkung” and “Zwischenbetrachtung” (Weber 1988 [1920]), Weber concludes that while several independent elements are traceable in these religions’ circumstances, no other world religion was able to develop anything approaching the form of rationality found under Protestantism.

In addition to the question of pre-conditions of rationality, the results and consequences of this rise in rationality also need to be considered. In the ‘classical’ period of sociology, there was a widespread expectation that irrationality, and with it religion, would wither away under the onslaught of rationality.⁴⁰ The secularisation of society – in Weber’s terms, ‘disenchantment of the world’ (S. Michael 2004; Walsham 2008) – seemed a natural evolutionary process. Yet today, this expectation has not been met, and the secularisation thesis⁴¹ needs reformulation (Koshul 2005; Schroeder 1995). For the moment, it remains unclear whether rationality will prevail in the context of a strong emphasis on religion in many (often quite modern) societies on this planet. The most likely outcome is a co-existence of secular rationality and religious irrationality, with this conflict likely to remain at the heart of modernity for some time to come.

Notwithstanding this conflict, the secularisation issue points towards a greater complexity. Modernity is often set (or is constructed to set) against ‘tradition’, whatever that may mean in concrete terms. This contrast – of which rationality versus religion is only one instance – needs to be transcended in order to fully understand modernity. Anthony Giddens is perhaps the scholar who has most prominently rejected the dualism of modernity and tradition, claiming that modernity is characterised by the acquisition of invented traditions, of a plurality of traditions and of a coexistence of competing lines of interpretations.

³⁹ For an insightful discussion of the relation between culture(s) and rationality: Harvey Siegel, ‘Multiculturalism and Rationality’, *Theory and Research in Education*, 5/2 (July 1, 2007), 203-23.

⁴⁰ Without entering this debate, it should be clear that any religion is ultimately irrational in the way that it is not based on empirical knowledge and logical argument. For a balanced view: Michael H. Barnes, ‘Rationality in Religion’, *Religion*, 27/4 (1997), 375-90.

⁴¹ For a short disambiguation in a philosophical context, see Graham Gordon, ‘Religion, Secularization and Modernity’, *Philosophy*, 67/260 (1992), 183-97.

Tradition itself is not to be understood as static, but provides only the context for its re-formulation in modern circumstances (Giddens 1990). Within this interpretation, an ‘invented’ tradition is systematically used and interpreted to legitimise current uses of power and dominion. Modernity in this context needs to be understood as a *reflexive* complex – in constant negotiation between the past, the present and the future. This has its correspondence in concrete history: With the establishment of nation states and democratisation in the 19th and 20th centuries, the societies in question entered the modern stage; formerly local communities were thus integrated into the national system, breaking the continuity both in time and space (Giddens 1994). Since this time, tradition has been integrated into a complex, institutionally reflexive process of dissociating with the past (and with past traditions) – a process that is even more radicalised and accelerated through globalisation, which is itself a form of radicalised modernisation.

2.1.3. Market-based Economy vs. Democratic Representation

The European Enlightenment is one of modernity’s two main ideational sources; the other, no less important although perhaps more controversial, is the Industrial Revolution, starting in England in the middle of the 18th century and spreading to the rest of Western Europe thereafter (Beaudoin 2000). The historical sequence of events is beyond the scope of the analysis here, but the results are obvious nevertheless. There is no denying that all social and cultural developments within the modernisation process were enabled and fostered by the economic expansion consequent to the industrial revolution. The individualisation discussed above, for example, is inconceivable without an economic break from the feudal past, where trade guilds and severe restrictions on commercial activity prevented a liberal exchange of services and goods. On the other hand, the movement towards a capitalistic form of economy can equally be attributed to the rationalisation of all aspects of life. Without a rational approach to business – described most notably by Weber with regard to double-entry accounting standards (Weber 1922) – the enormous expansion of economic activities would have been impossible. Through reciprocal changes in the social and economic sphere, modernity as such was both enabled and driven at the same time. The genuine achievement of the Industrial Revolution, the relative double-independence of the economy – from moral and political restraints in the theoretical sphere, and the partial escape from natural limitations⁴² – has, like no other development, enabled the societal sea change associated with modernisation.

What does this imply for the relationship between modernity and the economy? Is modernity only imaginable in coexistence with a capitalistic economy?⁴³ What place would socialist models – that constitute, according to Marx, a more rational development stage after and beyond capitalism (Marx 1906 [1867]) – have in a theory of modernity? Most theoreticians in the tradition of classical

⁴² In both dimensions, this independence is, of course, only a relative one. No economic theory is completely free from social and moral values and implications; human dependency on nature is also undisputed once narrow economic approaches are left behind.

⁴³ For a discussion about the sociological consequences, see Peter Wagner, ‘Modernity, Capitalism and Critique’, *Thesis Eleven*, 66/1 (2001), 1-31.

modernisation theories⁴⁴ would respond that, for them, modernisation is simply synonymous with a capitalistic development.⁴⁵ The critiques and counter-theories of modernisation discourse, meanwhile, would rather question this equation. The dependence theories, and within them the world system theory of Immanuel Wallerstein (1974), do not simply oppose the most naïve assumptions of modernisation theories, but point towards systematic obstacles to underdeveloped nations' progress.⁴⁶ For both modernisation theorists and their critics, it is still a highly controversial question if and how modernity can be thought of without capitalism.⁴⁷ For the moment, let us simply state that modernity is overwhelmingly associated with a market-based economy, while historic cases, like the Soviet Union or India from 1947-1991, serve as a reminder that this relationship is not an unequivocal one. Whether these two examples are an exception to the rule, or are the counterexample that proves the modernity/capitalism nexus wrong, depends on the perspective of the analyst.

Similar comments may be made about democratic representation. The famous Lipset thesis (Lipset 1959) – according to which rising economic prosperity increases the chance of a nation becoming a democracy – is only one expression of this relationship. Fundamentally, the rationalisation that is intrinsic to modernity already implies that political power needs legitimisation from the people it governs, especially as previous modes of government, most notably the doctrine of divine right, are no longer feasible. The Enlightenment and the French Revolution both emphasised the role of juridical equality, that pre-dates democracy,⁴⁸ although it has not been achieved in real terms for a long time. Empirically, the relationship between democracy and modernity is complex, and some cases – most prominently China – seem to indicate that modernity can function well without democracy, if only for the time being. When modernity is seen as a normative concept, or even a project (Habermas 1988 [1980]), democracy is, of course, an essential core element of modernity. But once modernity is not defined as a normative concept *per se*, the relationship between modernisation and democratisation is much less resilient than it looks at first sight.

⁴⁴ The most exemplary of these writings is perhaps: Walt Whitman Rostow, *The Stages of Economic Growth: A Non-Communist Manifesto* (Cambridge; New York: Cambridge University Press, 1960). in which he describes fixed and distinct stages of economic development that each society has to go through in order to become a fully-developed (that is, modern) capitalistic economy. First and foremost, this takes an institutional approach and is focussed on a range of necessary changes from a traditional society to a modern – capitalistic – one. In unilinear fashion, beginning with underdeveloped traditional societies and ending with modernity, a development was described and actively encouraged that tried to decouple the Western modernisation path from its unique historical foundation. And while this is the first attempt to develop a truly global grasp on the topic of modernisation, it is often seen as a failed attempt to claim universality for what was, after all, a unique historical process: Zaheer Baber, 'Modernization Theory and the Cold War', *Journal of Contemporary Asia*, 31/1 (2001), 71-85.

⁴⁵ Most modernisation theories take an institutional approach towards their analysis, but not exclusively so. Compare Daniel Lerner, *The Passing of Traditional Society. Modernizing the Middle East* (Glencoe: Free Press, 1958).

⁴⁶ Legitimate as this has been, it also has also lead to a general decline in interest in modernisation. The very term modernisation itself became delegitimised once it was connected to a seemingly disproved and outdated paradigm. Alberto Martinelli, *Global Modernization: Rethinking the Project of Modernity* (London: Sage, 2005).

⁴⁷ Capitalism itself is imaginable in differing ways under the topic of 'varieties of capitalism' Peter A. Hall and David Soskice (eds.), *Varieties of Capitalism: The Institutional Foundations of Comparative Advantage* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001).

⁴⁸ Democracy has an uneasy relationship with equality – a key factor in the concept of individuality. If equality is defined in a distributive way, it stands in contrast to the concept of democracy, which is itself based on an equality of fundamental rights plus the assumption of equal democratic agency. For a discussion, see Robert Post, 'Democracy and Equality', *The ANNALS of the American Academy of Political and Social Science*, 603/1 (2006), 24-36.

Even more fundamental than the empirical question of democratic representation and modernisation, is the tension between capitalistic economy and democracy. A capitalistic economy has historically enabled the democratic participation of more people than ever before. But it could, by contrast, also marginalise sections of society to the extent that they are no longer able to exert their democratic rights, thus preventing full participation. Democracy is based on the assumption that all people (or at least all voters) have equal rights, whereas capitalism continually generates inequalities and is therefore prone to undermine the egalitarian ideals of democracy. Empirically, the conflict is most often resolved through a compromise that equality is assumed in the legal and political sphere, and inequality is confined to the economic sphere.⁴⁹ But since these subsystems or value spheres are not completely independent (see 2.1.4), the underlying conflict remains.

2.1.4. Functional differentiation, Bureaucratisation, Juridification vs. the Rationale of the *Life-World*

Functional differentiation is a hallmark of modernisation and no sensible sociologist would disagree with this premise (Hagen 2000; Luhmann 1997b; Weber 1922). In a fully modern society, all social life is structured into spheres or (sub)systems – legal, scientific, religious, economic, ethical, aesthetic, etc. – that are internally interconnected but structurally distinct, and, to a certain extent, autonomous. All subsystems of society, to borrow the Luhmann term (Luhmann 1997a), are marked by a difference in communication between system and environment and function according to their own, distinct rationale. But these value spheres (Weber) or societal subsystems (Luhmann) are not completely autonomous, they tend to influence each other and at times to impose their rationale on their respective opposites. One of these conflicts – the one between the equality underlying democracy and the inequality generated by capitalism – has already been discussed above (2.1.3) and other tensions are imaginable. Such conflicts would not have been possible before this stage of functional differentiation, and that is what makes them fundamentally modern conflicts.

The bureaucratisation and juridification of all aspects of life, already captured in Weber's "iron cage" argument (Weber 1958 [1905]), describes a strong tendency within the modernisation process, but one which undercuts functional differentiation: Those value spheres or sub-systems that are not originally informed by bureaucratic or juristic rationales increasingly lose their autonomy and are colonised in the process. No one has captured this aspect of modernity better than Juergen Habermas. He can be seen as the scholar most emphatically connected to the "project of modernity" (Habermas 1988 [1980]), which he traces back to the European Enlightenment and which he defines as a liberating and humanitarian tradition. For Habermas, modernity has a strong and explicit normative dimension⁵⁰ and he defends modernity as an ongoing project or movement, in contrast to other philosophical beliefs about the end

⁴⁹ For a contrasting, yet insightful view, see: John E. Roemer, 'Will Democracy Engender Equality?', *Economic Theory*, 25/1 (2005), 217-34.

⁵⁰ A number of theories of modernity discussed here have this normative dimension, but none is as explicit as the one by Habermas.

of modernity. In Habermas' main work – the theory of communicative action (Habermas 1981) – he describes modernisation in terms of a frictional relation between the development of the capitalistic economy and the “*Lebenswelt*” or *life-world* of the autonomous citizen. The rationale of the economic sphere, based on purpose-relational action, tends to become increasingly copied by, or fully subsumed within the *life-world*, where it potentially violates the structural principles of “communicative rationality”. Ideally, the *life-world* would be immune to the capitalist rationale, but in modernity it is, in fact, in danger of being colonised by purpose-relational motivations.⁵¹

Modernity itself is characterised by this relationship: It is unthinkable without the market economy (see 2.1.3) that provides the individual with the economic basis for potential autonomy. But the colonising tendency of economic, bureaucratic and juridical rationales put this conflict at the base of modernity, since it undermines functional differentiation. A number of empirical conflicts⁵² are the manifestation of the tension between subsystems or value spheres, and modernity itself is informed by such faultlines. Any further analysis would need concrete, empirical examples, but the outline of the conflict itself should be established by now.

2.1.5. The Endpoint of Modernity vs. ever-remaining Contingency

The final conflict or paradox to be discussed here is again a complex one. Very briefly: The rationality characterised by modernity (chpt. 2.1.1) has brought about a conquest of nature inconceivable in any earlier epoch, and one with no parallel in history. This raises the question of an endpoint, once modernity has reached all corners of this planet. And this question could directly lead to a more abstract one: Is the world in modernity rationally controllable, or is a certain amount (possibly even a great deal) of contingency essential for the modern condition? For Weber, it would have appeared as if the world would soon substitute rationality for (religious) irrationality. However, contemporary times and contemporary scholars would refute this claim.

Ulrich Beck, while a prominent figure, is only one amongst many who try to explore the limits of modernity and its underlying claim of rationality. Beck asks how the formerly undisputed limits of modernisation can be thought of today, where institutions, such as the family or the nation state, are undermined by a radicalisation of modernity, without stepping out of the context of modernity itself (Beck et al. 2001). Against the claims of post-modernists,⁵³ Beck postulates that the Western world is

⁵¹ And while Habermas is often criticised as standing too much in the tradition of German Idealism – and therefore being prone to anti-empiric statements – he sees the friction and the fragility of individualism in modernity clearer than most other authors.

⁵² For example, any civil rights movement that challenges decisions that are formally/legally agreed upon.

⁵³ Associated with the names of Jean-François Lyotard, *The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge*, ed. Frederic Jameson, trans. Geoff Bennington and Brian Massumi (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1984 [1979]). Jacques Derrida Jaques Derrida, *Basic Writings*, ed. Barry Stocker (New York: Routledge Chapman & Hall, 2007). Jean Baudrillard Jean Baudrillard, *Selected Writings*, ed. Mark Poster, trans. Jacques Mourrain (2; Cambridge: Stanford University Press, 2002)., Michel Foucault Michel Foucault, *The Order of Things: An Archaeology of the Human Sciences* (London, New York: Routledge Classics, 2002 [1966]). and many more, post-modernism can be seen as intellectual movement that incorporates ideas from a number of sources into a radical questioning of established theories and theorems about the meaning of ‘modern’. The underlying assumptions of modernity – in the idea of progress, in the technological subjugation of nature and humans’ independence from it, in the perfectibility of the human condition and in the consequent rationalisation of the

entering a phase of a second modernity, where the deepening of modern tendencies goes together with a new consciousness of the fundamental requirements of human existence.⁵⁴ With the ‘discovery’ of the limits of natural resources, with the awareness of risks (such as environmental degradation) that are a given within modernity, any naïve assumption about human dominance over nature is increasingly questionable (Beck et al. 1994). According to Beck, there is no teleological endpoint of modernisation and no full control of processes within modernisation is imaginable.

Another, perhaps surprising, protagonist for the claim of increasing contingency in modernity is Niklas Luhmann. He categorically rejects the modern/post-modern divide (Luhmann 1998), claiming instead that modernity itself (and not post-modernity) is defined by “an unusual measure of contingency” (1998: 44). Modernisation, according to Luhmann, is not leading to the increasing controllability of society (or the world), but rather to an increase in complexity, and a related decrease in certainty. While he consequentially insists that we all are living in a world society, and therefore modernisation can only be thought of globally (cf. Dirlik 2003; Luhmann 1975), this does not provide any indication of an end to the process. Even if the whole social world is fully modern – and for him this would be the case once all spatially distant societies are interconnected by communication – it would not be the end for modernity. As Luhmann does not interpret modernity as a normative project, as Habermas does (Habermas 1988 [1980]), it poses no normative problem to insist on the fundamental contingency of modernity. According to Luhmann, society will never be fully rational, the natural world will not be fully subjugated, and human existence will be more uncertain than before.

Thus, the fundamental conflict remains: While mankind is constantly struggling to rationally conquer nature, both inside and outside of the human body, and indeed wins battles every day, the war itself, as a matter of principle, is unwinnable. The process called modernisation today will not come to an end, even if the generations to come apply a new name to it. There will always be aspects of human existence that are not entirely controlled or understood in rational terms. But, dialectically, the quest to analyse the world in rational terms will prevail as long as the trend towards rationalisation, visible today, finds a basis in society.

world – are exposed as beliefs with no or little justification on empirical grounds. The postulate of modernisation, according to the post-modernists, is a ‘great narrative’ and ultimately based in a Hegelian conception of history, one that sees history as endowed with a teleological sense, and which is ultimately a secularised version of the Judeo-Christian expectation of salvation. These meta-narratives – and modernity, plus its basis in the Enlightenment, is one of them – need to be deconstructed, their inconsistencies exposed and the legitimacy of their ideologies questioned.

⁵⁴ For an affirmative appraisal of post-modernism, see Zygmunt Bauman, ‘A Sociological Theory of Postmodernity’, *Thesis Eleven*, 29/1 (1991), 33-46. For a critical discussion, see Peter Wagner, ‘Liberty and Discipline: Making Sense of Postmodernity, or, Once Again, toward a Sociohistorical Understanding of Modernity’, *Theory and Society*, 21/4 (1992), 467-92. and Raymond L.M. Lee, ‘Reinventing Modernity: Reflexive Modernization Vs Liquid Modernity Vs Multiple Modernities’, *European Journal of Social Theory*, 9/3 (August 1, 2006 2006), 355-68.

2.1.6. The element of Reflexivity

Modernisation and theoretical approaches to the concept of modernity have come a long way, with no consensus position yet in sight. Most, if not all, elements of modernity have a corresponding counter-current, and the history of modernisation is riddled with apparent contradictions. The preceding discussion of the main elements of modernity has, hopefully, highlighted the inner fractures of modernity in a manner that cautions against simplistic reduction of the complexity involved in the term. But it would also be wrong to reduce modernity to an insoluble net of tensions and contradictions. Certain aspects of modernity have indeed come to the fore, while others have faded into the background. Since modernity took its first form in the 18th century, the knowledge base of society has greatly expanded, and this should not be underestimated. With sociology being the brain child of modernity, society's self-awareness has dramatically increased, in turn enabling an empirically-based societal reflexivity. Altogether, reflexivity as a core component of modernity can clearly be seen as the one issue that has consistently progressed, unlike the other elements.

But the concept of reflexivity is not necessarily straightforward either. It is generally defined as a feedback system, one that systematically puts the position of the observer into the observation itself, thereby qualifying the observer's observation in relation to his position (Salzman 2002). But the consequences of this process are controversial. In a radical interpretation, reflexivity could be employed to counter the value of all 'truths' – as they are only relative to the position of those who search for or proclaim such 'truths':

Reflexive knowing is usually predicated upon a constructivist or performative view of conceptualization that emphasizes the mutually constitutive nature of accounts and reality; it is critical of an 'iconic' or 'mimetic' account which is geared towards the faithful observational recording of allegedly pre-existing facts. (Pels 2000: 3)

But whether reflexivity, *per se*, involves a commitment to a certain philosophical, or sociological position, as Pels imagines it, remains doubtful (Salzman 2002). For our purposes here, reflexivity in its social embeddedness is more relevant than the concept of reflexivity in academia. And because the societal use of the concept mirrors the use in academic discussion (Mesny 1998), it is worthwhile to note that it is not used in a consistent way there either: As social sciences, social theory and social philosophy analyse modern society in ever-increasing detail, so too does everyday reflexivity increase (Holland 1999; Hopkins 1986).

In society, reflexivity can therefore only be described in broad terms unless and until an empirical example is considered. Ulrich Beck speaks about it as the main feature of his second modernity (Beck et al. 2001), indicating that it is a surviving paradigm of modernity, increasingly associated with the end of the "first modernity". As Scott Lash puts it:

This is perhaps the key to understanding reflexivity in the second modernity. It has little to do with the

reflection of structure on agency. It equally has little to do with the (partial) determinacy of agency by structure. Indeed, it is not about reflection at all. First modernity reflexivity was a matter of reflection. [...] Second modernity reflexivity is about the emergent *demise* of the distinction between structure and agency altogether. It is not about reflection at all. I also do not think it is predominantly about reflex. Second modernity reflexivity presumes a move towards immanence that breaks with the dualism of structure and agency. (Lash 2003: 49/50)

While both Beck and Lash have concrete society in mind when speaking about reflexive modernity, their concept is still too abstract for empirical application.⁵⁵ However, the immanence of structure and agency that Lash speaks of is perhaps closer to the every-day experience of people living in modern societies.

If one assumes that sociological concepts are slowly but steadily trickling into the discourse of "lay people" (Mesny 1998), than reflexivity is surely a candidate for widespread acceptance.

[T]he omnipresence and pluralism of expertise mean that expert knowledge in general is open to re-appropriation more than ever before, and that people have no choice but to appropriate expert knowledge on a routine and continuous basis. While the re-appropriation of expert knowledge by non-experts has been studied with respect to natural science and technological knowledge, social science knowledge, to a large extent, has been left aside of these studies. In my view, however, social science knowledge is crucially involved in the "problematisation" of day-to-day life, and in the routine construction and reconstruction of self-identity. (Mesny 1998: 161).

The ongoing penetration of *social reflexivity* into ever more aspects of human life is nevertheless a development clearly visible beneath the proto-philosophical concept discussed earlier. Thus, for all the dialectics in the modernisation process, the one thing that seems truly evolutionary is the potential, and increasing, use of reflexivity in respect of social relationships from the macro to the micro level.

2.2. Modernity in India

2.2.1. Parenthesis: Does Modernisation equal Westernisation?

Most of the elements discussed above have been based on observations from the societies that modernised first – that is, the Western nations on both sides of the Atlantic. And because social science is not context-free, the relevant theorists have naturally focused primarily on their own societies, the Western ones. In consequence, and unfortunately so, their theoretical advances have not thus far borne much fruit in relation to non-Western societies. Even the theories that are most explicitly global in scope are not especially relevant here: Neither Eisenstadt's multiple modernity paradigm (Eisenstadt 1973, 2000, 2001), nor the classical modernisation theories⁵⁶ provide convincing answers to this problem;

⁵⁵ For a critique of Ulrich Beck's main concept, see Anthony Elliott, 'Beck's Sociology of Risk: A Critical Assessment', *Sociology*, 36/2 (2002), 293-315.

⁵⁶ For a critical reformulation of modernisation theories' main ideas see: Christian Welzel, Ronald Inglehart, and Hans-Dieter Kligemann, 'The Theory of Human Development: A Cross-Cultural Analysis', *European Journal of Political Research*, 42/3 (2003), 341-79.

indeed, their respective answers are diametrically opposed.⁵⁷ Unfortunately, in discussing non-Western societies, there is no established position on modernity. Those who are concerned with modernity in this context use weak or ill-defined concepts (for India cf. Appadurai 2000; Niranjana et al. 1993; Sivaramakrishnan and Agarwal 2003), and those who deliver fitting theories are not concerned with non-Western countries.

Historically, modernity as we know it today has its origin in those few countries on either side of the North Atlantic Ocean, popularly lumped together and labelled ‘the West’. Thus any reflection upon modernity as such is deeply influenced by the cultural predispositions of these societies. Some authors, perhaps the best known being Weber (Weber 1958 [1905]), would argue that modernisation in its capitalistic trajectory was culturally enabled by the specific circumstances of the countries in question. What, then, does this imply for societies outside of the West? Is modernity possible outside the cultural matrix that has, according to Weber and others, helped to bring modernity to life?⁵⁸ Does modernisation in a non-Western society necessarily emulate the trajectories pioneered by the forerunners of modernity?

Once one enters this debate, more specific questions come to mind. Can we speak of ‘individualisation’ in societies lacking a long history of Christian cultural dominance, such as that which has influenced the West’s concept of the individual? What happens in economies that are integrated into the ever more connected world market, while the institutions of the respective societies – both economically and politically – are formed mainly by pre-modern, pre-market traditions? Can the concept of secularisation⁵⁹ – which historically arose from the contrast between an *other-worldly* religion and the challenges of the mundane world – be translated into contexts where the main expression of religion does not in fact contrast with every-day life (Veer 2001)?

Moreover, there are normative issues beneath the questions posed above. For Weber, finding similar patterns of capitalistic development in non-Western societies as those that had historically occurred exclusively in the West was a non-normative issue. Today, a hundred years later, the Weberian question itself – can capitalism be adopted by non-Western societies? – is still not satisfactorily answered. After considerable historical change, theoretical developments and normative challenge to ‘Eurocentric’ theory, its normative undercurrents continues to be a source of controversy. For the American modernisation theorists of the 1950s and 1960s, it was taken for granted that developing nations would eventually follow in the footsteps of the United States, as the standard bearer of modern capitalism. The

⁵⁷ While the modernisation theories (and their contemporary successors) are based on the assumption that there is at least a convergence in modernisation trajectories for all modernising societies, Eisenstadt and his followers would fundamentally deny this.

⁵⁸ This question, affirmatively answered by Weber with regard to China, but not with regard to India, is of minor concern today, not least because forms of modernity are visible in all societies and countries on earth. Max Weber, *The Religion of India: The Sociology of Hinduism and Buddhism*, trans. Hans H Gerth and Don Martindale (New York: The Free Press 1958), Max Weber, *The Religion of China: Confucianism and Taoism*, ed. Hans H. Gerth, trans. Hans H. Gerth (Glencoe Free Press, 1968 [1920]).

⁵⁹ For a short disambiguation in a philosophical context, see Gordon, Graham (1992), ‘Religion, Secularization and Modernity’, *Philosophy*, 67 (260), 183–97

other extreme, ironically in a reformulation of Weber's programme, was developed in Eisenstadt's multiple modernity theorem (Eisenstadt 1973, 2000, 2001), according to which modernity is necessarily in the plural, and essentially independent from any Western notion of modernisation. While the earlier modernisation theorists had a narrow, economicistic and a-historical view that has proven empirically rather naïve, Eisenstadt and his followers are likewise fallacious in their loose, theoretically ill-defined concept of modernity, their over-emphasis on culture, and in their arbitrary focus on random elements of modernity (Schmidt 2006).⁶⁰

While this problem could be solved with a more accommodating theoretical approach, there are more fundamental issues that render this discussion problematic. From the perspective of subaltern or post-colonial theories (Bhabha 1994; Chakrabarty 2000; S. Hall 1997; Pieterse 2009),⁶¹ the notion of a conflict-free re-enactment of Western trajectories towards modernity are seriously challenged by the events of recent history, events that seem to indicate little convergence between Western and non-Western modernisation processes. Moreover, for quite a few authors, the equivalence of Westernisation with modernisation, and vice versa, becomes more than just a theoretical problem⁶² – which it surely is – but also a normative attempt to impose a Western way of theorising on the rest of the world. Martin Fuchs, for example, writes:

Especially insidious is the interlocking of modernization and Westernization. Modernist projects claim and promise the universalism of their values and purposes. But then, they tend to lean almost completely on Western traditions of knowledge, shunning debates with other knowledge traditions whose validity claims, often universalistic as well, are not taken up. They also tend, when applying concepts and models in analysis as well as action, to discriminate between members of Western societies and other civilisations. Modernity's universalism undercuts its own claims. (Fuchs 1994: v/vi)

Here, some potent arguments are thrown together with other, much less valid ones. The general context is undisputed. Sociology and the neighbouring disciplines have indeed tended to neglect non-Western societies, and – even today – often simply consign them to the anthropological field.⁶³ But the assertion that non-Western knowledge traditions with universalistic claims are ignored is empirically weak and theoretically dubious.⁶⁴ And any discrimination between members of Western and non-Western societies, as claimed by Fuchs above, while perhaps a problem in empirical circumstances, is not

⁶⁰ If everything that happens in contemporary societies is deemed modern, than there is no benchmark for an operational comparison – neither within one nor between different societies.

⁶¹ For interesting discussion, see the founding work: Edward W. Said, *Orientalism* (New York: Random House, 1978)., or, for a much shorter essay on the practical implications of post-colonial thoughts, see Eric Bain-Selbo, 'Understanding the Other: The Challenge of Post-Colonial Theory to the Comparative Study of Religion', *Religious Studies and Theology*, 18/1 (June 1999 1999), 60 - 109.

⁶² In some cases, the critics use a concept of modernity that is not only out-dated by at least 30 years, but also deliberately simplistic. See, for a cautionary example: Satish Deshpande, 'Modernization', in Veena Das (ed.), *The Oxford India Companion to Sociology and Social Anthropology* (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2003b), 63-98.

⁶³ Anthropology has for a very long time ignored modernity, and is only slowly coming to terms with it. Joel S. Khan, 'Anthropology and Modernity', *Current Anthropology*, 42/5 (2001), 651-80. See also: Harri Englund and James Leach, 'Ethnography and the Meta-Narratives of Modernity', *Current Anthropology*, 41/2 (2000), 225-39.

⁶⁴ The claim of universalism itself does not provide a reason for a "knowledge tradition" to be taken up. Rather, the usefulness and applicability of a "knowledge tradition" is the criterion for its success in the global context, and this can only be judged from those who apply it, not from those who represent this "knowledge tradition".

reflected in the theoretical works on modernity today.⁶⁵ All in all, it seems that underlying normative elements in this argument⁶⁶ do more to obscure than clarify the factual problems that arise when applying the concept of modernity to non-Western contexts.

Nevertheless, the paradigm of post-colonialism does indeed contain some arguments that would survive close scrutiny. The claim that non-Western societies are mainly analysed from a Western standpoint holds true in most cases. This is mainly due to brute historical fact – modernity was born in the West – and is therefore not necessarily a normative problem. But it can indeed be problematic if it is the pretext for over-generalisations about or neglect of the inner-rationale of the non-Western societies in question. The radicalised position of the post-colonial school would, if taken seriously, undermine much of sociology's methodological basis (McLennan 2003). But, in essence, it is fundamentally a reformulation of one of the main problems that has plagued social science since its foundations, namely the inescapable conflict between empirical reality and theoretical concept. Gregor McLennan writes that

[...] this is just the latest form of the old complaint that the grey paint of theory fails to do justice to the green fields of life. Its *superficiality* lies in thinking that it is possible for *any* distinctive *analytical* discourse – and in spite of its 'energetic' terminology, postcolonialism *is* one of these – fully to 'capture' the raw edge of life as it is actually felt and lived. Constitutively, all theories and categories 'reduce' experience to their own conceptual priorities, and rigorously exclude rival theories/categories which counteract those central abstract foci. Postcolonialism is no different in that regard (McLennan 2003: 82; italics in original).

Following this argument, post-colonialism involves a new twist to the old problem that theoretical concepts are never fully congruent with empirical reality in all its shapes and forms (cf. Adorno 1966). For a sociologist working on empirical facts, there is a need to reflect upon the problem that concept and reality (whether Western or not) do not always (if ever) dovetail nicely. But it would indeed be throwing out the baby with the bathwater if the consequence of this was to leave all (meta-)theory behind and focus exclusively on the empirical side,⁶⁷ or – the other extreme – to cling to a theory without considering the empirical facts.⁶⁸

For the question at hand, I would cautiously suggest that India shows signs of a convergence of modernisation trajectories with that of Western societies, but that India has, of course, a different history and different underlying conditions for modernisation. And if modernisation is not first and foremost regarded as normatively charged project, then finding a non-Western society modernising in ways resembling the West presents no theoretical problem. Strictly speaking, India's trajectory could still vary wildly from that of the Western societies (Wagner 2010a) but still follow roughly the same patterns,

⁶⁵ The 'dominant' – over-systematized and over-integrated – image of society that Fuchs associates with Parsons was neither the main nor unchallenged paradigm in sociology even at the time of writing. The teleological versions of a historical theory of modernity have been largely criticised in sociology, history and philosophy, and is not representative of the disciplines involved.

⁶⁶ Behind all these claims appears an argument against 'Western intellectual imperialism', which is not fully developed and only partially understandable through logical reasoning, but which must - according to the authors who diagnose it – still be repudiated on moral grounds.

⁶⁷ Some, if not most social anthropologists seem to be trapped in this sterile way of thinking.

⁶⁸ This 'theoretical autism' is a problem for some sociologists, mainly of French or German background.

simply because certain features – such as local culture,⁶⁹ religious traditions, and so on – are either immaterial or neutral to the question (Schmidt 2006). If normative definitions of modernity can be avoided, the preconditions for a sober comparative analysis of non-Western societies such as India are in place. A contextual model that takes the example of the West as an informative backdrop, and not as deterministic role model for modernisation elsewhere (Linkenbach 2000), would avoid and transcend both cultural relativism and Eurocentric views. The vexed and emotionally charged question of the relationship between modernisation and Westernisation would then lose its sting considerably.

2.2.2. The Elements and Tensions of Modernity in India

In the following, the elements and tensions of modernity discussed above will be applied to the Indian context. Such an undertaking is not uncontroversial because it must address a number of problems⁷⁰ – not least methodological ones regarding the applicability of Western concepts to non-Western contexts.⁷¹ Because sociological interpretations of India are not yet as advanced as those in Western societies, the empirical and theoretical basis for this discussion is noticeably less robust than it would be for a Western society. Some of the topics are more relevant to the Indian context than others, with a few needing to be suitably adjusted to the Indian context. The following discussion, then, refers back to issues raised in 2.2.1.1 – 2.2.1.6 above. It will provide a sketch without any claim to completeness, although hopefully an informative sketch nevertheless.

2.2.2.1. The Individual and Standardisation in India

While individualisation is one of the main features of modernisation in Western societies, this has completely different connotations in India. In the most general terms, the basic social units are families in India, rather than individuals (R. Lee 1994; Patel 2005; A. M. Shah 1998), even though this is gradually changing (Rajen K. Gupta and Panda 2003; Tuli and Chaudhary 2010). Here, the consequences of India's trajectory to modernity are visible with clarity absent elsewhere. According to Sudipta Kaviraj, and despite the country's democratic credentials, group identities trump individual ones in India, and individuality is not a political concept, nor a cultural one (Kaviraj 2000). The pre-modern social order conflicts with the modern institution implanted into India, and this contrast will – in all likelihood – stay with India for a long time to come. India's political constitution and its legal system are, given their mainly British origin, squarely based on the rights of the individual (Baird 1998). The right to voting ensures that individual members of societies, not groups, are the core units of the political sphere as

⁶⁹ For a discussion of the problems of comparing inter-societal cultures, see Heidrun Friese and Peter Wagner, 'When 'the Light of the Great Cultural Problems Moves on': On the Possibility of a Cultural Theory of Modernity', *Thesis Eleven*, 61/1 (2000), 25–40.

⁷⁰ In doing so, an abstract, proto-philosophical model will be empirically tested, and some 'frictional loss' in applying theory to practice is to be expected. The differing levels of abstraction all have their own rationales and prerequisites and no simple translation is possible. But since the potential insights are immense, it is nevertheless justifiable.

⁷¹ The alternative, the approach of many anthropologists who exclusively employ concepts that are indigenous for the societies where their research takes place, seems much more appropriate. However, for a comparison of societies with different cultural backgrounds, this is a theoretical dead-end as those indigenous concepts are never fully 'translatable' to different cultural contexts.

well. But practically speaking, most representation of interest is done on the basis of groups and is directed at groups (Hasan 2006). The famous phrase ‘vote bank’ (famously attributed to M.N. Srinivas, cf. Alam 1999; Heller 2009) implies nothing less than the assumption that people would generally vote *en bloc*, rather than through single, individual decision-making. As family obligations, traditional connections and religious associations all undermine the role of the individual, it is not surprising to find that the individual’s role is marginal.

Empirical research in psychology appears to further support the view that collectivism trumps individualism in India (Panda and Gupta 2004; Sinha et al. 2002):

Indians are more collectivists than individualists, but depending on the *desh* (place such as family versus non-family), *kaal* (time constraint e.g. the urgency of accepting a job offer) and *paatra* (person having personalised versus contractual relationships), they combine individualist behaviour or intention to collectivist behaviour in varying degree. However, they rarely opt for an individualist behaviour with an individualist intention. This was probably the reason that C&I (a mix of both collectivist and individualist behaviour and intention) was the most endorsed combination. (Sinha et al. 2002: 21/22)

These findings do not support the generalisation that Indians are anti-individualistic *per se*. Rather, they point to the fact that individual motives are balanced by collectivistic counter-motives and will mostly be compromised as a consequence. The expression of individual motives – and therefore individuality – in a pure and undiluted form is unlikely to be encountered: Hence, ‘individualisation’ in India (of which only incipient stages exist) is much less pronounced than in Western societies.

On the other hand, standardisation, the counter-current to individualisation, is perhaps even more irrelevant here, simply because the integration of Indian society has never overcome the underlying heterogeneity (see 2.2.2.5).⁷² One could fill books by discussing the implications of this, but for the sake of brevity, one can conclude that the concept of the individual (within Western modernisation) is alien to India, and individualistic notions rarely find expression there. There is a conflict between political institutions – based on the notion of individuals – and general social practice where the individual is not seen as central category. Therefore, one cannot speak of individualisation in India with Western concepts in mind. Likewise, claims of strong standardisation in India at the national or state level would be unfounded: If standardisation is visible, it will occur within much smaller entities – in communities, castes and within the extended family. (In the empirical chapters to follow, the consequences of these specifics of Indian society will be considered more fully.)

2.2.2.2. Rationalisation, Secularisation and India's cultural traditions

As with most other modernising societies, India has a complex and often contradictory relationship between institutions that are clearly based on a rational outlook and, on the other hand, those with strong tendencies for irrational patterns of thought – with the latter potentially undermining the former.

⁷² Contrary to widespread expectations, the societal macro level is much less integrated, let alone standardised, than the intermediate level; that is, the family or community in India.

And at the same time that India is officially a secular democracy, it boasts a diverse society, in which numerous forms of religion, astrology, superstition and other non-rational world views still remain popular, with no signs of weakening (Assayag 2003). Nevertheless, these irrational elements live side-by-side with rational ideas, and do not seem to obstruct them. Science is highly regarded and the nation is explicitly founded on ideals of secularism (Assayag 2003; Judith 1997). There is, then, more of a (mainly) peaceful coexistence between both sides rather than the dominance of one over the other, with the same also being true for the European Enlightenment. Even though India, as a society, was not directly affected by the Enlightenment movement, indirectly it has a borrowed heritage from it. The Indian independence movement was dominated by an elite with rational, (Western) education, through which Enlightenment attitudes were transferred in various ways to the subcontinent – for example, in Nehru's version of socialism; in the rationality of science; in the ideal of secularism (even though it is a different version than that of the West (B. Rao 2006)⁷³); and in the imposed, but increasingly lived form of democracy.

Since independence, there have been major trends with regard to the appreciation of rationality. While the first decades of India's existence as an independent country saw an imposition of rational ideas from above, the following years witnessed a decline in this tendency. The Indian constitution, plus the institutions that were inherited from British rule, were borrowed and implemented without much regard for the overwhelming majority of people for whom these institutions were alien concepts and who had no regard for rationality as an ideal or as applicable patterns of thought. The institutions of modernity, notably the legal system, representative democracy plus the binding power of pan-Indian nationalism, were literally imposed by the elite, and have only reluctantly been endowed with meaning by the general population (Chatterjee 1986). These institutions were subsequently challenged by regional or linguistic jingoism, local quasi-feudal power relations and by pressure groups whose membership was exclusively based on caste or religious identity (Kaviraj 2000). The short term result was an imperfect implementation of modern institutions, which were explicitly or implicitly undermined by loyalties to pre-modern or anti-modern institutions. In the long run, however, a subtle trend towards accepting and accommodating these institutions is evident, and there is no doubt that India today is much more modern than it was in 1950. Thus, in unexpected and contradictory ways, and influenced by an amalgam of pre-modern and modern institutions, modernisation has taken hold in India.

Nonetheless, the special circumstances of this imposed rationality have left their mark. A notable divide is apparent between the urbanised, Western-oriented middle classes, who cautiously embrace modernity and rationality, and a much greater majority of people for whom modernity is of no especial concern. Of course, there are outspoken critics of modernity, most often found amongst the religiously-

⁷³ While Western nations define secularism mainly in the separation between church and state – with varying degrees in practical implementation – secularism in India is understood in an equidistance the state keeps to all religions. The result is an officially declared tolerance and often even embrace of the religions popular in India. And even though religions enjoy certain autonomy from direct state control, the situation is by no means characterised by an absence of mutual interference.

inspired (neo-)orthodox. And while the political rise of the Hindu nationalist movement (Jaffrelot 1996; Madan 1997), whose explicit intent was to regenerate the notion of citizenship with a particular religious belief and identity (Bannerji 2006), has ebbed for the moment, it is by no means a spent force (Kinnvall and Svensson 2010). In spite of the seeming tolerance of divergent religious ideas in India, there are strong social trends undermining rationality; that is, in the identification of citizens with their religious upbringing, in the inconsistency of secularism that conflates religion with mundane aspects of life (Majeed 2010), and in the survival and popularity of irrational beliefs, such as astrology. So while rationality is clearly the basis of India's political institutions, in the wider population rationality is a contested, disregarded or unfamiliar concept. Indeed, this is the case in most societies, not least the Western ones.

2.2.2.3. Democracy and Capitalism in India

India is the largest democracy on this planet and has had a democratic tradition, interrupted only by the emergency status from 25 June 1975 to 21 March 1977, since independence in 1947. The newly founded country quickly adopted a constitution and democratic institutions that were, in many respects, more modern than those of 'advanced' Western nations: India's democratic institutions were abruptly imposed, were not in competition with monarchic or religious claimants for power, and did not exclude women (as in Switzerland) or racial minorities (as in the United States) (Dreze and Sen 2002). From the beginning of Indian independence, however, it has remained an open question about how deeply ingrained this 'imposed' democracy would become in a country with a highly non-egalitarian social tradition and a mostly illiterate, uneducated population.

The *main* limitations of Indian democracy do not, however, relate so much to democratic institutions as to democratic practice. [...] while Indian elections are formally "free and fair" in most cases, their effective fairness has been compromised by nepotism, the criminalization of politics, and pervasive inequalities in electoral opportunities as a result of disparities in economic wealth and social privileges. (Dreze and Sen 2002: 8; *italics in original*)

Sixty years after independence, this gap between institutions and practice still poses problems for any straightforward analysis (R. Guha 2009b; Jayal 1999). On the surface, democracy has clearly taken root; voter turnout is consistently higher than 50 per cent (Nikolenyi 2010); and, less-educated and poorer people tend to vote more than their richer, better educated counterparts (perhaps not surprising given the re-distributive benefits for the former that result from popular democracy) (D. Gupta 2007; Thachil 2009). Politically and ideologically diverse governments have been voted in and out of power, with the country only briefly close to falling under autocratic or authoritarian rule. Given all this, though, the Indian democracy is still not a shining success story. Despite a deepening of democracy across the board,⁷⁴ persistent pockets of anti-democratic features remain stubbornly entrenched in India's political

⁷⁴ See the rise in power of formerly marginalised sections of society, the better legal protection of minorities and women, the decentralisation of democratic government, the general rise of women in politics, etc.

fabric. Not entirely coincidentally, the political party most powerful in India's democratic tradition, the Congress Party, is dominated by one family, and is even now on the verge of transferring power to the fourth generation (Adams 2007; Swamy 2001).⁷⁵ Even though elections appear to be fair and open, the campaigns of parties and subsequent government actions are, in essence, not directed at individuals, but at social groups (see 2.2.2.1). The most salient development in the last decade, the rise of political parties catering to Dalits (Rao 2009) showcases the problem: Clearly aimed at uplifting those at the socio-economic bottom, the movement is not modern in the proper meaning of the word since it employs anti-individualistic group identities and vote bank policies. Given all these developments, and considering the objections to a claim to modernity, India seems clearly moving in a modern direction, albeit at rather glacial speed. For the time being, an immense gap exists between the aspiration of the constitution and the design of political institutions, on the one hand, and the every-day politics and the lived reality of the majority population, on the other. This gap is narrowing, but closure is not to be expected any time soon.

Equally frictional is India's relation with capitalism. In early modernity, India had already a highly elaborate market-based economy, even though the system was geared towards subsistence exchange rather than profit maximisation (Washbrook 2007). In the first (Nehruvian) decades after independence, official policy flirted with socialism, and developed a heavily state-centred, technology-driven version of developmentalism (Bassett 2009a, 2009b). Only after the resulting *license-permit-raj* was found too restrictive for economic development did India slowly begin to change course in the early 1980s, before largely liberalising its economy from 1991 onwards (Rosser and Rosser 2005). So at least since the early 1990s, India has had an increasingly market-oriented economy, and is still going through a major societal transition (S. Kothari 1997). If placed within a 'varieties-of-capitalism' spectrum,⁷⁶ India's macroeconomic fundamentals would still count as leaning heavily on state-control, although the fundamental working of the market is now been embraced, rather than opposed. The result is a mixed economy, and, with that, India would rank in the mainstream of most developed countries, even if some aspects of the economy – the price control on fuel (2008), the inconsistent regulation of economic competition (Bhattacharjea 2008) and the restriction on capital flows (Chaisse et al. 2009) – make it seem like an outlier.

Nevertheless, the issue of the penetration of the market is as much a qualitative question as one of institutions. While India's on-going international integration into the capital market is inconclusive and patchy (Misra and Mahakud 2009), the domestic situation is even more contradictory. The size of the informal economy (Harriss-White 2002, 2003b; Kannan 2010) prevents an unconditional affirmative answer to the question of whether India is integrated with a market-based economy.

⁷⁵ In this respect, the Congress Party exhibits a dynastic line of succession that resembles a monarchy better than a democracy.

⁷⁶ For a critical discussion of the 'varieties of capitalism' theorem, see Jamie Peck and Nik Theodore, 'Variegated Capitalism', *Progress in Human Geography*, 31/6 (2007), 731-72.

Table 2.2.2.3. Labour productivity and employment shares by institutional sector (OECD 2007)

| | Level of productivity (net product per person, 1999/2000 prices, rupees) | | Share of employment (per cent of total employment) | |
|----------------------|---|---------|---|-------|
| | 1993 | 2003 | 1993 | 2003 |
| Institutional sector | | | | |
| INFORMAL | 20 721 | 27 958 | 92.6 | 94.0 |
| Agricultural | 14 745 | 17 431 | 63.9 | 57.7 |
| Other | 33 989 | 44 674 | 28.8 | 36.3 |
| FORMAL | 139 663 | 308 099 | 7.4 | 6.0 |
| Private Companies | 174 220 | 431 699 | 2.1 | 1.9 |
| Public Enterprises | 148 215 | 319 883 | 2.7 | 2.0 |
| Public Services | 101 756 | 186 891 | 2.5 | 2.1 |
| WHOLE ECONOMY | 29 475 | 44 706 | 100.0 | 100.0 |

In this regard, modernity in India stands and falls on the question of the reach and penetration of the market. On a political rather than analytical level, the inclusivity of India's economy is a politically charged question, particularly as the slogan 'inclusive growth' became popular in the last election campaign (Chandra 2010; Dev 2008). In terms of modernity, however, a slightly different form of 'inclusiveness' is the focus of interest; not so much as regards whether rapid macroeconomic growth is reaching the poorer members of society, but rather whether all parts of society are economically interconnected. The largest part of the Indian economy, in respect of numbers employed, is still agriculture (M. Ghosh 2010; Valli and Saccone 2009). Estimates vary, but it can be safely assumed that a considerable proportion of Indian agriculture is still on a subsistence level (cf. K. Basu and Maertens 2007; Bhaskar and Gupta 2007)⁷⁷, which means these farmers are not connected to the rest of economy by a market. On the other hand, it is also clear that more and more of these subsistence peasants are being rapidly included in the market. This will ultimately determine how integrated – and therefore modern – the Indian economy becomes; at the moment, agriculture has modernised only to a limited extent.

⁷⁷ Comparing the productivity levels of (informal) agricultural production in Table 2.2.2.3 with all over sectors, the precarious nature of this mode of income should be evident.

2.2.2.4. Functional differentiation, Bureaucratisation, Juridification and the Rationale of the *Life-World* in India

Since India has borrowed much of its political institutions from the former British masters,⁷⁸ the formal differentiation of the political sphere has been high since independence (Dwivedi et al. 1989). Even prior to the colonial period, much of modern India's territory consisted of political entities with highly developed economies (O'Hanlon 2007; Subrahmanyam 1986); thus economic differentiation was also relatively high – apart from peripheral territories with subsistence economies – well before the British seized control of the subcontinent (T. Roy 2002).⁷⁹ Nonetheless, even today there are major gaps in the extent to which modernity has been adopted within social, economic and political institutions. Neither the market-based economy (see 2.2.2.3), nor the bureaucratic or legal system have the socio-cultural penetration that would make them truly on par with the *life-world* rationale of most of India's population. Whether this negates normative concerns, such as those raised by Habermas, is a different question – one that could only be answered after a deeper analysis than is possible here. But at least the socio-economic penetration of the bureaucratic and juridical system can be sketched out.

The bureaucratic tradition that India inherited from the British colonial administration took British ideas about good and effective governance and applied them to the newly independent Indian state. The very idea of an 'impartial' or 'neutral' and, most of all, 'a-political' bureaucracy (on the British model) appeared to be a consequence of a parliamentary democracy in which the administration served constantly fluctuating governments without ever engaging in politics itself (Jain 1993). A certain detachment from the worldly affairs of the state was therefore not only accepted but seen as desirable. With the rapid expansion of economic planning after 1965, the Indian state bureaucracy heavily expanded in number as well as in ambition. Driven by the rhetoric of social redistribution in the name of justice, the state became omnipresent; it would not only monopolise the tasks of economic planning and production but also take over functions that were once neglected or left to institutions of civil society (Kaviraj 1991). The result was a powerful if slow-moving colossus that strangled the private enterprise economy and became known by the name of '*license permit raj*' (cf. Reed 2002).

But this is only the official part of the story. Contrary to these narratives, the reach and authority of the Indian state has been limited even in the economic sphere where it claimed supremacy. In spite of its high ideals and presumptuous aspirations, the state was never fully able to establish its sovereignty

⁷⁸ Modernity in the Western sense came to India primarily from above, first by the direct colonial rule of a more modern country, later by an elite that was educated and trained by this very same colonial power. All subsequent indigenous movements for the modernisation of India and Indian society were heavily influenced by the colonial experience and the apparent superiority of the colonisers' methods and ethics. Without the embarrassing admission that the territories that now comprise India fell easily and with little resistance into British hands, Indian modernisation is not understandable. The embarrassment of colonial subjugation explains, even today, both the pleaded contempt for the deeds of the coloniser and the (more or less) covert admiration for Western culture and societies – not least the British. Compare: Peter Van Der Veer, *Imperial Encounters: Religion and Modernity in India and Britain* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2001).

⁷⁹ It should not be forgotten, that independence for India was essentially the founding of a new nation state. There were no historical precedents as the British colonial empire in India was a patchwork of directly controlled territories and princely states with limited autonomy. Compare chapter 9 "Does India exist?" in: Immanuel Maurice Wallerstein, *Unthinking Social Science: The Limits of Nineteenth-Century Paradigms* (2nd edn.; Philadelphia Temple University Press, 2001).

domestically. As Sudipta Kaviraj observes:

The state would occupy [...] a kind of high ground in the middle of this circle of circles [each neighbourhood intersection of caste, religion and occupation being a circle B.L.]. It enjoyed great ceremonial eminence, but in fact it had rather limited powers to interfere with the social segments' internal organisation. Its classical economic relation with these communities over which it formally presided would be in terms of tax and rent. And while its rent demands would fluctuate [...], it could not [...] restructure the productive or occupational organisation of these social groups. (Kaviraj 1991: 75)

While the state seemed powerless in face of the huge informal sector, it asserted an authoritarian control over the parts of economy that were within the reach of regulation. If there is a colonisation visible here, than it is perhaps one of the economy by the bureaucracy.⁸⁰ However, this development happened largely before liberalisation and the bureaucratic system has since ceded powers in the economy. But it still has a tight grip on those parts of society that are within official reach and under formal regulation.

The situation is slightly different when it comes to the juridical sphere. As already stated, the legal system is by and large an institutional leftover from the British, with some important additions and adaptations to the Indian context (Dwivedi et al. 1989). And while the constitution provides and guarantees legal rights to all citizens, this is not reflected in reality. First and foremost, access to the legal system is not as straightforward as imagined in the constitution, and the enforceability of legal rulings, laws or simple contracts is often dismal.

Legal proceedings can take years (if not decades) to be completed, and are often far from intelligible for the average citizen. For this and other reasons, legal protection tends to remain beyond the effective reach of most, especially the poor. In fact, the legal system can also be used as an instrument of harassment (rather than as an efficient means of dispensing justice). Those at the receiving end of the system can end up suffering terrible injustice. (Dreze and Sen 2002: 8/9)

With few exceptions, it is reasonable to assume that most people in India would be unable to enforce their rights via the legal system. Therefore, the modernity associated with the legal system rings hollow as soon as the practical implementation of the law in everyday contexts is taken into account. The modernity that is attached to the penetration of the legal system into Indian society exists mainly on paper (Jayanth 2003).

Without stretching the topic beyond the scope of this overview, it can be assumed that functional differentiation is, as in all other societies, a concept that has relatively little scope on the ground in India.

⁸⁰ This conflicting situation had direct consequences for the relation between state and society, on the one hand, and private ethics, on the other. The contrast could not be more striking in a state that proclaimed the welfare of its people as its highest goal but failed to deliver basic necessities, and proved an obstacle to economic development and social change more often than not. The reaction can be called schizophrenic but is essentially consistent with the prevailing circumstances. Rather than challenging the state directly (even though this happened and is still happening in India today) the state was largely undermined by a private disregard for its institutions and concepts by a large share of its population. Passively opposing the regulations by bypassing them and actively undermining the state's authority by bribing officials, the disillusion was not limited to the citizens only. Bureaucrats themselves, frustrated by low pay and meagre career expectations, started to adopt the widespread cynicism whereby the state is just the bounty of various interest groups.

The colonisation of the *life-world* that Habermas sees as a threat in Western societies, is perhaps not accentuated here, but the incursion of the rationale of one subsystem into another one is very visible in the extent to which the bureaucracy has extended its reach. So, while the conditions and actual workings of the social sub-systems are different in the Indian context, the contested nature of functional differentiation (a fundamental condition of modernity) is as obvious in India as in any other modernising society.

2.2.2.5. The Indian road to Modernity and the problem of Contingency

To proclaim an endpoint of modernity in a society that is – like the Indian one – in the midst of an accelerated phase of modernisation, is pointless. And while any speculation about an end of modernity is rather academic in all societies, the question is even more out of place here. That leaves the issue of contingency.

In social and cultural terms, an unusually high level of contingency is readily apparent in Indian society. According to a concept of modernity where contingency is the main defining feature (Luhmann 1998), Indian society would have had modern aspects from a very early time. In striking contrast, India has long been depicted as a matrix of stable and unchanging cultural settings by authors from the West (Curtis 2009). Due to the compartmentalised co-existence of mutually contradictory world views⁸¹ – in religious denominations or on a community basis – Indian society has never been unified or informed by a single principle. Culturally, Hinduism is too diverse and inconsistent to provide a cultural frame for society, and the division into countless sects, castes and ethnic sub-population does not provide a population that regards itself as a social unit either (Adeney and Lall 2005). At independence, nationalism played a role only for a tiny fraction of Western-educated Indians (Seth 1992), and even today most Indians would not identify themselves as Indians in the first place (Sathyamurthy 1997). The rise of Hindu Nationalism can indeed be interpreted as an attempt to overcome the fundamental heterogeneity and contingency of Indian society (Pardesi and Oetken 2008), but this movement has not yet met with lasting success.

While the diversity of India's population and the often missing common identity might be the macro-sociological basis for contingency, there are corresponding features much closer to the individual. Fundamental ethical questions can be evaluated only in passing here. Nevertheless, the argument shall be made that an ethic prevails in India, which is very much in line with a high amount of contingency. The basic feature of this ethic, according to Kakar and Kakar, who trace it back to Hindu tradition, is “a pronounced ethical relativism” (Kakar and Kakar 2007: 186). According to them, there is no absolute certainty, no moral imperative that would rule some sort of actions out while allowing others:

Instead, an Indian's actions are governed by a more permissive and gentle, but more ambiguous, thou-
canst-but-try ethos. On the one hand, this basic uncertainty makes possible the taking of unconventional
and risky actions; on the other hand, actions are accompanied by a pervasive doubt as to the wisdom of

⁸¹ One, amongst a myriad of examples, would be the different views on cow slaughter. See Daphne Barak-Erez, ‘Symbolic Constitutionalism: On Sacred Cows and Abominable Pigs’, *Law, Culture & the Humanities*, 6/3 (2010), 420-35.

individual initiative, making independent voluntary action rare for many who look for psychological security by acting as one's ancestor did in the past and as one's social group – primarily the caste – does at present. (Kakar and Kakar 2007: 187)

If one follows this argument, and there are good reasons to do so, then Indian society is, above and beyond any actual situation, indeed informed by an amount of contingency that finds no parallel in the West. The tension between an end of modernity and the ever-remaining contingency that is relevant for the first modernising societies, is not only irrelevant to India because there is no end for modernisation in sight, but also because the contingency within Indian society is nowhere near exhaustion. Corresponding to 2.2.2.4, the actualisation of modern institutions and ideas is not nearly as deep as to provide a balance, or even a contender, to contingency. For all these reasons, India will remain a special case in the global spectrum of modernising societies.

2.2.2.6. India and the rise of Reflexivity

At this point, one is again faced with a great number of contrasts and contradictions. When reflexivity is understood not merely as a concept in academia, but as a lived reality in society – and this will be the basis of this section – then one has to look at phenomena that hint at reflexivity in social contexts. India is unevenly developed and this has obvious consequences for the potential for reflexivity. A few empirical contrasts could perhaps provide a glimpse of the situation as regards reflexivity: While India is home to world-famous intellectuals, a significant portion of its population remains illiterate, and its education system continues to fail to provide the majority with a decent education (Chudgar 2009; Kingdon 2007; Narayana 2009). The media, largely free and often critical of political power, is surprisingly under-informed about social conflicts, not least caste (see chpt. 3), so a general awareness of societal context is often low, and reflexivity is at times simply absent. While the fundamental facts about society are clearly understood by intellectual elements of society, the extent and influence of the *intelligentsia* would be guesswork at best (Malik 1977; Pollock 2008). The arts and humanities are even more neglected in relation to the natural sciences than they are elsewhere, so even academia has comparatively little to offer for a reflexivity of society in modernity (Welz 2009). On the other hand, the experience of difference, caused by the heterogeneity of society, already anticipates an awareness of the cultural practices of one's own group in relation to others, and therefore provides a starting point for reflexivity.

In this context, it is perhaps presumptuous to discuss reflexivity in the abstract, and some examples would very probably help to explain what reflexivity could mean in social practice. Martin Fuchs cites the example of Neo-Buddhism as a deliberate re-invention of an ethical religion by a convinced rationalist with an agenda for the societal reintegration of India's Dalits (Fuchs 2000). Following this interpretation, the re-invention of a religion is indeed an indicator of a high amount of reflexivity. A deliberate (re-)construction of a religion in order to find an expression for everyday problems is a prime example of a reflexive understanding of humans' position in society. But this example can be attributed to mainly

one prominent public intellectual, B.R. Ambedkar, and it remains unclear to what extent his reflexivity is shared or even understood amongst his followers.

Another example could perhaps be found in the ethical relativism discussed under 2.2.2.5. It would require a certain ability to reflect upon one's own position in order to adapt one's ethical position to every context. In a wider perspective, the contingency within India's heterogeneous society would also prevent a narrow mono-dimensional and therefore anti-reflexive perspective on social issues and society as a whole. But this amounts to not much more than educated guesswork. The issue of social reflexivity in India has not received the scrutiny it deserves, and the argument here remains a weak one. Perhaps the best indication of social reflexivity, or the potential for social reflexivity in India, is the direction of development this society is taking. However one assesses the amount or potential of social reflexivity today, it is beyond doubt that it is increasing. A positive feedback loop is created as the necessary pre-conditions for reflexivity become established – the growing number of educated Indians, the media finding new channels to communicate, the Internet opening up possibilities for a more direct communication between the increasing share of population that has access to it, and even politicians becoming more receptive to the demands of their voters (the pre-stage for reflexivity). In sum, even if the starting point for reflexivity in India is far from ideal, the direction of development is as expected. Social reflexivity in Indian society is surely rising, and so is its modernity.

2.3. Caste and Modernity

In the final section of this chapter, the relationship between caste and modernity will be briefly explored. In essence, the three models of caste from the first chapter shall be expounded against the backdrop of the modernity explored earlier in this chapter. That is, each interpretation of caste will be singled out and analysed with regard to its compatibility with modernity. The theoretical implications will be sketched out here, before the third chapter begins to empirically address the question of caste in modernity. Initially, the outcome of this exercise should not be surprising. Since one interpretation of caste is already called 'modern' in the theoretical model, the compatibility of this interpretation with modernity is expected to be much greater than that of the others. But, as it turns out, the compatibility of caste in any interpretation is never fully perfect, and it is well worthwhile discussing the areas of tensions that each interpretation has with modernity. Once the relevant elements and conflicts of modernity are seen against the features and consequences of caste, a more nuanced picture emerges. The aim of this section, then, is to locate these conflicts, to analyse the underlying tensions and to bring caste into the context of modernising India.

2.3.1. Modernity and Caste in the ‘Classical’ interpretation

This model, at first glance, contrasts most with the conceptualisation of modernisation discussed above. For those elements of modernity that are relevant for caste in this interpretation, the model’s basic assumptions are in open conflict with the rationale of modernity: It is opposed to the individualisation deemed modern, since it takes groups and not individuals as social agents. The religious legitimisation of caste appears to be incompatible with modern rationalism, and its division of labour out of sync with capitalistic development. For the problem of functional differentiation, or the complexes surrounding contingency and reflexivity, it is either ambivalent or not fully relevant. But the strongest conflict lies beneath these complexes: The systematic hierarchisation of the whole of society, which is the hallmark of this mode of interpretation, appears completely impossible within a complex, modern society – if it was indeed ever possible in any society. In sum, caste in this interpretation is basically a contradiction of all what is deemed modern by contemporary scholars. This would be the short version of a conventional interpretation, but as already intimated, this conclusion would be premature. There are grey areas, not least because modernity is not confined to a narrow definition. However, there are other obvious conflicts between modernity and this mode of interpreting caste.

First of all, caste is incompatible with any notion of individualisation, let alone the egalitarian ideal underneath it. Caste, and this holds true for all three interpretations, is fundamentally anti-individualistic. As basic attributes are acquired by birth and are beyond the scope of the individual, caste puts a limit to all forms of individual self-actualisation. The basic units for social interaction – and this is relevant for all interpretations – are not reduced to the individual, but remain on a group level. So the very idea of caste is already a contradiction of any notion of individual agency. On the other hand, standardisation (the antithesis of individualisation in Western societies) can only work on a much smaller scales in caste societies, which provide relatively small units of association. Instead, standardisation would be achieved via the hierarchical concept that orders society through the contrast of pure and impure in all its fine-tuned differentiations. According to this model – and it is worthwhile remembering that it is a model, not empirical description⁸² – society is fully integrated by a comprehensive caste order. The conflict between individualisation and standardisation is not realised here – society is all standardised and individualisation is deemed impossible.

This model of caste is internally rational, but this rationality remains incomplete since it is not based on empirically gained knowledge, but on religious texts, with little regard to actual circumstances and logical argument. If modernity is indeed linked to a trend towards secularisation, then this interpretation of caste is clearly handicapped by its emphasis on religious legitimisation. Factually,⁸³ modernity is less in opposition to religion than previously thought, and the re-invention of traditions according to Giddens

⁸² The hierarchy that is intrinsic to this model has empirically never been comprehensive. So even in this regard, the conflict here is more between concept and empirical reality in general, than between this specific concept and modernity.

⁸³ It is understood here as contrast to an ideational notion of modernity that is often charged with normative values.

(see 2.1.2) would leave room for an embrace of caste in modern circumstances. But since the religious legitimisation is so central to this interpretation of caste, any loss of importance for religion would have consequences for caste itself: If religion was generally undermined – and so far, there is no indication of this in contemporary India – this mode of interpreting caste would be undermined along with it. But even if religion remains in general high esteem, any rise in rationality could challenge religious explanations for the societal division of labour.

The strongest conflict, however, can be seen with regard to the modern relation between capitalism and democracy; this model of caste is in strong opposition to both of them. When economic specialisation and division of labour is not only religiously legitimised, but also pre-ordained at birth, and therefore unrelated to actual aptitude, it precipitates an economic order that is fundamentally hostile to change. The division of labour imagined here,⁸⁴ is attached to birth in a certain caste and fundamentally inflexible. It therefore creates a conflict with the requirements of a changing, modern economy. And with this, caste's economic consequences are clearly in contradiction to the economic conditions deemed modern. Capitalism, with its ever-changing economic circumstances, requires flexibility for adaptation that, in turn, is enabled both by this flexibility and by a broad skill set. If this interpretation of caste ever had an ideal-typical economic expression, it would have been a society based on agriculture, with a (mercantilist) economy and wide artisan specialisation, but with little economic change. It is in most obvious contrast to modern capitalism.

Much the same can be said with regard to democracy. This interpretation of caste conflicts with the concept of democracy, not least since it denies the fundamental equality of people upon which democracy is based. Furthermore, it is incompatible with the idea of political change, also intrinsic to democracy: The social order imagined in this interpretation of caste is unchanging and guided by religious, other-worldly principles. Democratic principles of social organisation are grounded in the real world, which makes them negotiable and ultimately changeable; otherwise political agitation, democratic elections and changes of leadership or policy would be either a sin or a meaningless endeavour. Whichever way one looks at it, this interpretation of caste is incompatible with the basic rationales of democracy.

Functional differentiation, on the other hand, is already envisaged in the division of labour. In a crude and pre-modern form, the economic specialisation of castes predates the economic modernisation developed much later in capitalist terms. And since it is a pre-capitalistic and pre-modern functional differentiation, it is again in tension with modernity in its empirical form. Moreover, the functional differentiation of other sections of society – and with it bureaucratisation and juridification – are not covered in this interpretation. This concept of caste proceeds from the assumption that society is primarily agriculture-based and is not much concerned with political or administrative ideals. Even though this classical interpretation of caste is the most comprehensive one, and the only one providing a

⁸⁴ Empirically, the economic specialisation was never as extensive as imagined in this interpretation. See chapter 1.2.1.

model for society, it does not systematically describe or prescribe society. It remains a limited model for societal organisation, and is inadequate as the basis for any society, modern or not. However, despite these reservations, this most traditional interpretation of caste is already quite modern with regard to functional differentiation.

Finally, the remaining points – contingency and reflexivity – deserve brief consideration. Since this model of caste assumes that society is governed by certain basic principles, there is little scope for contingency.⁸⁵ At least in its own terms, this model tries to extinguish social contingency by subsuming social complexity into an internally rational, coherent system. The underlying tension is solved, or rather suppressed in a pre-modern solution that contributes little to the modern conflict between rationalisation and the still-remaining contingency. For reflexivity, on the other hand, two positions are imaginable, in accordance with the distinction between internal rationality and rationality in the modern, radical sense. Based on the former, it could be argued that this form of explaining caste constitutes a contribution towards social reflexivity, however crude this might be. But once rationality is based on empirical knowledge, this model becomes the very opposite of reflexivity; indeed, it prevents reflexivity by projecting mundane, social problems onto a religious plane – and therefore outside the realm of rational argument.

2.3.2. Modernity and Caste in the Subaltern interpretation

The subaltern interpretation of caste, compared to the classical one, is less of a radical re-interpretation of caste and more a shift in emphasis (chpt. 1). While the main argument shifts from the religious explanation (central in the classical interpretation) to one based on ethnicity, the economic element – the caste-based division of labour – still connects the subaltern with the classical interpretation of caste. The basic conflict between caste in this interpretation and the elements and tensions of modernity are essentially the same as those in the classical interpretation. It is, therefore, unnecessary to discuss these points again.

However, there is one salient difference in this model; not in the way it analyses caste, but with the intention behind it. In its Ambedkarian version, it is already a reflexive and critical perspective on caste, much in sync with modern reflexivity. This interpretation is an active reflection upon the origin of caste as a social institution. In replacing an a-historical, religious explanation for caste with one that tries to put it in a historical context and aligns its origin with the concrete, rational interests of social groups,⁸⁶ it is more modern than both the alternative versions. This model of caste is more rational, since it provides a non-religious, logical explanation for caste instead of obscure reference to religion. Furthermore, it is more reflexive, because it is an active, interest-guided reinterpretation that analyses caste as a real-life

⁸⁵ At closer examination, there is indeed contingency, even in this model – the figure of the Renouncer, and the conflict between economic and ritual requirements would all provide room for contingency. For our purposes here, it is sufficient to point out that contingency is systematically subdued here, even if not in all cases successfully.

⁸⁶ Of course, this version is still an imagined one, not a meticulous historical study on the origin of caste. However, it takes the question of the origin of caste into discussion, something that the alternative versions would not do: The classical interpretation leaves it to religion, the ethnic interpretation does not even ask this question.

struggle for recognition in historic and contemporary times. This concept, at least in its tangible formulation by Ambedkar, is more than an academic concept – above all, it is a politically powerful attempt to open up caste for contemporary debate. In this regard, it is perhaps the most modern of the three interpretations of caste discussed here.

The issue of democracy is especially revealing: Caste in this mode is incompatible with the egalitarian ideals that are the underlying rationale for a democracy. (With regard to its features, the relationship is the same as for the classical interpretation.) Furthermore, the comprehensive social hierarchy described in the model cannot possibly coexist with the contingent power struggle of a democracy based on the idea of social mobility. For these reasons alone, this model of caste is a clear contradiction of all democratic ideals.⁸⁷ But to follow this argument, one would have to assume that these are positive (i.e., legitimising) descriptions of caste. And this, especially in the case of Ambedkar, would be a complete misinterpretation of the model. Behind the description is a clearly articulated rejection of caste, and in this rejection lies the model's compatibility with democracy. Hence, there are two ways of relating this model with democratic ideals: Either that no compatibility exists (as might be assumed on first glance), or that, when informed about the intentions of this model, there is a clear alignment. This model of caste has been developed to intellectually undermine caste in favour of a more democratic society – this is the only way one can make sense of Ambedkar's intentions.

2.3.3. Modernity and Caste in the Ethnic or 'Modern' interpretation

As this interpretation is already an adaptation of caste towards modernity, compared to the alternative modes of description, it is most compatible with modernity. Indeed, in many respects, it is undeniably more adapted to the concept of modernity: The dissolving of a comprehensive hierarchy provides the opportunity for social mobility (still group-based, not individual), the dissociation with a historical concept of division of labour facilitates the economic transition to capitalism, and the reduced focus on purity/pollution makes the whole idea of caste more flexible in social and economic circumstances.

However, as already mentioned, no model of caste is compatible with the idea of individuality, and this one is no exception. Even if the over-arching hierarchy is dissolved in favour of a quasi-ethnic compartmentalisation of society, this still does not conform with the idea that individuals are the basis of society. Castes, even if 'substantialised' and therefore relatively independent of each other, are still *per se* social actors above the individual level. Groups and not individuals are the basis for society here – and the fact that membership of caste is by birth only reaffirms its incompatibility with individual agency. On the other hand, this model does not correspond with the standardising counter-current to individualisation either. Seen on a societal level, caste in this mode is not the precursor for standardisation: Its compartmentalisation of society into a multitude of subgroups is the opposite of standardisation. Admittedly, on the intra-caste level, and to a limited extent, this model may

⁸⁷ The whole description is indeed based on an ideal of democracy that is informed by normative elements. If democracy is primarily defined in empirical terms – and therefore not seen as an ideal but as a messy reality – the contrast between caste (in all three interpretations) and democracy would be much less contrasted, but nevertheless still be there.

accommodate standardisation of individuals within particular castes. But on the inter-caste level, it lacks the authority or power of a caste hierarchy projected (or imagined) in the classical and, to a lesser extent, in the subaltern interpretations.

Certainly, in contrast to the classical interpretation, this model is more modern because it is essentially more secular. Religion is not needed to explain caste here, and it works relatively independent of religion, even if religion is invoked as a (weak) reference sometimes. Consequently, the rationality is more stringent, since no reference to irrational belief systems are needed. In chapter three the manner in which caste is rationally employed in practical circumstances will be discussed, but here it is sufficient to note that the absence of religion is already an indicator of increased rationality. Modernity is informed both by increasing rationality and the survival of tradition that cannot be fully explained by rational argument; hence caste is a paradigm example: The everyday invocation of tradition that is evident even in this interpretation goes together with the fully rational use of this institution in modern circumstances (see chpt. 3).

Nevertheless, caste even in this interpretation is still not fully compatible with the democratic elements in modernity, since it puts the group before the individual. That it integrates so well with contemporary Indian democracy (chpt. 3) is perhaps due to an imperfect implementation of democracy, rather than to a harmonious relationship with democracy as a concept. However, caste in this interpretation is also amazingly adaptable to changing circumstances – the hallmark of modern capitalism. Even if capitalism is, as an ideal, based on individual competition and endeavour, caste in this interpretation is an ideal adaptation for the insecurities of capitalism (chpt. 3). Since the traditional division of labour is weak or irrelevant here, it does not hold back the individual from adaptation to new modes of production or income. That makes it adaptable to a wide variety of economic circumstances. And even if some reservation regarding tradition rules might exist in day-to-day circumstances,⁸⁸ the model provides no systematic opposition to capitalist forms of economy. Rather, caste provides the individual with a back-up system that, potentially, provides aid and resources for success in such an economy. This interpretation of caste is, therefore, quite modern in its adaptability to an economy that is based on the market.

Rather more neutral is the model's relationship with functional differentiation. The issue here differs from that with the classical interpretation: Since the division of labour is largely irrelevant here, the functional differentiation that is intrinsic to modern society is not of much concern here. The compartmentalisation of society that is the result of this interpretation can perhaps be seen as an analogy for functional differentiation, but this model provides no solution to the fundamental problem of organising society. While caste in the classical interpretation was an ordering principle for society as a whole, here it is rather practised without much regard for its implications. Caste in this interpretation is thus both more compatible with modernity and with a reduction of social complexity at the same time. While the classical interpretation would work only in a relatively highly-developed society with a

⁸⁸ Purity rules are still relevant for some castes, mostly the ones at the extreme ends of the spectrum – see chapter three.

complex division of labour, this interpretation would also be compatible with a subsistence economy. Ironically, this reduction of complexity is exactly the element that makes caste compatible with the most complex economy today; the modern, capitalistic one.

With the loss of cohesiveness, caste in this interpretation also loses its power to interpret society, and to reduce complexity for the people involved. While both the alternative interpretations provide an idea of society, here it is either lacking or piecemeal at best.⁸⁹ This makes it more able to adapt to changing social developments and enhances its chances of survival in modernity. But it provides no solution to the modern problem of contingency; it increases societal contingency without providing a rational counter-balance. Since this model is not an academic interpretation of caste, but rather of what is meant by caste in everyday interactions, it cannot be expected to provide explanations for society at large. Even if it still produces meaning for those who practise it, caste in this version is no longer comprehensive enough to have an ideal of society at large. Compared to the classical interpretation, this is a reduced, shortened and less ambitious model, with little scope to take society into account. Hence, it is also pointless to analyse the model with regard to the last aspect of modernity, reflexivity. The bottom line, then, is that caste, in all its interpretations, and modernity are in most important respects incompatible – and often outright opposed. Even the modern interpretation of caste is not in sync with modernity's underlying notions of individuality and equality. In consequence, caste will always have an uneasy relation with modernity. If and how it is able to adapt to modernisation in empirical terms will be discussed in the next chapter. That there is always a residual conflict when caste comes in contact with modernity should, however, be rudimentarily clear.

⁸⁹ If there are any abstract ideas of society attached to this interpretation, they take society to be ordered in small and economically unrelated units whose membership is assigned by birth. Loyalty to these societal units is important, but an idea how this group-loyalty relates to other social obligations is not given.

3. Caste in contemporary India

After the previous chapters explored the theoretical dimensions of caste and the relationship of caste and modernity, this chapter will focus on empirical concerns. The guiding question will be: ‘What functions does caste fulfil for people who consider it a factor in their everyday life?’ As these functions can be diverse, it is necessary to limit the analysis to the most relevant in our context, namely caste in public discourse, in the political and economic sphere and, finally, in connection with the family. Based on the available literature, it will be argued that caste has vital functions in all these contexts and is therefore more than a mere tradition for the people who employ the concept. This will, in turn, further clarify what is meant by caste in a modern reinterpretation. Neither the classic, nor the subaltern interpretations are relevant here, and it would be pointless to interpret caste as a religiously-inspired phenomenon in this context.

Since caste rests on pre-existing socio-economic foundations, and is in some cases becoming stronger within the process of modernisation, a view of caste that sees it in its socio-economic context would contribute considerably to a further understanding of this social institution. In other words, because caste holds significant value for the people concerned, it cannot be expected to wither away under modern circumstances. However, since the changes accompanying the modernisation of India have an impact within the various contexts in which caste functions, caste itself by necessity must adapt to these changing circumstances.

3.1. Introduction: Caste at Independence, and Caste today

In the initial decades after independence, caste had a shadow existence in India. The prevailing expectation at this time was that caste was an ancient and outdated relic, not in accordance with the new republic’s ideals, and unsustainable under modern circumstances. With the death of M.K. Gandhi, the last public voice that was openly trying to defend the idea of caste – though not the reality as he found it on the ground – was lost (Pankaj 2007; Pillai 1982).

During the Nehruvian era, the national consensus on caste seemed much more comprehensive and durable than the one on secularism. Caste – unlike religion – was among a few ‘traditional’ institutions that were presented as all bad, as ‘social evils’ without any redeeming features. It was as if the only civilized response to caste was to urge its abolition. And in the 1950s and ‘60s it seemed as though everyone was civilized, for no one argued otherwise. (Deshpande 2003a: 98)

Since most observers agreed that economic development and mass education would wipe out caste traditions, it was anticipated that the days of caste would come to an end as soon as modernisation reached all corners of India. What was – deliberately or not – overlooked in these assessments was that caste had functions that were still vital for large portions of the population. Biased by perspectives that

placed caste either in a non-economic, religious sphere or saw its environment exclusively in traditional rural settings, the accounts failed to see its functional value in a variety of circumstances, both traditional and modern. Therefore, the continued and obvious survival of caste has come much to the surprise of academic and non-academic observers, even though the *substantialising* trends for caste, which allowed the phenomenon to survive in modernity, were well documented (Dumont 1980; D. Gupta 2000).

Seen in hindsight, it is not at all surprising that the institution of caste thrived after independence. Not only did the narrative of an egalitarian modernisation have little or no relevance for the majority of population, but state institution themselves were – beneath the surface – anything but caste-neutral. As Susan Bayly argues:

The expectation was that India would thereby [by central planning and the permit Raj B.L.] combine rapid economic growth with a move towards casteless egalitarianism. Yet, in the short term at least, these policies tended to preserve or even reinforce the differentials of caste in everyday life. In order to operate the system's quotas, licences and protective labour laws, both central and state government recruited far larger official bureaucracies than those of the colonial era. Not surprisingly, given the stringent educational qualifications required for senior posts in state service, those at the higher administrative levels remained predominantly of high-caste origin, just as they had done under British rule. (Bayly 1999: 321)

Thus, the positions at the centre of Nehru's administration – and therefore at the top of the public prestige scale – were securely in the hands of an educated elite with *Brahmin* and High Caste backgrounds. Indeed, for a long time, the traditional caste hierarchy found its equivalent in the levels of bureaucratic prestige. With few exceptions, those at the helm of the new nation were almost exclusively recruited from a highly educated minority, whose success rested squarely on their intellectual tradition and the ability to pay for an extensive education. Needless to say, this minority reflected historic inequalities in the accumulation of wealth that, in turn, largely correlated with caste status (Dreze 2003). For the first few decades after independence, then, as far as government institutions were concerned, caste hierarchy survived relatively unchanged from its pre-independence form.

This tradition was eventually undermined by two interconnected processes, both of which contributed to the demise of the '*Brahminical*' hierarchy within the various bureaucracies. First, affirmative action in the form of reserved jobs in public institutions – inaugurated at independence, but marginal and meaningless in practice for the first few decades – resulted in a tiny, but growing number of government employees from SC and ST background (Desai and Kulkarni 2008; Thorat et al. 2009). Although not an immediate success, the reservation system has now resulted in a public workforce that is much more diverse in its caste background than it was at the time of independence. Second, with the weakening of the political dominance of the Congress Party in the 1980s,⁹⁰ the greater assertiveness of Low-Caste-

⁹⁰ The dominance of the Congress Party can generally be described as based on a patronage system where the established elite (from High Caste or Local Dominant Castes) would dominate the party even though political rhetoric would be directed at social progress, an inclusive society and an emphasis on the reduction of poverty. This proved a viable model for a long time, attracted the votes of Lower Castes and religious minorities, and only started to unravel once former supporters took

politics began to impact on the political system (Rao 2009). Especially in North India, where even today caste inequalities are much more pronounced than in the South, the rise of political parties focused on ameliorating the condition of Lower Castes has had a tremendous impact on the political system (Jaffrelot 2003). Both these trends have challenged the traditional hierarchies within the government sector: Employees are recruited from a much wider spectrum of castes, and governments or political parties can no longer ignore the Lower Castes, particularly SC and ST.

While the changes within the administration reflect a change in society, the specifics of this change are complex and cannot be reduced to one-dimensional explanations. It is therefore necessary to ask: Is caste still relevant today? From the outset, it is clear that caste still plays a role in India today. Almost no sphere of Indian life can be separated from caste and its implications, from electioneering and the filling of government posts to the discussion of reservations and the educational and economic opportunities of individuals. Inter-caste socio-economic inequalities are still apparent, most especially the significant gap between SC and ST, on the one hand, and the rest of society, on the other (Borooh 2005; Desai 2008; Gang et al. 2002; Karnataka 2006; Kijima 2006; Thorat et al. 2009).⁹¹ While living standards for SC and ST remain lower than the average, the socioeconomic condition of many other sub-populations cannot be easily assessed due to limited or low quality data.⁹² In general, because the official census dropped the question of caste in 1931,⁹³ one is left with only piecemeal demographic information and very broad caste classifications. The best source of data at the moment is the one from the IHDS but the limitations are also quite obvious:⁹⁴

to more direct means of articulating their political needs. Zoya Hasan, 'Constitutional Equality and the Politics of Representation in India', *Diogenes*, 53/4 (November 1, 2006 2006), 54-68, Anirudh Krishna, 'What Is Happening to Caste? A View from Some North Indian Villages', *The Journal of Asian Studies*, 62/4 (2003), 1171-93.

⁹¹ For an empirical assessment on the connection between child mortality and caste, see Premchand Dommaraju, Victor Agadjanian, and Scott Yabiku, 'The Pervasive and Persistent Influence of Caste on Child Mortality in India', *Population Research & Policy Review*, 27/4 (2008), 477-95.

⁹² The official statistic classification of the Indian population into "SC", "ST", "OBC", "General Category Hindu", and "Religious Minority" is too loose to provide insights into the economic condition of particular castes. Moreover, since the classification is all too often subject to political lobbying, an official "OBC" status can, for example, empirically translate into membership in a Dominant Agricultural Caste – as is the case with Vokkaligas / Gowdas in the state of Karnataka. P Radhakrishnan, 'Backward Castes/Classes as Legal and Political Entities', in Veena Das (ed.), *The Oxford India Companion to Sociology and Social Anthropology* (New Delhi, 2003), 1474 - 93. Chengappa Raj et al., 'OBC Who Are They?; What Are the Norms to Decide an OBC? Why Should They Get a 27 Per Cent Reservation? Can the New Formula Be Implemented?', *India Today*, Jul 17, 2006 2006 p. 36.

⁹³ The census of 2011 will include a question related to caste, so the data situation is likely to improve. However, the very move to include the caste category was met with widespread public controversy. Krishna Pokharel, 'India Shifts Policy, Adding Caste Query to 2011 Census', *Wall Street Journal - Eastern Edition*, 256/60 (2010), A12. Priya Sahgal, 'The Caste Curse ', *India Today*, May 24 2010.

⁹⁴ The IHDS data is superior to the official Indian census data since it at least distinguishes between Brahmins and Forward Castes. However, all these classifications follow administrative rationales and have only limited reference to caste on the *Jati* level.

TABLE 3.1. Caste and communities in India, according to IHDS HH3 1.13-15 (Desai et al. 2007)

| | unweighted frequencies | weighted percentage |
|------------------|------------------------|---------------------|
| 1 Brahmins | 2,421 | 5.1% |
| 2 Forward Castes | 7,151 | 15.5% |
| 3 OBCs | 14,068 | 35.7% |
| 4 Dalits (SC) | 8,333 | 22.0% |
| 5 Adivasis (ST) | 3,439 | 7.8% |
| 6 Muslims | 4,708 | 11.2% |
| 7 Sikhs, Jains | 683 | 1.1% |
| 8 Christians | 751 | 1.7% |

The dearth of accurate nationwide data leaves room for interpretation, but the fundamentals are clear: Those born into the opposite ends of the caste spectrum (that is, either in *Brahmin* or SC/ST categories) have statistically significant differences in life outcomes.⁹⁵ The picture might be more obscure in the middle levels of society, but caste is still undeniably relevant in people's lives today, in whatever circumstances the concept might be employed.

3.2. Caste in public discourse

Put simply, caste is a highly controversial topic in public discourse in India. It is contested in fundamental ways; for example, while some groups or advocates for groups claim it is slowly dying and already mainly irrelevant for urban professional middle classes (cf. Béteille 1996), others would insist that caste is the hidden, but nevertheless ubiquitous, structure behind all social interaction in India today (Lancy Fernandes and Bhatkal 1999). Both claims have some validity, but neither one comprehensively captures the true situation. For the present, let us simply state that the phenomenon of caste is often seen contrarily in Indian discourse, with no consensus position. Since it has strong political and economic implications (see 3.3 and 3.4), caste is inextricably linked with individuals' and groups' interests. In this process, the official bureaucratic classifications, such as SC, ST or OBC, develop a life on their own and have come to eclipse more traditional caste identities subsumed under them. Not surprisingly, the caste debate is dominated by interest groups who see and define caste mainly in regard to the economic costs/benefits of affirmative action policies. Caste is all too often narrowed down to the pros and cons of

⁹⁵ "A second systematic and robust result is the existence of statistical discrimination in the outcomes of the allocation process for medical services on the basis of caste and religion. A higher proportion of Muslims or scheduled castes in the rural areas of a district leads to a lowering of the public input in each equation for every model specification and with both estimation methods. This discrimination is the consequence of decisions by the state governments." Roger Betancourt and Suzanne Gleason, 'The Allocation of Publicly-Provided Goods to Rural Households in India: On Some Consequences of Caste, Religion and Democracy', *World Development*, 28/12 (2000), 2169-82 at 2177.

reservations policies – a process which badly underestimates and misrepresents the phenomenon.

In more personal contexts, and in every-day interactions, caste is in most cases avoided as a topic of conversation, due to the sheer potential for offence and embarrassment that it carries. Especially in the new middle classes, caste is barely addressed at all, with caste identity only revealed to those who are considered trustworthy. As Jan Nijman puts it: “The avoidance of caste as a topic of discussion reflects some deep sensitivities and a desire to circumvent possible prejudice (both for higher and lower castes)” (Nijman 2006: 762). If two strangers were to announce their caste identity to each other, it would immediately position one towards the other in relation to their respective caste backgrounds – with possibly embarrassing results for both parties.⁹⁶ With such sensitivities attached to personal caste background – not least because caste is connected to the private identity of the persons concerned – it is jealously protected by a veil of secrecy, one that may appear impenetrable. The topic of caste is all-too often downplayed, or not considered appropriate for open discussions, and usually deliberately avoided. The only factions likely to bring caste back into open discussion are usually advocates for, or are themselves, politically-minded Dalits, who see and use caste as their main vehicle in the struggle for greater social equality (cf. Omvedt 1991). For the overwhelming majority, however, caste is a private issue, rarely discussed in public. Even a foreigner, without personal attachment to any caste, would find it difficult to openly address questions about caste relations. If one only follows public debate, it would appear – at least for naïve observers – as if the question of caste is somewhat ghostlike; while it is always lurking in the background, it is most often unmentionable in one-to-one conversation, and remains covered in an impenetrable layer of mystery and denial (Sheth 1999).⁹⁷

On the other hand, this concealing and denial of caste is only meaningful up to a certain point. Caste is undeniably part of people's identity, and therefore becomes embodied by individuals, to some extent at least. Bourdieu's concept of *habitus* is perhaps too rigid to capture the embodiment of caste in all possible cases (Gorringe and Rafanell 2007), but the stereotypical view of castes certainly has an impact on how individuals are seen. There is, after all, a widely-shared image of an ideal-typical *Brahmin* or *Vaishya*, even if particular individuals do not always fit into this pre-conception. The way caste is invoked in public can, by its very nature, only be based on stereotypes of castes, and they necessarily have a social impact. It would be interesting to investigate how the Indian public perceives what it takes to be an ideal-typical *Brahmin*, *Dalit*, *Lingayat*, *Reddy*, and so on. Unfortunately, and again characteristic of the topic, the lack of relevant studies prevents an informed assessment of such caste stereotypes. What is possible, though, is to investigate how caste is covered in the media – and therefore reproduced in the public imagination.

⁹⁶ The guiding principle of this relationship is not necessarily the traditional hierarchy – political and economic consideration could well be a factor. For example, a Brahmin, who would be considered high in the traditional hierarchy, could well be belittled by someone from a Dominant Agricultural Caste, who considers Brahmins as paid stooges in the service of his caste. The situation would even be more complicated if the counterpart of the Brahmin is from a politicised Dalit background, who may view Brahmins as the source of societal evil in India.

⁹⁷ The reasons could be political, see the example of Kerala: J. Devika, 'Egalitarian Developmentalism, Communist Mobilization, and the Question of Caste in Kerala State, India', *The Journal of Asian Studies*, 69/03 (2010), 799-820.

3.2.1. Caste in the (printed) public discourse

Even a non-scientific, non-systematic study of the English-medium regional or supra-regional newspapers and magazines reveals a striking ambiguity about caste; that is, caste is portrayed as a scandalous remnant of the past, downplayed yet still acknowledged and accepted as an everyday fact of life. Regular reading the *Times of India* (Tol) and *Deccan Herald* (DH), and occasionally browsing through the *Hindu* (H), *Daily News Analysis* (DNA), or the magazines *Outlook* (O) and *India Today* (IT), provides a complex and contradictory picture. On one hand, the importance of caste appears (at least subjectively) to be underrated in relation to descriptions and analysis of everyday life, with this in keeping with a general neglect of social inequality when analysing day-to-day issues. On the other hand, if violence results from caste conflict, for example, the subject of caste is suddenly highlighted and emphasised as an embarrassing, scandalous and painful reminder of India's darker past. However enlightened and reflective the examples of the Indian media might claim to be, the apparent bias in reporting and commentary provides a contrary conclusion.⁹⁸

Coverage of events with an inherent caste basis, such as social conflicts, often disregards the caste dimension, with the news reports lacking reference or recognition of the fact that caste underlies seemingly caste-neutral issues. Metropolitan issues especially tend to be portrayed as independent of caste, thereby implying that caste is a factor only pertinent to the rural hinterland. While it is commonly acknowledged that the slum population is overwhelmingly composed of SC/ST members and Muslims, the correlation between social origin and economic status is consistently underplayed in reporting slum clearances and related events. The predominant coverage, focusing on enforcement of municipal law and order, along with reflections on poverty, is strikingly blind to the fact that a population with a specific caste (or religious) background is at the centre of actual issue.

In contrast, caste outside the metropolis is repeatedly brought up in connection with honour killings, lynch justice and patriarchal structures. As an example, the Tol dedicated an entire page to a portrayal of 'medieval' caste relations in the countryside, complete with negatively connoted stereotypes of traditional caste *Panchayats* and the honour code they pursue.

Boycotts. Killings. Lynchings. All in the name of honour and kinship. That's justice – khap style – and it flourishes in vast stretches of India's hinterland. An hour drive from the capital is all it takes to go back a few centuries. (Arshad et al. 2009)

In this depiction, caste is rooted in ancient belief systems and, in consequence, is outdated in modern, metropolitan circumstances: India has changed not only economically but also morally. This depiction of caste, as straight from a horror story, may not always be far from the truth; nevertheless, presenting caste as a dark and exotic phenomenon, utterly alien to the educated readership in the cities, obscures the wider realities. Thus, caste is associated solely with the fringes of society, with no real influence on

⁹⁸ It should be noted here that, because all these newspapers are published in English, and therefore aimed at the educated middle classes, it is necessary to analyse these writings in the context of a middle class ideology that often claims to have moved beyond caste.

the lives of the (educated) readers themselves. And through caste being actively pushed into specific areas, such as politics, or charged with connotations, such as underdevelopment, the *life world* of the readership is sanitised, at the same time that cultural notions of the opposite end of Indian society are reinforced. The view of caste as something exclusively associated with rural, underdeveloped areas or social segments that are not seen as bearers of modernity is biased in two ways: It cleanses caste from India's narrative of capitalistic modernisation, thereby hiding it from the light of public (journalistic) reflection, and it projects an urban-rural divide that is, even if often justified in factual terms, unhelpful for an understanding of Indian society.

The same goes for the occasional stories about the sufferings of SC / Dalit communities. In a different article in the Times of India, the subject of Dalits vis-a-vis their Upper Caste counterparts is placed, as per routine, in rural settings and crammed with gory details that point to the distance between the readership and those being reported upon:

No social boycott could perhaps be so harsh and shameful than this one in the land of the Chalukyas. About 40 dalit families of the remote Jagalur village are living under duress after being ostracised by upper caste land-holders. For the past four days, provisions, vegetables, hotels and transport have been out of bounds for them. Worse, the dalits of this little heard-of village, located about 40 km from the district headquarters, are not even allowed to relieve themselves freely. (D'Souza 2009)

Without dismissing the compassionate motives of the writer, the issue of caste is further portrayed as an exotic, half-forgotten feature from India's past. According to this perception, caste has no place in the cities, still less in India's future.

Contradictory as it may seem, however, caste also regularly surfaces within specific newspapers reports, with the implicit suggestion that there is no cure for it, even if a cure would be welcome: Whenever elections are to be covered, or public posts have to be filled, the caste membership of the candidate is analysed with the same rigour as the potential caste-based vote banks are predicted. The opening line of a DH article, one of many possible examples, already covers the essence of the whole piece (which discusses the exact caste membership of the three main parties standing for the general Lok Sabha election):

The BJP has again proved that it is a pro-Lingayat party, compared to other parties, while the Congress is still a party which gives primacy to Other Backward Classes and Minorities. The JD(S), true to its image, has remained faithful to its vote bank – Vokkaliga. (DH 2009)

The text, at times openly cynical about the political power of caste and family clan connections, is explicit about two things: That caste loyalties are both a menace in Indian politics and, at the same time, immensely powerful, and hence unavoidable. The problem is that, while caste continues to be a vexed issue in daily life, modern or 'progressive' Indians – and newspaper reporters are generally in this category – appear embarrassed by its persistent refusal to vanish from Indian society.

All things considered, the rationale behind the newspaper coverage of caste is still informed by a

surprisingly obvious bias: Caste is a matter primarily confined to stories of the depressed or those at the fringe of society, economically or spatially. Caste has no positive connotations, and there is no appreciation of caste as a factor in modern life. That caste is an important factor in establishing self-image and in underpinning economic relations, as it crucially does in the informal sector, is also not acknowledged. Needless to say, this portrayal in the contemporary English-speaking press is anything but comprehensive or accurate; in fact, it serves merely to mystify and conceal the phenomenon. And, unsurprisingly as it is, this is not due to any media conspiracy, but rather it reflects the deep-seated denial of the on-going existence of caste by the middle classes, who criticise caste in public with the same nonchalance as they practise it in private (Frøystad 2001; Fuller and Narasimhan 2008; Sheth 1999).⁹⁹ In the English-language newspapers at least, caste appears a slippery concept, difficult to pin down. Fortunately, there are other ways of assessing caste, and the following sections will be concerned with caste in politics and economics, where the issues are more clearly distinguishable.

3.3. Caste in the political sphere

Obviously, as fully documented in the literature, caste is one of the most important factors in any election in India today. Historically, caste always had a political dimension and the notion that it was once an a-political, purely sacral institution is nothing more than an anthropological myth (S. Guha 2003). The colonial administration, for example, engaged with a variety of caste associations that had secular agendas (amongst others) to project (Rudolph and Rudolph 1960; Rudolph 1965). However, with independence and the advent of democracy, the situation changed dramatically; caste and caste association now had direct political input into elections and elsewhere. Since the early 1980s at the latest,¹⁰⁰ caste has become an increasingly important factor in political circles, resulting in the rise of politicians and political parties that openly agitate for the interests of castes or caste alliances (Jaffrelot 2003; R. Kothari 1970a; Lucia 2009; Mitra 1994). Individual politicians with strong caste identity and caste alliances or lobbying groups often have an enormous influence, with caste used to garner favours that can be translated in economic benefits. This, though, does not imply that caste associations as political pressure groups are necessarily a negative aspect of the Indian democracy¹⁰¹ – in more than one case they operate as the sole mouthpiece for otherwise neglected social groups, who would have little alternative means of influencing political debate (Alam 1999).¹⁰²

⁹⁹ As an illustrative account from a non-academic source: “The world of a naive believer in caste is limited; their intentions are obvious; their cruelty towards the Lower Castes is clear. But there is a greater danger from those who declare that casteism is bad, but view people of all other castes except their own with enormous suspicion. The caste that resides in their own mind poisons their entire being. The more they try to cover it up, the more they seethe from within. It is a state of mind that is incapable of any love. You can fight with a naive casteist, but not with urban Brahmins who may have abandoned all religious practises, but are strong believers in caste at heart.” U.R. Ananthamurthy, ‘I, a Brahmin’, *New Internationalist*, 380/20-21 (July 2005) at 20.

¹⁰⁰ Caste has played a role in politics before: Rajni Kothari (ed.), *Caste in Indian Politics* (Hyderabad: Orient Black Swan, 1970b), but has only become a direct force in elections with the reduced dominance of the Congress Party in the 1970s.

¹⁰¹ For a caste-conscious analysis of political strategies in the 1990s, see Eswaran Sridharan, ‘Coalitions and Party Strategies in India’s Parliamentary Federation’, *Publius*, 33/4 (2003), 135-52.

¹⁰² Empirical analysis clearly indicates that political lobbying of historically marginal communities has had positive effects on

3.3.1. Caste and the politics of Reservations

Even though caste has always had political leverage, the institution would not be so powerful today without a specific system to incorporate caste into the political fold and promote real economic benefits for caste membership. Since independence, India has adopted a unique scheme to address the pre-democratic inequalities inherited in its traditional social order. With caste discrimination identified as a major obstacle to a democratic and egalitarian understanding of citizenship, the official policy has been to smooth over its social consequences, despite its complete eradication being neither declared nor attempted. In a bid to balance socio-economic disparities between the ‘mainstream’ and those who were subjected to the most severe forms of discrimination – those of SC and ST origin – the so-called ‘reservation system’ was implemented in the Indian constitution. Under this scheme, hiring quotas for all jobs in public services were introduced, as well as reserved seats in all regional and federal parliaments. In addition, educational institutions that are financially dependent on state's assistance have reserved places according to the SC and ST share of the population – at present, 22.5 per cent. Originally envisaged as a 10 year plan, this system of compensatory or positive discrimination has proved to be more enduring than initially imagined, and has been expanded and intensified over the years.

While the original reservation policy was only partially carried out, the situation has changed dramatically in recent years; implementation has been much more consistent, with the eligibility criteria significantly expanded. Over the course of the years, and significantly accelerated after the Mandal commission's recommendations (P. Radhakrishnan 1996), more than half of India's population, those categorised as SC, ST or OBC, is eligible to receive the benefits of this scheme (Mohanty 2006). Especially in the recent past, further extension of the reservation system in the educational system has led to bitter protests from those who are not eligible and who feel marginalised by its exclusionary tendencies (Louis 2003). Nevertheless, while the supreme court of India has ultimately limited the extent of reserved seats to 50 per cent of all available seats, the debate over reservation is not yet over (Overland 2004; Zachariah 1986). With the rise of the private sector and the diminishing significance of public employment, some advocates now lobby for an extension of caste-based quotas in the private sector.

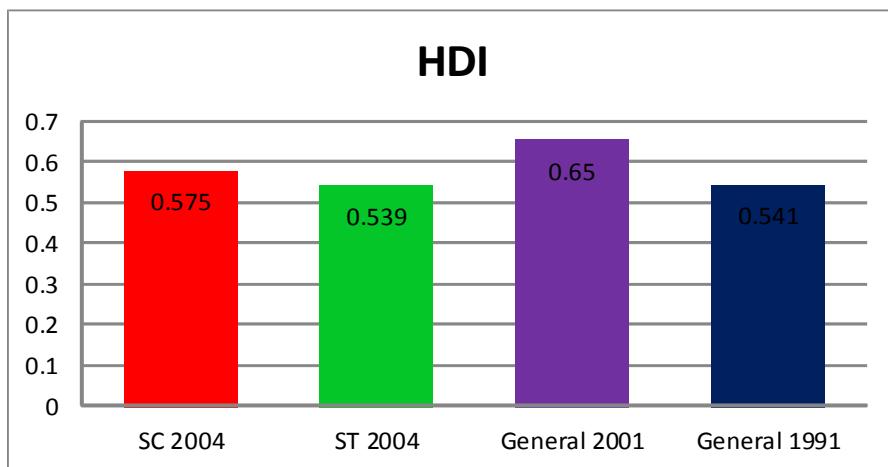
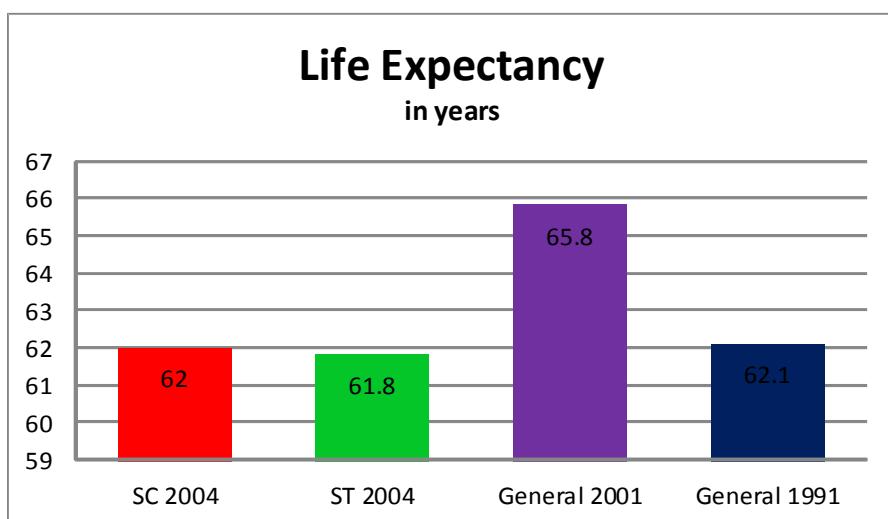
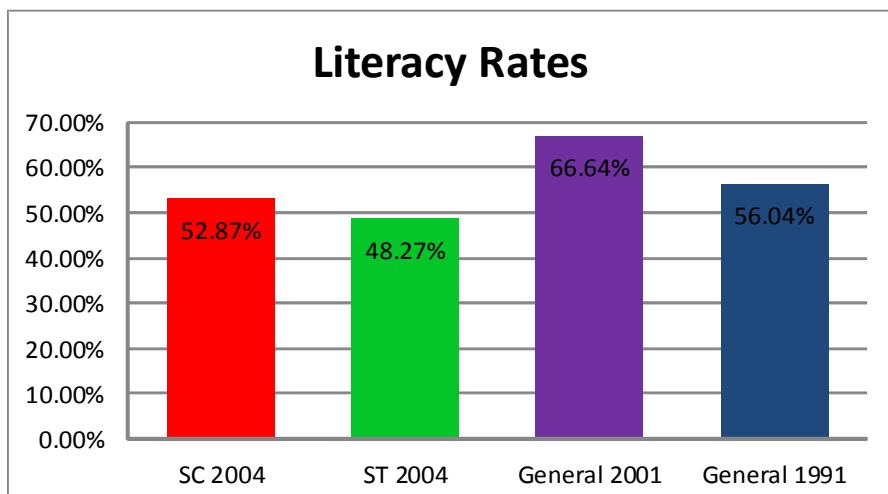
Politically, the arguments over caste quotas often seem polarised between proponents and opponents. Unfortunately, sober cost-benefit analysis are rare and often fragmentary, although not altogether absent. And while the quota system attracts a great deal of criticism – that it reinforces caste identity; that it leads to the formation of small groups of beneficiaries – “the creamy layer” (Chaudhury 2004) – while failing to reach the masses; that it reduces the performance of the institutions in which it operates – the system is not completely unsuccessful. In broad statistical terms, though, the benefits are rather murky: Research shows signs of improvement for all segments of society, but recent analysis reveals

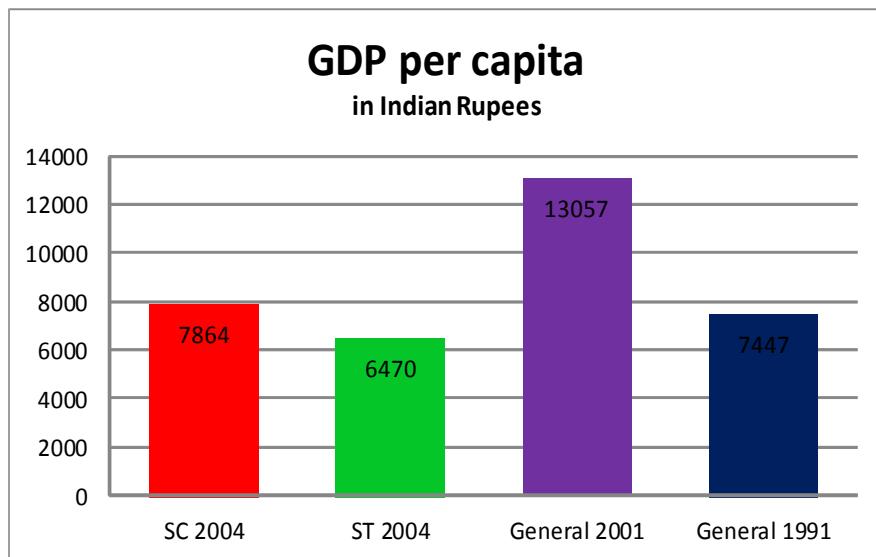
their share of public goods. Abhijit Banerjee and Rohini Somanathan, 'The Political Economy of Public Goods: Some Evidence from India', *Journal of Development Economics*, 82/2 (2007), 287-314, Rohini Pande, 'Can Mandated Political Representation Increase Policy Influence for Disadvantaged Minorities? Theory and Evidence from India', *The American Economic Review*, 93/4 (2003), 1132-51.

that, 60 years after independence, SC and ST members still lag significantly behind in all measured indicators (Planning and Statistics Department 2006).

Diagram 3.3.1. Socioeconomic Status of Caste Groups

(according to Karnataka Human Development Report, Table 2.8 A)





However, supporters of the reservation system usually point to its achievements; to the integration of different castes in state-owned industries (Parry 1999), the opening-up of new careers for the disadvantaged (Drèze and Sen 2002), to the on-going commitment to social justice (Bajpai 2010), and to the successes achieved in the creation of a small Low Caste middle class (Säävälä 2001). Rather than reaching out to a large number of beneficiaries, the system appears to have empowered a small number of Low Caste members who act as advocates and role models for the much larger pool of Low Caste members who have not directly benefited from reservations. In this way, in the admission of different castes to government employment and in the creation of advocates from and for Lower Castes in position of power, the quota system may indeed be the reason for the change in Low Caste assertiveness since the 1970s (Jaffrelot 2003; Pande 2003). The resulting prominence of Lower Castes in the political sphere, the agenda-setting power of Low Caste advocates, and as a result, the impossibility of abolishing the reservation system itself demonstrates the vigorous nature of this system.

However, the downsides of the current reservation system loom large in the eyes of the Indian public. The supposed correlation between caste reservations and the inefficiency of the public sector is frequently emphasised in the public debate, even though the claim is hard to prove empirically. Nevertheless, this presumed connection provides potent arguments against the expansion of the system into private industry. Every interested observer of the Indian public service (as repeatedly confirmed in my interviews with those both within and with-out the public sector) knows the infamous 80/20 equation, according to which 80 per cent of the public employees are literally idle while the remaining 20 per cent have to compensate for the majority's lack of commitment. Since government jobs are highly protected – employment is seen as a life-long guarantee and dismissals are difficult or near-impossible – an attitude of unaccountability and lethargy is traditionally associated with public sector employees, whether justified or not. It is a common refrain (again confirmed in my interviews) that many public sector employees confuse their hiring date with their retiring date, and are therefore on 'mental holiday' as soon as they take up their life-long job.

What does the caste quota system have to do with all this? At face value, such sloth and cynicism is possible regardless of any caste considerations, and, of course, not all lazy public employees are the result of a caste quota ticket. However, and this is most important, in public debate the dismal state of the public sector is often explained by, or blamed upon, the reservation system (cf. Spectator 2007; cf. T. Economist 2007; Upadhyaya 1998). Hence, in the arguments of those lobbying against the implementation of reservations in private industry, the public sector serves as a warning about the consequences of the elimination of performance-based recruitment schemes.¹⁰³

3.3.2. The consequences of the politicisation of Caste

The controversial issue of reservations has effectively cemented the legitimacy of caste as a factor in the political system of India. Despite its mixed over-all results (Desai and Kulkarni 2008; Upadhyaya 1998; Weisskopf 2004), the issue is too much part of electoral politics today for its abolishment to be expected in the near future, if at all. Factually, the reservation system has strengthened caste identity and institutionalised caste-related subsidies, thereby creating new identities, such as the official caste categories, with attached benefits. Indeed, the issue of financial rewards has poisoned the debate about caste in India, because caste status is now even more directly linked to economic benefits. The reservation of seats in institutes of higher learning has, more than anything else, ignited a popular backlash against reservations amongst those not entitled to them. The educational elite, those most likely to have a High Caste background, feels more and more squeezed out by the seemingly ever-increasing share of reserved seats in relation to 'general' (i.e., competitive) ones. Again, the reservation issue has also contributed to a narrowing of the caste phenomenon in the public perception, where caste is seen almost exclusively through the lens of socio-economic deprivation and possible remedies (cf. Jeffrey 2010). This, in turn, creates an excessively restricted view of this complex phenomenon. All in all, the reservation policies since Indian independence have crystallised the formerly fluid institution of caste like no other single development.

In consequence, the political use of caste has implications both for the political system and caste itself; at the same time that the political system has to accommodate the influence of castes, caste becomes redefined within the political sphere. The so-called 'Ethnicisation of politics'¹⁰⁴ goes hand in hand with the politicisation of castes, though caste is only one factor amongst many other – such as religion,

¹⁰³ There might be some fundamental truth to this claim – reservation could and does mean that people are hired not by their qualifications but according to their social background. In order to fulfil quota requirements, many government-affiliated departments and institutes are over-staffed with people who have no obvious function but who are needed to fulfil the requirements for the social composition of the workforce. As Ramachandra Guha complains, the qualifications for higher office are often not even considered anymore since the filling of a post is seen as an act in the power play between larger caste groups (plus the occasional religious minority) for influence - Ramachandra Guha, 'The Chancellors' Vice', *India Together*, 04 July 2009 2009a, sec. Opinion: Higher Education. However, agitation against the reservation scheme could also be interpreted in less benign ways. Behind the equalisation of caste reservation and corruption could be a hidden element of aversion against the Low Castes' rise in power, or against Low Castes in general, although open hostility against Lower Castes is considered an immense political risk in India today.

¹⁰⁴ The alternative, but more pejorative, term for this phenomenon would be 'identity politics'. It touches upon the complex relationship between concepts of individual citizenship, as understood in political terms, and the existence of pre-political communities – with caste as an example of the latter. Compare Dulali Nag, 'A Post-Colonial End to History? A Reflection on the Relation between Democracy and Communitarianism', *Contributions to Indian Sociology*, 36/3 (2002), 525-49.

language, regional or state nationalism – that could play a role in an ethnically-defined electorate. For caste, it amplifies the *substantialisation* that has been discussed before (chpt. 1) in the way that it brings castes and caste-alliances into horizontal competition (Pick and Dayaram 2006), in contrast to the traditional view of caste as a hierarchical system. This analysis, not surprisingly, is very much in line with the modern interpretation that sees caste primarily as ethnic units (in extension of the family unit) without much reference to hierarchy or overarching religious legitimisation. When caste is seen as a political entity – and caste alliances and other caste-based organisations can only be interpreted in this way – then it is an explicit rejection of both the classical, Dumontian interpretation, and the subaltern, Ambedkarian interpretation of caste, because this also implies a rejection of comprehensive hierarchy. Caste in politics, and the politicised version of caste, can only be thought of in terms of independent, quasi-ethnic groups, which in turn is essentially the modern interpretation of caste.

This relationship has been discussed in the literature, albeit on different theoretical terms (Gould 2003).¹⁰⁵ However, the basic implication – that the notion of caste as ethnicity involves an inherent challenge to any hierarchical notion of castes as a system – is a widely accepted consequence. Christophe Jaffrelot, for example, writes:

Therefore the primary implication of ethnicization of caste consists in providing alternative nonhierarchical social *imaginaires*. This is a key issue so far as the emancipatory potential of the low caste movements is concerned since in their case, the ethnicization process provides an egalitarian alternative identity. Besides intermarriages, the ethnicization of the low castes, for efficiently questioning social hierarchies, therefore, must imply the invention of a separate, cultural identity and more especially a collective history. (Jaffrelot 2000: 758)

In effect, the more political caste or caste alliances become, the less one can speak of caste as a comprehensive and hierarchical system. But while Jaffrelot situates this process primarily in the Lower Castes, the implications are pertinent for all castes. Once the Lower Castes are outside the hierarchical system, the system of hierarchy itself breaks apart.

For those who see caste in the traditional, systematic way, it would appear legitimate to ask: How authentic is caste when it is reinterpreted in ways deemed untraditional? Is caste as a social institution still the ‘same’ when it is seen as political pressure group? This can be answered in two ways: First, caste was always subject to change, and historical research shows that it has been reinterpreted before, most significantly in the colonial period (Dirks 2001). It is therefore an institution that is constantly in flux and readily adapted to the prevailing political, socio-economic and cultural conditions that provide its societal background. Second, the change is, in most cases, not radical realignment, but rather a shift in emphasis of the elements that make up caste (chpt. 1). The politicisation of caste, to return to the concrete example, employs certain pre-existing elements of caste (such as identity, as well as caste solidarity and awareness), and introduces them into a different context. And since caste has always had a

¹⁰⁵ However, since the classification of caste into three main interpretations is a unique feature of this thesis, this is not to denigrate other scholars.

political dimension, the shift is even less radical than it seems at first sight: In the end, it comes down to a spatial proliferation of caste politics beyond the local;¹⁰⁶ a transgression of the boundaries between castes in similar socio-economic conditions; and – last but not least – the employment of new ways to project power, no longer exclusively by local economic and political means, but also by numerical force in democratic, nation-wide elections.

It could be argued that the politicisation of caste has little to do with the individual's traditional caste identity that existed before caste became a factor in elections. According to this view, the new, political form of caste is artificially imposed, or even created to suit the needs of politicians to garner support and to mould an electorate on supposedly pre-modern lines. Indeed, there may be some incidental truth to this claim. But this interpretation seriously underestimates the personal attachment of people to their caste identity and, at the same time, overlooks the hard facts that make invoking caste identity an attractive option politically. As Susan Bayly argues:

Despite all that the politicians and the law-makers have done to make caste real for modern Indians, awareness of jati and varna distinctions has come from within as well as outside and above the local environment. It has been the pressures and insecurities of everyday life in both towns and villages that have kept the sacred thread and the caste purana in widespread use across so much of the subcontinent.
(Bayly 1999: 316)

Thus, the politicisation of caste takes old identities and loyalties, and moulds them in a manner compatible with the socio-economic circumstances of Indian modernity. Categories such as SC, ST or OBC take over more traditional identities and the reason for this is quite obvious: It simply pays for the members of a numerically important caste (or of caste alliances in the case of smaller ones) to increase their bargaining power by invoking caste solidarity in the political arena. But the "pressures and insecurities of everyday life" are a much more fundamental basis for caste in modernity. The other main reasons that caste has such a significant presence in contemporary India are to be found beneath the political sphere; that is, it is the economic reality of contemporary India that provides the rigid, elementary basis for caste.

¹⁰⁶ There have been attempts by Dalit activists to bring caste-based discrimination to a wider, international audience, most prominently at the 2001 UN World Conference Against Racism. Cf. Visvanathan, Shiv (2001), 'The Race for Caste: Prolegomena to the Durban Conference', *Economic and political weekly*, 36 (27), 2512-16.

3.4. Caste in economic circumstances

Despite all the hype about being a rising superpower, exemplified by the ‘Shining India’ label, the economic reality for the overwhelming majority of Indians is either of personal experiences of poverty, or of the possibility of reduced circumstances in the future. Even with the recent successes in alleviating poverty (Kathuria 2008; Kochhar 2008; Siggal 2010), India is still home to the largest absolute number of people below the poverty line in the world,¹⁰⁷ with 41.6 per cent of its population living on less than USD 1.25 a day (Antony and Laxmaiah 2008; WorldBank 2009). Even for those who are economically well off, poverty is visible everywhere and in almost all circumstances. Moreover, with very few exceptions (in government services or in higher positions in private industry), the unpredictability of economic existence means that poverty could become a reality for many who are statistically not counted as poor (cf. Chatterjee 2008). India has no welfare system to speak of, with the state failing all those beyond the reach of its poverty alleviation programmes, and the most immediate safety net for the individual is the family. This implies that the family in India has essential economic functions as a social and economic safety net, and also helps explain why the family is considered such an integral part of life by most Indians. And, finally, through highlighting the institution that is seen as the extension of the core family, this reveals the economic foundation of caste.

India’s economy is, then, still largely characterised by scarcity and unpredictability. Basic necessities are in short supply and the general perception is of massive competition in all facets of life, from education to employment. Income as well as wealth distribution is perceived as highly unequal, even though official numbers do not necessarily support this perception (Claudia 2006; Jha 2000). As large numbers of the population are living at or close to the subsistence level, rising food prices or shortages can have a critical impact on millions of people (Kiresur et al. 2006). The hikes in food prices in 2007 and 2008 (Singh 2009) forced the government to take emergency steps to prevent a hunger crisis. Thus, it is a pressing reality for a majority of the population that income is all-too often uncertain, in the large informal economy as well as elsewhere. Since India’s economy is for the large part neither regulated nor taxed but, rather, informal (Harriss-White 2002; Kundu and Sharma 2001; Maiti and Sen 2010; Mathew 1995),¹⁰⁸ economic insecurity is not counter-balanced by a reliable institutional fall back for those who subsist there. The well-documented policy initiatives to address this problem – namely the National Rural Employment Guarantee Scheme and the Social Security for Unorganised (Informal) Workers (Kannan 2010) – have reduced the hardships of insecurity somewhat, but this is still far from a solution for the fundamental dilemma.

¹⁰⁷ The measurement of ‘below-poverty-line’ status itself is politically contested, see: Bina Fernandez, ‘Poor Practices: Contestations around ‘Below Poverty Line’ Status in India’, *Third World Quarterly*, 31/3 (2010), 415 - 30.

¹⁰⁸ For an overview of the literature on the multidimensional consequences of the ‘in-formalisation’ of India’s economy, see Barbara Harriss-White, ‘Work and Wellbeing in Informal Economies: The Regulative Roles of Institutions of Identity and the State’, *World Development*, 38/2 (2010), 170-83.

Even if famines are unlikely nowadays, the insecurity of the market economy, and the general fact that for a large number of Indians the loss of livelihood is a real possibility, make a security net a necessary. One very common consequence is the strategy of employing caste both as a marker of a shared identity, to create a base for solidarity with other members of the same or a similar caste, and to exploit network connections based on caste associations.

Indeed, in uncertain times, a wide range of ‘modern’ Indian businesses have continued to find that profit margins can be protected or enhanced by pooling assets and sharing information within established kin and caste networks. (Bayly 1999: 321)

In very basic and simplified terms, caste and caste organisations are an adaptation to this state of economic unpredictability. Structurally situated between families and the state, caste organisations bridge a gap that neither families nor state organisations are able or willing to cover. Because they pool the resources of more members, caste organisations are clearly better at providing a safety net than simple family connections, even if individual members could expect more loyalty from their own families (cf. 3.5). While a family is in most cases simply unable to exert any political influence, caste associations, especially those of large and powerful caste or caste groups, are a powerful force in the struggle for public resources. Thus, India’s economic circumstances, plus the pre-existing caste identities and loyalties, are the prerequisites for the political use of caste and caste alliances as the means to achieve greater individual and collective bargaining power.

But the caste associations’ role is not confined solely to the exercise of political pressure:

As education and entrepreneurship emerge as twin pillars of advancement in modern India, historically wealthy castes play an interesting, often covert, role in shaping opportunities. Caste associations organize private schools, colleges and charitable trusts through which members obtain scholarships and loans for higher education. While these schools are ostensibly open to all, members of the caste that established the school often receive priority. Scholarships are given based on recommendations from members of the caste-based governing body. For rural students, educational opportunities in cities are governed by their ability to obtain subsidized dormitory accommodations. A search of hostels in Mumbai turns up dormitories with such identifiable caste names as “Lad Baniya” and “Modh Baniya.” In addition to caste-based educational opportunities, many caste organizations have also managed to set up cooperative banks, initially set up to serve caste members, and where caste members continue to retain considerable clout. The tiny caste of Saraswat Brahmins is associated with a surprisingly large number of banks. This access to capital is reflected in the fact that when IHDS enumerated the source of loans obtained in the preceding five years, of the households that took out a loan, 39% of the Brahmins borrowed from a bank or credit society while only 18% of the dalit households did so. Among dalits, an overwhelming number resorted to private moneylenders, paying a considerably higher rate of interest than if they had been able to borrow from a bank. These are just a few examples of the way in which castes manage to parlay their historical privileges into opportunities for their members and often use the vehicles – such as tax-deductible status – provided by the Indian state. (Desai 2008: 26)

Without invoking traditional caste hierarchies, economic disparities between castes can – as portrayed above – survive in a modern, market-based economy.

Since it offers its members real economic benefits, caste is more than a residual institution, but an active agent in modernising India. Some theoretical economists see caste primarily as means to enforce contracts in the wider sense (Freitas 2008).¹⁰⁹ Depending on the actual interaction between groups, caste can exert pressure on its members by controlling social goods, e.g. access to a marriage network, that provide considerable benefits. Depending on circumstances, caste can therefore have a disciplining effect on its members. More generally, a shared caste identity potentially provides mutual recognition as equals and a basis for trust relationships. As Barbara Harris-White puts it:

Caste membership still affords the trust necessary for informal or illegal dealings, both within the formal sector and between the formal sector and the State. It still provides the network necessary for contacts, for subcontracting and for labour recruitment within the informal economy. (Harris-White 2003a: 178)

As trust is a precious and essential prerequisite for business dealings (Bachmann and Zaheer 2006; Huemer 1998), and even more so in a largely informal economy (Harris-White 2003b), membership of a caste, which helps to establish this trust, is a real asset for the individual concerned.

All this has implications beyond domestic dealings within a caste. In the face of the sheer diversity and pluralism of Indian society, caste functions as a marker of identity that structures and reduces chaos and complexity for all parties concerned. Once caste gets interpreted in an essentialist way (Bhatia and Stam 2005; Gil-White 2001; Mahalingam 2003),¹¹⁰ it conflates socially-induced perceptions about specific castes with the members of those specific castes, thereby reducing complexity. Against a backdrop of general contingency, it provides preformed expectations of people that are not personally known to each other. And this, in turn, can have a significant impact on the economic behaviour of the parties concerned (Hoff and Pandey 2004, 2005). Since caste carries notions of quite distinct characteristics – i.e. that a person from a *Brahmin* caste would be well-mannered and gentle, with natural authority, while a non-vegetarian *Shudra* would perhaps be immoral and untrustworthy – the classifying of people into castes implies a concurrent categorising of their personal characteristics. As long as the actual *Jati* can be allocated to some position in the social matrix (perhaps informed by *Varna*), existing perceptions or prejudices are automatically applied to individuals within that *Jati*.

Thus, it would be fair to assume that caste has a real role in the economy of India today. However, while virtually nobody would contest the economic function of the family in India, the situation is different for caste, and this requires further consideration. Caste is certainly subordinated in importance to the family in most economic respects. Caste has neither direct control over the individual nor can it provide the immediate support that a family can. André Béteille is thus correct when he states

¹⁰⁹ Contract enforcement in India is a problem not exclusively confined to the informal sector.

¹¹⁰ It is indeed a highly controversial and, regrettably, under-researched question the extent to which caste is interpreted in essentialist ways. The relevant studies, most often based on socio-psychological methodology, provide a mixed picture. But it can safely be assumed that an essentialist view on caste is one important perspective (amongst others) in India.

that the family plays a far more active role than caste in reproducing the inequalities associated with the new occupational system (Béteille 1991: 13).

Nevertheless, aside from the most modern sectors of the Indian economy, caste is vital not only for its function within political pressure groups, but also as a back-up system for families with small and limited resources. Once the resources of the family have reached their limit, the caste (or caste association) is often the only leverage that remains. Used in the political sphere, a powerful caste association can lobby for economic benefits, with macro-economic effects on economic and spatial mobility (Munshi and Rosenzweig 2009). As long as the membership of castes or caste networks results in economic gains for the individual, it becomes risky to leave a caste by intermarriage, or to move to a place where the caste's influence is irrelevant. And while caste is already a highly potent force in the rent-seeking behaviours prevalent in political circles (Osborne 2001),¹¹¹ it is not just political lobbying that makes caste membership and caste organisations economically attractive. In addition to the survival of supposedly traditional caste status stages – and the rediscovery of caste as part of a religious revival¹¹² – the economy itself provides more than adequate reasons to keep this institution alive.

However, to further test this assumption, one would need to assess empirical examples. This will be briefly done in the following two sections: First, the changing social prestige of certain castes will be related to changes in economic clout in the context of modernisation. Second, the role of castes in Indian businesses will be briefly explored, thereby testing the thesis that caste connections provide a vital catalyst for business operations. Both examples are somewhat arbitrary, and many others could be included, if space and time permitted – although all would eventually confirm the fact that caste plays a vital role in India's economy today.

3.4.1. Interaction between economic changes and Caste perceptions

The inter-linkage between caste and economy is fundamentally reciprocal; changes in the economic circumstances of castes must be accompanied by changes in the way castes are perceived socially. The modernisation of the Indian economy cannot be separated from the changing relations between castes, and of the social status that is the consequence of, and the basis for, these relationships. The result is a mix of traditional and novel perceptions about specific castes and their respective economic role. So, for example, the high status generally attributed to clean, non-polluting office work, suited the identity of *Brahmins*, *Vaishyas* and *Sanskritisised* castes, while at the opposite end, menial jobs that involve the handling of polluting substances, remained firmly in the hands of castes traditionally associated with each role. The traditional affinity of *Brahmin* and Higher Castes to 'intellectual occupations' finds its expression in their greater representation in jobs in the New Economy (see chpt. 4). On the other hand,

¹¹¹ Apparently, this behaviour has a long history, dating back to colonial times. See: Abhijit Banerjee, Lakshmi Iyer, and Rohini Somanathan, 'History, Social Divisions, and Public Goods in Rural India', *Journal of the European Economic Association*, 3/2/3 (2005), 639-47.

¹¹² Even in the modern interpretation of caste, a weak but perceptible connection to the traditional, religiously-connoted interpretation of caste is relevant. See chapter one for details.

occupations considered polluting are still often exclusively the domain of Lower Castes or Muslims (Bhowmik 2004: 87; Knorringa 1999).

In the space between the two extremes, however, a transformation has taken place that was as much related to the opening up of new possibilities as it was by changing attitudes. The Ezhavas of Kerala (equivalent to the Nadars in Tamil Nadu), whose traditional occupation was toddy tapping – the production of arrack from coconut palms – are a textbook example (Osella and Osella 2000). Their status, mainly accorded to them by their physical work and the handling of a polluting substance, alcohol, was merely one step above Untouchables before modernisation. However, with a greater social tolerance towards alcohol, and economic opportunities in other areas, their status rose as their economic situation improved. Nowadays, Ezhavas are often powerful castes in their respective localities, and tend to dominate villages. Due to the power of numbers, they are a considerable political force in Kerala, as well as in Tamil Nadu.

Examples like this one can be found all over India; the point is that caste, and the situation for people who consider themselves as caste members, is changing dramatically. Nevertheless, it does not follow from this that caste itself is likely to dissolve. Rather, the balance is shifting – though more in the centre than at the extreme ends of the caste spectrum – towards more private interpretations, where questions of ethnic belonging are emphasised while the traditional occupation loses importance. While the economic and political justifications for caste remain strong, the way caste can be practised in modernity is fundamentally different. The idea of a caste system, where every caste has its position vis-à-vis all other castes, is functionally connected to a locality where the caste membership is publicly known. The anonymity of increasingly urbanised India explains why traditional occupations have increasingly lost their meaning in modernity. In a few cases, entry restrictions or social stigma tend to keep some occupations exclusive to specific castes: Priestly positions are still the domain of *Brahmins*, whereas sweepers are only recruited from the lowest rungs of society. But in India's modern sectors such consideration are not an immediate concern. Religious considerations are increasingly overlooked, even though the Indian secularism is far from excluding religion out of public life (chpt. 2).

3.4.2. Caste in business settings

Although caste undoubtedly plays a role in Indian businesses today, demonstrating this is difficult – especially as limited empirical analysis has been undertaken on the caste and socioeconomic background of India's business elites. However, what research there is seems to point to two parallel developments. First, the supposed economic influence of traditional trading castes, associated with the *Vaishya Varna*, is no longer supported by empirical evidence (if, indeed, if it was ever as strong as believed). Second, Indian business is dominated by people from higher or landowning castes, who inherit material and non-material forms of capital (cf. Bourdieu 1986). Nafziger's study of an industrialising city in coastal Andhra Pradesh and the background of 54 entrepreneurs reveals an overrepresentation of *twice-born* Higher

Castes, and – interestingly – Muslims,¹¹³ against an under-representation of *Shudra* and *Harijans* (Nafziger 1975, 1978). Nafziger points to the advantages enjoyed by those born into castes and families with wealthy backgrounds:

A period of rapid industrial growth and economic modernization, as in India's independence era, does not remove the advantages of ascribed status, even in entrepreneurial activity in manufacturing. The traditional Indian upper classes – local rulers and administrators, landlords, and Brahmins – whose strength is a legacy of the feudal and colonial periods, have allied, and in some cases overlapped, with the capitalist, political and bureaucratic elites, most of whom originated from high-income families, to control much of the access to key business positions. Families and communities with wealth and position use the monopoly advantage resulting from ready access to capital, greater information and mobility, superior education and training, privileged access to licenses and concession from government, and the luxury of a longer planning horizon, to become industrial entrepreneurs in disproportionate numbers. (Nafziger 1978: 63)

Thirty years after this research, the extensive study on the caste background of India's businesses by Harish Damodaran (Damodaran 2008), while pointing to changes, confirms the fundamental facts.

[C]apitalism in India has evolved a long way since Independence and today is fairly well diversified not just in terms of production profile [...] but also social base. Capital is not the privileged bastion of a few mercantile castes the way it was; its base has expanded to incorporate a wide spectrum of communities. However, this 'inclusive capitalism' has been more a feature of southern and, to some extent, western India. [...] This is not so in the North, where businessmen tend to be uniformly Bania-Marwaris or Khatris. [...] The group that has, nevertheless, been bypassed in this churning of capital and widening of its social base are the Dalits. In our study we did not come across a single Dalit industrialist even in the South. (Damodaran 2008: 312-15)

What Damodaran omits to mention, but which is clearly visible from his landmark study, is a pronounced distinction between dealings within a caste or community and dealings with outsiders. Most cases described in his book have started out either as family or caste-based enterprise, with many also retaining a certain attachment to their social origin. So, for all the widening of the social base, it is still overwhelmingly the case that business dealings are enabled and facilitated by the trust resources of the social in-group, most often defined in caste terms.

The considerable degree of social mobility within India's modernisation has allowed previously marginalised communities to enter formerly exclusive business circles; even so, success depends a great deal on the capital endowment of the caste and family group of the entrepreneur. And while communities like the Nadars of Tamil Nadu (Templeman 1996) or Ezhavas of Kerala (Chandramohan

¹¹³ The case of Andhra Pradesh is indeed atypical for the rest of India. What is now Andhra Pradesh had been ruled by a Muslim, the Nizam of Hyderabad, before independence. Therefore, Muslims are part of the traditional elite in Andhra Pradesh, whereas in the rest of India they are primarily seen as economically marginal religious minority. See: C.V. Subba Rao, *Hyderabad: The Social Context of Industrialisation, 1875-1948* (New Delhi: Orient Longman, 2007). and Eric Lewis Beverley, 'Muslim Modern: Hyderabad State, 1883–1948', Ph.D. diss (Harvard University (publication number AAT 3285574), 2007).

1987; Osella and Osella 2000), that would be considered low in the traditional hierarchy, have emerged as powerful business groups, the absence of SC / ST businesses is in need of explanation. Furthermore, while the influence of traditional trading castes was never as strong in Southern and Eastern India as in their traditional stronghold of North Western India, there are still areas where they dominate the local economies.

Within ongoing modernisation, (higher) education is seen as increasingly important, with such education often seen as a road to social mobility. However, as is already obvious, all occupations that require tertiary education tend to be dominated by Hindu Higher Castes.¹¹⁴ A look at NSSO data of 1999-2000 on the caste composition¹¹⁵ of Indian graduates reveals a clear trend: Hindu Upper Castes, who make up 36.9 per cent of India's urban population, make up 62.1 to 66.8 per cent of graduates in tertiary education, depending on the subject (Deshpande 2006: 2439). Even if the 'Hindu Upper Caste' is taken as a residual category, calculated by excluding all other options,¹¹⁶ and is not clearly defined,¹¹⁷ the sheer size of this over-representation indicates the survival of economic inequalities along caste lines. Thus, if exact data on caste were available, it would (with a probability bordering on certainty) reveal the same basic facts: Historically advantaged castes can translate their economic power into success in the skill-based economy by financing the education of their children, something less advantaged castes struggle to afford. The whole procedure of affirmative action has not fundamentally changed this fact, even if some successes are visible in historical perspective. Higher education, and the financial means to afford it, acts as filter for occupations in the knowledge-based economy, and this filter is not caste-neutral.

3.5. Concentric circles: The relationship of Caste and Family

The economic role of the family has been raised before, and its vital function in Indian society cannot be underestimated (Uberoi 2003). What is missing, however, is a clear disambiguation that distinguishes the role of the family from that of caste. There has been considerable confusion about this issue, most of it based on a somewhat outdated (or completely missing) theoretical model of caste. In the contemporary debate, an argument is presented that caste is losing its economic functions in the family, as the latter provides a much more close-knit and flexible form of economic back-up for the individual. There is some

¹¹⁴ The caste composition of the IT industry, which is at the heart of this thesis, will be described in chapter four, and need not be discussed here.

¹¹⁵ Unfortunately, official Indian statistics only reveal the categories of SC, ST, OBC and General Caste (or Forward Caste) for Hindus, plus religious minorities.

¹¹⁶ The NSSO does not ask for specific castes, so "Hindu Upper Caste" here means essentially **NOT** SC, ST or OBC, **NOR** Non-Hindu. There is indeed some room for possible statistical error here, but since the overall trend is so clear greater statistical accuracy would not change the wider picture.

¹¹⁷ It could well be that some *Shudra* caste, who are not entitled to benefits under the OBC label, feature here as "Upper Castes" since they would be classified as "General Category" as long as they are not part of any other category. Therefore, the classification used in official Indian statistics is somewhat inaccurate in caste terms. But since economic conditions are the basis for classifications of castes into OBC or general category, the general category should comprise only castes that are economically relatively well off.

truth to this claim, but I would contend that the contrast between caste and family is not as theoretically significant as it first appears.¹¹⁸ When André Béteille, one of the most distinguished living sociologists of India, writes about caste, he appears to contrast it with family:

But all things considered, it will be safe to say that the family plays a far more active role than caste in reproducing the inequalities associated with the new occupational system. The retreat of caste as an active agent for the reproduction of inequality at the upper levels, and the continuing, if not increasing, importance of the family constitute two of the most striking features of contemporary Indian society. (Béteille 1991: 13)

While he portrays them as opposing forces, a complementary co-existence between family and caste would be a much better analysis of their mutual relationship. Families are, of course, not at the same societal level as castes – they can be seen as a subdivision of caste, or, vice-versa, the basic building blocks for caste. In both cases, their social role in the reproduction of inequalities, as well as elsewhere, depends on their respective weight, and since families are much closer to the individual, they serve much better as institutions in an individualised working environment. So the core of Béteille's argument would be that in a more individualistic society, where the economic benefits are closer to the individual, the more the family gains importance over caste. The change that Béteille describes is a change of emphasis, not a fundamental change in the structure in the relation between caste and family. The connection of caste and family can be explored further by empirical means, thereby establishing the crucial links without reference to the theoretical model. The institution of dowry serves as an illuminating example.

3.5.1. Caste and Dowry

The one phenomenon where caste-, family- and economic considerations are most obviously interconnected is the dowry system. Although it has a long tradition in India and elsewhere (S. Anderson 2003), dowry has specific significance in contemporary India, with the spread of this practice indicating that it (and caste itself) is unlikely to lose its social and economic importance with modernisation in India. Arguably, the growing importance of dowry, visible both in the spatial spread of the institution and the increasing amounts of money involved, proves that caste is indeed a crucial factor in marriage decisions, in addition to family and economics.

Siwan Anderson clearly demonstrates that the rise of dowry payments cannot be explained by modernisation alone, but by the combination of modernisation and the survival of caste:

The model developed here contrasts caste- and non-caste-based societies. In the former, there exists an inherited component to status (caste) that is independent of wealth; in the latter, wealth is the primary determinant of status. Modernization comprises two components: an increase in average wealth across the society and increased wealth dispersion within status groups. The paper's main result is that, in the

¹¹⁸ In the modern interpretation of caste, where the family is seen as the originator of caste, the distinction is indeed artificial as caste is simply an agglomeration of a number of families. However, the alternative modes of interpretation, most notably the classic model, provide a much clearer distinction between the two institutions.

caste case, the increased dispersion in wealth accompanying modernization necessarily leads to increases in dowry payments, whereas in the non-caste case, increased dispersion has no real effect on dowry payments and increasing average wealth causes the payments to decline. (S. Anderson 2003: 273)

Without going into detail,¹¹⁹ it can safely be assumed that dowry is a prevalent custom in most parts of India today.¹²⁰ Sharada Srinivasan, for example, argues that, while dowry was historically restricted to the Upper Caste spectrum in South India, it has now become an all-caste phenomenon (S. Srinivasan 2005). Despite opposition from women's advocates and the women concerned (P. Srinivasan and Lee 2004), the institution of dowry is gaining ground in India. Economic growth is largely cited as reason for an inflation of dowry, but the spread of the practice to formerly unaffected parts of India (Self and Grabowski 2009), seems to indicate a role for other factors. Since dowry practice is in obvious contrast to Indian demographics – that is, with men in the majority and women in short supply, this should boost bride prices rather than dowry – social factors and not demographics must be employed to explain its existence (K. Banerjee 1999; compare Botticini and Siow 2003).

Analytically, most authors argue that earning differentials between men and women, and, in the case of hypergamy, status differences between castes, are the primary motives for the practice. Both caste and family are, at least for those who practise dowry, seen as economic in-groups, with restricted entry conditions and benefits for the members of the groups. For the individual, economic benefits are more directly attached to the family, with caste being primarily a status reservoir; nonetheless, both are essentially seen as economic assets to be protected from outsiders. In fact, the role of social prestige in dowry practices should not be underestimated, as Marguarite Roulet indicates:

Dowry [...] is not merely an institution confined to the valorisation of marriage, but serves more importantly as a central institution to define social prestige and status and thus becomes an important dimension of people's representations of themselves and others. (Roulet 1996: 91)

Apart from the few cases of inter-caste marriages,¹²¹ marriage restrictions are a mean to control access to the economic benefits of membership in caste networks (Luke et al. 2004; Munshi and Rosenzweig 2006), with the rising dowry prices only underlining the economic importance of gaining access to these networks. Even if caste-based networks' influence would eventually decline in the future, they still have a viable function, especially for economically weak members of society with otherwise limited means (Munshi and Rosenzweig 2005). Be it prestige, or be it the earning potential of the husband-to-be (and in a few cases the wife-to-be), the dowry is a reflection of the value of marriage, not as a romantic bonding of two individuals; but overwhelmingly as an alliance of two families within the framework of a shared

¹¹⁹ Carol Upadhyay provides a discussion of anthropological theories on the meaning of dowry in India: Carol Boyack Upadhyay, 'Dowry and Women's Property in Coastal Andhra Pradesh', *Contributions to Indian Sociology*, 24/1 (1990), 29-59.

¹²⁰ Dowry costs provide one of the main explanations for the widespread abortion of female foetuses, and the resulting unequal gender composition of India's population.

¹²¹ Empirically, only around 6 per cent of marriages in India are inter-caste marriages. Sonalde Desai et al., 'India Human Development Survey (Ihds) [Computer File]', in Inter-University Consortium for Political and Social Research [Distributor] (ed.), *ICPSR22626-v8* (Ann Arbor, MI: University of Maryland and National Council of Applied Economic Research, New Delhi [producers], 2007).

caste identity.¹²² As long as caste considerations play a role in marriages – and the fact that 94 per cent of marriages amongst Hindus in India are intra-caste marriages (Desai et al. 2007) strongly indicates this role – the practice of dowry reveals the connection between caste and family, on the one hand, and economic and prestige considerations, on the other. Dowry is indeed imaginable without a caste dimension, as comparative history indicates (S. Anderson 2003), but in its current form in India, it is an indicator of both the power of family and caste, and of the relative strength of the latter.

3.6. Conclusion

As discussed in this chapter, caste had a function before the liberalisation of the Indian economy and, today, continues to fulfil a vital role in the lives of many, if not most, Indians. Rather than being a hollow tradition or a fading remnant of past social conventions, it is still intrinsically linked to India's modernising society. But because caste operates on different levels, in various circumstances, and is not always immediately obvious, often only a partial assessment is possible. Nevertheless, the above discussion of how caste operates in politics, the economy, the family and, specifically, in the practices of dowry should be sufficient to highlight the importance and impact of caste in daily life. Even if changes in the economic working of society deeply affect caste, it cannot be expected to wither away in the near future. In the economic sphere, caste often provides an exclusive, if improvised, safeguard against the vagaries of existence for millions of Indians. In the economy, as well as in politics, associations based on caste membership find their niche in the relative vacuum left by other institutions. The lack of economic certainty, the impotence of the judicial system in enforcing contracts, the absence of an equalitarian and comprehensive education system affordable to all, and the dearth of alternative means of political representation for marginal castes and communities, all open the door for a social role for caste. Consequently, caste association or political parties based on caste tend to bridge this gap.

In the modern reinterpretation of caste, the institution acts first and foremost as an extension of the family. This helps to explain the institutionalisation of economic inequalities over generations, as indicated by the different success rates of castes in the tertiary education system. It also provides the background for the survival and recent extension of dowry practices. By restricting and controlling access to valuable status levels and marriage networks, caste has a crucial importance in preserving economic benefits over the course of generations. For individuals, caste provides a marker of identity both for themselves and for generalised others who encounter them. Knowing the caste origins of those encountered in public helps to reduce contingency by relying on caste stereotypes. Regardless of how accurate these preconceptions are, they nevertheless smooth everyday interaction between people with no previous knowledge of each other. This fact would also help to explain why caste is often hidden in the public sphere. For the individual, caste can be either a source of personal reassurance or

¹²² Again, this is relevant for the large majority of intra-caste marriages only.

embarrassment, depending on the status and history of the respective caste. For those from Higher Caste background, caste is often invoked to create a sense of time-honoured rootedness in history and culture, in contrast to the bewildering and ever-changing modern environment. Equally, caste can be a reminder of a dark and embarrassing past for those from Lower Castes, with all its negative connotations still alive in the public consciousness. In both cases, caste has an identifying function that is independent of actual socio-economic circumstances.

Overall, it appears highly unlikely that caste will vanish from Indian society anytime soon. The roles it fulfils are still needed today, and will continue to be in the near future. The perspective taken here does allow for predictions about the future of caste, albeit not a concrete timeframe. Once an individual defines his or her identity in different terms than that of caste, the institution of caste significantly loses its authority. When the public debate acknowledges and identifies a person not by reference to his or her caste but by, say, professional achievements, educational qualifications and the like, then caste loses yet another of its socio-economic supports. If, after further economic and political change, caste associations become unnecessary because other institutions replace them, caste will certainly retreat from the public sphere. And were the political and legal benefits accruing to caste membership to be abolished, another lifeline would be lost. Generally speaking, if the overlap of caste and class, or the connection of economic status with caste position, was reduced towards insignificance, caste would lose most of its economic and political clout. If, in the end, private decisions were to follow in the same direction, caste would lose its most important control mechanism; that is, if marriage alliances were based on criteria other than caste considerations – or, more radically, sexual norms were liberalised so that sexual partners could be freely and exclusively chosen by individual consent – caste would be gone within a generation.

Nevertheless, these remain distant possibilities. Many of the necessary social adjustments are not even under way, while others are only just visible in a very small sub-section of the Indian population; thus, a variety of scenarios with regard to caste seem imaginable. How caste develops within a specific segment of society much depends on the convergence of all the factors discussed above. India's most advanced industries – the torch-bearers of modernisation in the new middle classes – could provide valuable insights into the future of caste. And because IT (and, to a lesser extent, ITES) can arguably be seen as symbols for a particular version of India's future, an analysis of the role of caste in this context would provide an estimate of the direction of change this country is likely to take. This will be the topic of the empirical chapters to come.

4. Focussing on the Empirical Research

In the following chapter, the topic of this thesis will be framed within its socio-political, economic and spatial contexts. First, the social milieu of the research setting, the new Indian middle classes, will be sketched out and then analysed in respect of its socio-cultural significance within Indian society. Second, the Indian IT industry will be examined – first, in relation to its societal role, and then, with regard to its internal workings. The IT industry and the new middle classes are, of course, not identical; they are, though, intrinsically linked in that the former has come to symbolically represent the latter, and the latter, in turn, provides the social backdrop for the former. Together, their recent rise and prominence represents a decisive break with India's past, and this could provide interesting insights into how seemingly traditional institutions like caste operate in this new environment. A short appraisal of the relevance of caste will follow, to link the discussion to the general topic of this thesis. This will not be overly detailed – due to the lack of data and the available space here – but it will nevertheless ground the empirical research in the chapters to follow.

Following that discussion, the spatial setting of this study – the South Indian city of Bangalore – will be examined. The specifics of this (perceived or real) centre of the Indian IT industry require consideration as it is distinct from other localities in several ways. The term ‘Bangalore’ itself has come to symbolise India’s IT development, even though less than half of India’s IT output is generated in Karnataka’s capital. Up until the present, and with the exception of a few enclaves in the North and the West, India’s IT sector is mainly clustered in half a dozen cities or so in the South, with Bangalore still being by far the biggest. The city, which is still regarded as synonymous with Indian IT by the outside world and domestically, is not only home to the headquarters of two of India’s top five IT companies, but is perhaps the most ‘all-Indian’ centre of IT, due to its supra-regional attraction of talent. Bangalore is thus a human magnet, drawing technical graduates from all over India and throwing them into a melting pot where nearly every cultural background can find its niche. Since the teeming city is not dominated by any particular community it provides open pastures (metaphorically) for most newcomers. On the other hand, the rising cost of living threatens those residents who cannot compete with the salaries prevalent in the IT sector. Finally, since I lived in the BTM layout for most of the research, the specifics of this particular quarter will be briefly discussed at the end of the chapter.

4.1. India's new middle classes

While the IT industry and its employees remain the primary focus of this study, the new middle classes deserve attention for a variety of reasons: First and foremost, the 70-250 million people making up the new middle classes¹²³ include IT or ITES employees, who number roughly 2 million. And even though these IT employees make up only a small share of the diverse middle classes, IT tends to symbolise the apparent differences between the new and the established middle classes. Moreover, since the new middle classes are unthinkable without the role of private industry, and IT has come to epitomise their new prominence, they exist in a kind of symbolic symbiosis. IT is a status-bearing reference system and, incidentally, a recruitment base for these classes, as well as providing the industry with a social foundation for leverage in the political struggle for influence. To the Indian public, both the IT industry and the new middle classes act as symbols and trailblazers for a more-capitalistic, less state-centred vision of India's future. Their intermingling in the private service sector puts them in stark contrast to the established, traditionally-oriented middle class, who were mainly recruited from the ranks of the middle and higher bureaucracy. Because this carries with it numerous social implications, a short appraisal of the middle classes seems justifiable in the context of this thesis.

4.1.1. What is 'new' in the new middle classes?

The modernisation of India is economically and symbolically connected to the emergence of a new sociological category, distinct from the traditional Indian middle classes. This new class is distinguished most obviously by its growing size and buying power. According to the 'economist cheerleaders' of McKinsey, the new middle classes are expected to grow from five per cent of the population to more than 40 per cent by 2025, which would equate to nothing less than 583 million people (Beinhocker 2007). A more sober analysis puts their number today at somewhere between 70 and 250 million, depending on the how the class is defined and which purchasing power parity (PPP) model is applied (Sridharan 2004: 405). And whichever of the numerous academic definitions of 'middle class' is adopted – most commonly households with at least a third of income disposable (Eisenhauer 2008) – the empiric reality in India is hard to access. However small the middle classes' share of the total population might be, their socio-cultural significance far outweighs their economic clout.

Despite the cultural importance of this new group in setting forth a new image of India, the highly mobile and skilled "knowledge workers" who constitute the new middle class to a large extent, form proportionally what can only be understood as an elite. (S. Radhakrishnan 2007: 149)

As a class of people, they represent both the advocates and perceived beneficiaries of economic liberalisation. Politically, the class appears ambivalent about the Congress Party, with the apparent swing

¹²³ The term class is not used in the precise and selective Marxian sense here. It rather refers to a vague concept based on mode of income (in the service sector), educational level and social orientation. However, since the term 'middle classes' is widely adopted in the literature, it will be used in this sense here with the acknowledgment that it is a popular, not scientific concept.

towards the BJP seeming temporary, at least from today's perspective. However, the most distinctive feature of the new middle classes is still very clear: Socio-economically, as well as culturally, their rise presents a fundamental shift from state-centred developmentalism to a privatised ideal of the consumer-citizen.

The most common founding myth about the new middle classes traces its emergence to the split between the traditional middle class and the Indian state in the early 1980s, when electoral politics were becoming increasingly influenced by identity politics, ostensible favouring hitherto neglected minorities, such as SCs, STs, Muslims or OBCs (Jaffrelot 2001, 2003). At the same time, the cautious enactment of more business-friendly policies under Indira and, later, Rajiv Gandhi, and the subsequent accelerated economic growth, opened up opportunities for those who found themselves ousted from their previous domain, the government service. While the old middle class, tiny in size but highly influential on the national character of India, was oriented towards the Nehruvian ideal of self-denying service for the good of society, the new middle classes were of the opinion that these political policies had failed; if the Nehruvian vision of Indian development had been feasible, the results would have shown after three decades of independence. Moreover, the new middle classes, angered by 'identity politics',¹²⁴ cronyism, corruption and the staggering inefficiencies in the public sector, began to regard official politics increasingly as merely a battle-ground for the redistribution of resources (cf. Chhibber and Eldersveld 2000; Economist 1997). And because the new middle classes, as well as the old one, were overwhelmingly recruited from High Caste backgrounds (Deshpande 2003a; Sheth 1999), they could neither claim the influence of large numbers nor the privileges of affirmative action. In consequence, bitter at the demise of their former domain, they eagerly embraced the promise of the market economy.

While this founding myth is not just plucked from thin air, neither is it a historically accurate account. As with any founding myth, it shows signs of deliberate creation and therefore cannot be taken at face value. For example, the juxtaposition of traditional and new middle classes is, at times, so excessively inflated that the two seem to take mutually irreconcilable positions in an embittered ideological conflict. Upon closer examination, however, a more gradual generational change is apparent between the two camps; indeed, the separation of 'traditional' and 'new' Indian middle classes is somewhat artificial, since both have much in common, not least their recruitment base. However, at least in theoretical terms, the new middle classes are economically based in the private sector, whereas the traditional ones are/were mainly composed of government employees.

4.1.2. Beyond the hype – who are the new Indian middle classes?

The considerable emphasis on the 'new' Indian middle classes, both inside and outside academia, tends to oversimplify the picture; presenting the new middle classes as monolithic, with a single socio-

¹²⁴ That is, essentially, all politics that are not directed at universal political objectives, but enacted or promoted to attract followers of a certain social identity in favour of others.

economic orientation.¹²⁵ By the most common definition, anyone who works in the private service sector is a member of the middle classes (Arabandi 2009), although this somewhat underestimates the complexity of the middle classes. With only a little exaggeration, it appears legitimate to attribute the creation of the new middle class image to the media and the marketing industry; as Leela Fernandes observes:

Advertising and media images have contributed to the creation of an image of a “new” Indian middle class, one that has left behind its dependency on austerity and state protection and has embraced an open India that is at ease with broader processes of globalization. In this image, the newness of the middle class rest on its embrace of social practices of taste and commodity consumption that mark a new cultural standard that is specifically associated with liberalization and the opening of the Indian market to the global economy. [...] In this process, the new (urban) Indian middle class becomes a central agent for the revisioning of the Indian nation in the context of globalization. (Leela Fernandes 2000: 89)

Economists, especially those with a Western background, often (over-)emphasise the potential of modern India as an outlet for consumer products.¹²⁶ The alignment of research with the commercial interest of companies tends to simplify the picture, biasing it towards a non-analytical and uncritical assessment of this social class. On closer examination, it would be more accurate to describe the term ‘new middle classes’ as relating as much to aspirations as to actual grounding in economic prosperity.

Against the simplistic view equating the new middle classes with the highest income percentiles, and automatically with abundant purchasing power, empirical evidence indicates that large numbers of the self-declared middle classes actually live on incomes that barely allow a middle class lifestyle. Fernandes, for example, points to the aspiring members of the middle classes in Mumbai who survive on salaries of little more than INR4000, and who work under conditions that are nothing like the image of empowered, professional work environments (Leela Fernandes 2000).¹²⁷ Caught between the rising costs of living and the (costly) aspirations associated with the very term ‘middle class’, the economic conditions of many middle class members are both more wretched and more vulnerable than most (economic) observers acknowledge. Compared with the Indian median income, the new middle classes certainly enjoy greater affluence. However, while even optimistic estimates¹²⁸ assume that only 6 million households in India have an income above INR215,000 per annum (with an average household size of 4.8 members), it is clear that even the richest members of the middle classes cannot afford profligate lifestyles, much less its poorer members (Lange et al. 2009: 284).

¹²⁵ For an attempt to disambiguate the numerous definitions of ‘middle classes’, and the inherent impossibility of finding a common denominator, see: Section 16.2.2 “How Homogeneous or Heterogeneous are the ‘New Middle Classes?’” in Hellmuth Lange, Lars Meier, and N. S. Anuradha, ‘Highly Qualified Employees in Bangalore, India: Consumerist Predators?’, in Lars Meier and Hellmuth Lange (eds.), *The New Middle Classes* (Springer Netherlands, 2009), 281-98.

¹²⁶ Indeed, many economic assessments seem exclusively motivated by this market potential; see for example, the study by McKinsey Eric D; Farrell Beinhocker, Diana; and Zainulbhai, Adil S., ‘Tracking the Growth of India’s Middle Class’, *The McKinsey Quarterly*, /3 (2007), 50 - 83.

¹²⁷ While salaries have risen since 2000 (when the study was conducted), a large number of young IT engineers still live in shared rooms as paying guests, in contrast to the standard assumption that a prestigious middle class profession equals a luxurious lifestyle

¹²⁸ These estimates are for 2005/2006 and are, admittedly, somewhat dubious.

Moreover, the new middle classes' relatively high level of affluence comes with an economic insecurity that was unknown to their predecessors. While jobs in government service (broadly defined) provided low-paying but stable career paths for the traditional middle classes, the advent of more market-oriented business models has eroded one of the fundamental aspects of the old middle classes; economic predictability. And whereas consumerist aspirations provide the impetus to embrace capitalism, the downside is an instability and unpredictability most severely felt amongst the new middle classes. Furthermore, the change from a state- to a market-centred model of society cannot adequately be described as voluntary; rather, it was the result of an economic emergency – the crisis of 1991 (Cerra and Saxena 2002; Nayak et al. 2005). Thus, the popular notion that economic liberalisation was brought about by the aspiring middle classes is mistaken in its confusion of cause and effect (Raj Nayar 2002). And even today, that most revered amongst members of the middle classes is economic stability, provided that a certain level of affluence has already been achieved. In effect, this complicates any simple conclusions about the (supposed) symbiotic co-evolution of Indian capitalism and its new middle classes.

In a nutshell, the new middle classes in India are neither the ideological adherents of Manchester capitalism, nor the economically powerful new force in the global consumer market. Against all contrary claims by cheerleading economists, the rise of the new middle classes signifies a gradual re-orientation of values rather than a cultural revolution.

4.1.3. The symbolic impact and social role of the new middle classes

As argued above, it would be wrong to portray the middle classes as a homogeneous block of people with the same worldview, orientations or aspirations. In reality, no overarching ideology appears to accord with the sheer diversity of the class. However, concurrent with the fundamental change in economic conditions has been a shift in certain parameters of cultural and socio-economic identity. One common refrain is disillusionment with state services and with the workings of democracy; consequently, voter turnout in urban, professional constituencies is consistently lower than in rural India (D. Gupta 2007; Nikolenyi 2010; Thachil 2009). Another theme is the ostentatious dismissal of identity politics, in particular the invocation of caste for political purposes. Justified by the seemingly enlightened position that caste is not part of the political power struggle because it is pre-modern, outdated and embarrassing, the consensus middle class position is that caste politics as such are illegitimate (Leela Fernandes and Heller 2006). And from a middle class perspective, this makes a great deal of sense: In politics based on caste or religious identity, and which put a premium on 'backwardness', someone from a relatively well-off, High Caste background always loses out. Thus, while the political outlook of the middle classes is not necessarily in accord with the Hindu nationalism preached by the BJP and its allies, the latter's stand against further caste quotas has ensured the support of the middle classes, and brought them to power in the 1990s (Chandhoke 1999; Raj Nayar 2002).

Despite popular opinion, however, the contrast between the Indian state and the new middle classes is less pronounced than it appears – in fact, the new middle classes are very much in keeping with India's official policies. As Satish Deshpande points out, the prevalent notion of development in India, coupled with respective “political ideologies” has changed, and contrasts now with the early Nehruvian, state-centred vision (Deshpande 1998). The popularity of Marxism and its Indian adaptations in sections of the political establishment, not to mention in academia, has ebbed, making way for a cautious embrace of capitalism, although not entirely on the Anglo-American model. The break with the past is obvious in Indian Prime Minister Manmohan Singh’s declaration that “it is our ambition to integrate our country into the evolving global economy. We accept the logic of globalization” (Rajat K. Gupta 2005: 130). The supposed ideological split between the Indian state and the private interests of the new middle classes is therefore mainly rhetorical, with their fundamental ideological alignment very much in the same direction.¹²⁹

Culturally, as visible in popular advertising, the new middle classes are often deliberately portrayed in a way that distinguishes them from the traditional image of India, both inside and outside the country. The middle classes, in effect, are a consciously created, sanitised contrast to the chaos and poverty that is synonymous with India. Not surprisingly, the ideal of neatly ordered domesticity is set against public overcrowding and chaos, the nuclear against the extended family, and the globalised outlook against the focus on national interest (Leela Fernandes 2006). In a sense, the middle classes are at times burdened with unrealistic expectations, and are seen as the antidote to anything that appears wrong or unethical in India (Dasgupta 2008).¹³⁰ Many of these issues are relevant to the context of this thesis, and will be raised either in the research chapters or discussed further below.

4.1.3.1. Hybridity / Westernisation

The new middle classes are not an entirely internal development in India. Instead, the transformation of this section of society was substantially fostered by the exchange, both personally and culturally, with the Anglophone nations of the West. In spite of anti-colonial rhetoric about India's independence from Western ideas, a certain admiration for the former colonial rulers, and their successors on the global stage, has always existed in the Indian mindset (Malhotra 2001).¹³¹ Facilitated by a shared history and a common tongue (at least as a shared language for the elites), the bonds of the Commonwealth (and a passion for cricket, especially) has retained India's closeness to the UK, while the US is regarded as role model due to its sheer economic success. Thus, the new middle classes represent not only those

¹²⁹ For this reason, parts of the new middle classes tend to see themselves as the vanguard of India's march to the capitalist future, and as a safeguard against a possible return to the Indian socialism of the past.

¹³⁰ This article deals with the IT industry, but has indeed implications for the whole new middle classes.

¹³¹ Long before liberalisation, it was a source of pride for a family to have a son or daughter studying or working in either the UK, US or Australia. Down to the present day the holder of American Green Cards enjoy a high value at the marriage market and this fact gets advertised prominently in marriage advertisements. The statistical acronyms NRI (Non Resident Indian) or PIO (Person of Indian Origin) are widely seen as synonym with successful entrepreneurs who serve as role models for a significant portion of the new middle classes. The appreciating of the host societies might be very particularly restricted to the economic opportunities and living standard, but it nevertheless helps to sustain a positive relationship, both culturally and political, with the Anglophone world.

economically based in the private rather than the government-controlled sector, but also, to a much greater extent, those leading a cultural shift towards a cautious embrace of global (and particularly Western) notions of the individual's role in society. In their own eyes at least, the new middle classes are spearheading modernisation¹³² and championing India's future. Whereas the traditional middle classes supposedly adopt the developmental ideals of the socialist state, the new middle classes take their legitimacy from the capitalist, growth-based claim to development. As Carol Upadhyaya puts it:

It must be recalled that until the late 1980s, Nehruvian socialism and autarchy remained the dominant economic ideology, but after liberalisation people belonging to the new middle class by and large have become votaries of neoliberal capitalism and globalisation. This development paradigm depends on energy intensive, consumption-oriented economic growth. Moreover, the globalisation of the new middle class has meant that they aspire to replicate Western lifestyles in India. (C. Upadhyaya 2009a: 262)

This attempted replication of Western lifestyles goes together with a much more frankly expressed admiration for certain aspects of Western culture, or perceived Western ways of organisation and business conduct (Nadeem 2009a). This is fostered and enhanced by a wave of immigration and re-immigration, and the emergence of a very visible Indian Diaspora, both in the UK and the US, in the decades since independence. What started as a one-way route for those seeking greater opportunities elsewhere has turned into a cycle of exchange between the Indian motherland and the expatriates overseas (Lakha 1994; Saxenian 2002, 2006). A wide range of private sector initiatives have benefited from this steady exchange between India and the Diaspora in addition to IT, although the latter is the most prominent example (Leclerc and Meyer 2007; Saxenian 2005; C. Upadhyaya 2004). Even though most members of the new middle classes would still reject Narayana Murthy's claim that Europe is "the legitimate, historical leader of this world" (Murthy 2006: 9),¹³³ and while attitudes to the West remain complicated, the relationship is on more friendly terms. The result has been, perhaps ironically, the reinterpretation of what it means to be Indian:

As urban India experiences the optimism of an economic upswing, and the diaspora increasingly engage in it, an ideology of "global Indianess" has crystallised - a set of beliefs and practices that are at once tied to a global lifestyle and to a deep sense of belonging to the Indian nation. Where previously, Indianess and Westernness were opposed to one another, a discourse of global Indianess makes the two compatible; a sense of "Indianess" sets the moral and personal boundaries for the material successes available to the West. (S. Radhakrishnan 2008: 9)

The new middle classes are unimaginable without the vision of modernisation in line with a perceived North American ideal, although without much of its inherent complexity.¹³⁴ The partial adoption of

¹³² As discussed previously (chpt. 2) the very term modernity is contested. Furthermore, modernity does not constitute a single, clear-cut entity. However, in this context, modernity is established primarily in contra-distinction to a constructed tradition, that which is seen in India's recent, pre-liberalisation past, and symbolised by the old elites, the 'traditional' middle classes.

¹³³ This statement was directed at a European audience and very probably meant to please their ego. Nevertheless, it stands in stark contrast to the antipathy that many traditionally-minded Indians display towards Western culture or Western influence.

¹³⁴ This partial and selective adoption of Western notions of economic development tells of a context that is neither neutral in terms of cultural values nor in concrete economic consequences.

Anglo-American concepts, most clearly seen in the use of hybrid English-Hindi ‘Hinglish’, is visible elsewhere; in television, music and sports. Generally, a cultural affinity to the British Commonwealth, as well as to the USA, co-exists with the often blatant denial of any cultural influences from the West.

As in the traditional middle class, the use of English as a lingua franca is a mark of belonging to the new middle classes, although with an additional practical function.

Command over English language represents both a form of cultural capital as well as a structural marker of middle class identity since the possession of such language skills can be transformed into social and economic capital in the labor market. In other words, fluency in English marks an individual with the distinction of class culture and locates the individual with the new middle class in socioeconomic terms as such linguistic skills are a necessary component for access to the new economy and skilled jobs. (Leela Fernandes 2006: 69)

English is thereby again emphasised as a status-enhancer with economic underpinnings (Ramanathan 1999). An advantage ever since the colonial period, English proficiency provides a crucial advantage in accessing and competing in global markets.

4.1.3.2. Consumption / Consumerism

The new Indian middle classes are a favourite subject of numerous – and often less than reputable – economic publications, with the emphasis on present and future consumption patterns (cf. Farrell and Beinhocker 2007). Membership of the new middle classes is, according to some scholars, actually defined by such consumption,¹³⁵ and equating the middle classes with consumers appears obvious. Indeed, the emergence of the new middle classes in India has been enabled – and caused in large part – by economic growth after liberalisation. Membership in the new middle classes is thus often primarily defined by rising levels of affluence and conspicuous patterns of consumption. The visible rise in consumerism has been accompanied by a marked opposition from left-leaning critics of capitalism, orthodox religious leaders and Indian nationalists, who reject this development as Western cultural imperialism and/or an obscene display of affluence in the face of wide-spread poverty (Chandhoke 1999; Surendra 2010). Nevertheless, the popular myth of the affluent, free-spending, conspicuously consuming member of the new middle classes requires further qualification.

Empirically, there are often surprising disparities between the image of middle-class consumerism and reality: Carol Upadhyaya, in a sample of 132 IT employees, found that only 75 per cent own a mobile phone (a ubiquitous item in India today), a motorcycle or a car is owned by 52 and 42 per cent respectively, whereas 42 per cent possessed real estate, with a further 21 per cent planning to invest in that sector (C. Upadhyaya 2009a: 258). Rather than confirming reckless consumption of non-durables, this indicates a conscious safeguarding against future economic insecurities. Thus, as Leela Fernandes reiterates, the supposed consumption patterns of the middle classes are actually extrapolated and

¹³⁵ See, for example, Table 16.1 in Lange, Meier, and Anuradha, 'Highly Qualified Employees in Bangalore, India: Consumerist Predators?'.

generalised from a tiny section of the highest echelons of the new middle classes, and often have little basis in the lived reality of other members of the middle classes (Leela Fernandes 2009). Of course, the new middle classes in general display different consumption behaviour than their less well-off compatriots, but it would be misguided to assume that the middle-classes is comprised entirely of newly-rich, free-spending hedonists (see 4.1.2).

4.1.3.3. Gender relations in the new middle classes

The economic growth since liberalisation and the subsequent rise of the new middle classes have benefited women as well as men; the participation of women in the newly emerging jobs in IT and ITES, especially, is much higher than their overall share of the Indian workforce (over 30 per cent in BPO versus 14 per cent of the general workforce, according to relevant studies (Remesh 2008; Sandhu 2008)). The service sector, the economic mainstay of the new middle classes, appears more open to female workers than any other industry. With more women participating in higher education (Jayaweera 1997; Narayana 2009), more and more career opportunities are becoming gender-neutral. Relatively high salaries have given women greater economic freedom and thus potential independence from their families. The cultural and social change that could – potentially – be triggered by this economic change, however, is difficult to fully appraise, with its initial implications ambiguous.

At first glance, little change is visible in the understanding of women's role in society, despite the heightened emphasis on education and a professional career. In the words of B.P. Arabandi, "Traditional family norms have not been abandoned, but modified to suit today's context." (Arabandi 2009: 103). Rather than discarding old role models for women in India, new ones – for example, professional careerist or sophisticated consumer – have been added to the dominant one of respectable middle class domesticity (S. Radhakrishnan 2009). An awkward balance has been struck between the imagined global ideal, on the one hand, and the constructed Indian notion of 'respectable femininity', on the other, with women still largely expected to put their family as first priority. Thus, at the same time that jobs in the service sector, and especially in IT, are perceived as empowering for women (Fuller and Narasimhan 2007), those women who concentrate exclusively on their careers are still seen as deviating from cultural norms and popular expectations.

Most women describe themselves as "not too ambitious," and view a career as something supplemental to a married life with children. Women who "rise up" in the company hierarchy are admired, but are often thought of as having sacrificed something crucial, or as being "aggressive." In these narratives, we find some continuity with nationalist conceptions of women as the protectors and nurturers of Indian culture – for these women, the role models are not the women who gave up their families for success, but those who manage to balance the two, most often by sacrificing the climb up the company hierarchy. (S. Radhakrishnan 2009: 202)

For the moment, it is sufficient to conclude that gender relations in the new middle classes have not brought about radical change, even if the economic underpinnings of gender roles are increasingly in

flux. Between the pull of social expectations for respectable Indian middle-class women, and the push of the new options based on greater economic freedom, no decisive shift towards the latter is apparent. As yet, the problematic contrast between these divergent role expectations is concealed behind the compromises that most women (are still willing to) make.

4.1.4. Caste composition of the Indian middle classes

When it comes to the caste background of the new middle classes, there is both change and continuity in comparison to that of the traditional middle class. With regard to caste, recruitment into the new middle classes is not radically different to that into the old middle classes, although a shift is visible in both as a result of affirmative action policies (see 3.3.1) and the establishment of new business models. While the traditional dominance of High Caste (that is, *twice-born* castes) in the Indian elite is still very visible, a significant change towards a more inclusive social composition is also evident (Sheth 1999: 2509). According to the 1999-2000 NSSO, the social category with the highest monthly per capita consumption expenditure is 59 per cent Hindu Upper Caste. Seen against this group's share of the total population – roughly 20 per cent (see Table 3.1 in chpt. 3) – this amounts to an over-representation of more than two to one (Deshpande 2003a: 112-13). Other studies, however, indicate that the middle classes are increasingly filled by those with a (nominal) *Shudra* or Dominant Agricultural Caste background. The proportion of traditionally deprived communities such as SCs, STs and the lower sections of OBCs in the new middle classes is considerably lower than their share of the total population, but growing nevertheless. Religious minorities tend to feature differently, with Jains, Parsis and Christians over-represented, with the larger Muslim community considerably under-represented (Sridharan 2004: 421). Thus, while the social composition of the middle classes has indeed changed, the continued Hindu High Caste over-representation is still the most notable feature.

Certainly, one of the most surprising facts about caste is its absence in the discourse of the new middle classes. According to J.A.M. Nijman:

In colloquial discourse in urban India, the topic of caste itself, especially in relation to class, is often conspicuously absent. In academic debates about class in Mumbai, caste is often not mentioned at all. The avoidance of caste as a topic of discussion reflects some deep sensitivities and a desire to circumvent possible prejudice (both for higher and lower castes). (Nijman 2006: 762)

Instead, the issue is dealt with in subtle, nuanced and often subconscious ways; while the topic itself is more often than not avoided, it is nevertheless still present. The social reality of the middle classes being, in most cases, almost identical with High Caste origin is denied; at the same time, however, advertisements aimed at this clientele accord closely with High Caste cultural values. Equally, the fact that many middle class households employ domestic servants, often from considerably lower caste backgrounds, is both ignored and taken for granted (Leela Fernandes 2006: 60). A deliberately idealised portrait of the new middle classes has been created, modelled on dominant High Caste Hindu values but

minus anything deemed problematic. How much of this ideal is a form of self-disguise remains to be explored at the individual level, but the fact that it is a very powerful image appears obvious from a more distant perspective. This issue is also, of course, relevant to the Indian IT industry at the centre of this thesis.

4.2. The Indian IT industry

The IT industry is, without doubt, the most globally exposed sector of the Indian economy, and thus a forerunner of social modernisation. This industry is not representative of the whole country; rather, it is exceptional in its elite social status, as well as in its bridging function between Indian and Western business environments. Unlike most other sectors of the Indian economy, the main IT companies are neither family businesses nor government-sponsored undertakings, but are initiated and sustained by interchange between the global business culture (with a sizable representation of Indian expatriates) and local economic conditions. The industry's success is unimaginable without the interchange of money, ideas and business practices across the divide separating India from the Western, most notably the Anglo-American, business world. Hence, IT is a clear example of globalised hybridity rather than a genuine home-grown development. Due to its obvious success, IT has come to represent the positive effects of globalisation within India, and continues to present India's newly discovered economic prowess to the world. For all these reasons, the IT industry offers a unique opportunity to transcend contemporary Indian society; given the likelihood that India will remain on its current course of capitalist development, IT (and ITES) provides a glimpse into the future of India.

As stated above, the IT industry is socially and culturally embedded in the new middle classes. A number of the main features of IT's social role have therefore already been discussed. But, in addition to those features that overlap with general tendencies within the new middle classes, the influence of IT is both more specific and more radical. For the wider Indian public, IT serves as an ambassador for the modernisation of India – a role that has been enthusiastically adopted by a number of prominent IT figureheads, who have come to symbolise the public image of this sector (C. Upadhyay 2009b). Internally, IT requires its workforce to adapt to a work culture that is alien in the Indian context, and which has implications beyond the workplace itself. The work culture in IT, with its emphasis on flat hierarchies, meritocracy, short-term and team-based work assignments, requires a radical openness from employees that cannot be restricted to the workplace alone. The social (and societal) consequences of IT's work-culture will be outlined in a separate section, once the public role of IT has been discussed. Finally, the few facts that are known about caste in the Indian IT industry will be summarised, before the research chapters tackle the issue in more depth.

4.2.1. The Indian IT industry; a short Introduction

What is meant by the Indian IT sector? First of all, it is an industry centred on the design, development, maintenance and testing of computer software, based in India but mainly servicing customers in the Western hemisphere (Arora and Athreye 2002). While no exact data are available, it is fair to assume that the bulk of the sector's income is generated by contracted, project-based service work of lower complexity (C. Upadhyay and Vasavi 2006). Consequently, and while diverse business models are in operation, the main one is based on high-volume, low-margin value generation. As part of the global division of labour, the Indian IT sector supplies a large workforce for tasks that require high manpower capacities, with the offshore planning and design conducted with much lower workforce involvement. There is considerable effort from the Indian IT sector to move up the value chain – by switching to product development instead of catering to clients¹³⁶ – although, as yet, this has not met with much success. Thus, despite its internal diversity, the Indian IT industry operates overwhelmingly on one main business model that depends crucially on the wage differences between India and the customer countries, plus a steady supply of technical graduates.¹³⁷

NASSCOM, a non-neutral source of information,¹³⁸ estimates that the IT/ITES sector has 2.3 million employees (in the fiscal year of 2010) and generates revenue of US\$73 billion. That puts the industry's contribution to Indian GDP in the 6 per cent range, with its share of total Indian exports at around 26 per cent (NASSCOM 2010: 6). Thus, while this export share is by no means insignificant, and can be seen as the unique selling point within India, it nevertheless puts the whole IT phenomenon into perspective: While the IT industry is without doubt a major player in the Indian economy, it is nowhere near as important as the inflated hype of its supporters would suggest. Even with indirect employment, estimated at up to 8 million people, considerably less than 1 per cent of the Indian population have a direct role within the IT-based economy, with this dropping to less than 0.2 per cent if direct employment only is counted. Even in an IT hub like Bangalore, the city most famously associated with the rise of this industry, far less than 10 per cent of the population are directly employed by the IT or ITES sector (Sudhira et al. 2007). However, within the tiny proportion of the Indian economy that is made up of private companies (roughly 2 per cent – see table 2.2.2.3.) IT is a major player nevertheless.

The core software industry is closely related to the adjoining ITES sector – indeed, some even see IT as a sub-sector within ITES¹³⁹ – although, in the public imagination at least, IT enjoys a status premium over

¹³⁶ The distinction has tremendous consequences in terms of work organisation: The 'service modus' crucially depends on deadlines set by the customers whereas the 'product modus' organises its work tasks according to its own schedule. For employees, working under the 'service modus' can frequently mean irregular hours, overtime and weekend shifts in order to meet deadlines, while employees in the 'product modus' generally enjoy reliable work schedules and regular 40-hour workweeks.

¹³⁷ There is considerable mismatch between the supply of technical graduates and the requirements of the IT industry, despite high numbers of graduations every year – see Carl Dahlman and Anuja Utz, *India and the Knowledge Economy: Leveraging Strengths and Opportunities* (Washington, D.C.: The World Bank, 2005).

¹³⁸ Since NASSCOM acts as a business lobby, it naturally assumes a non-neutral, pro-industry position. Worse, the data provided by NASSCOM are often overtly optimistic and not verifiable by independent sources. But because few other data sources are available, one simply has to live with these shortcomings.

¹³⁹ Analytically speaking, the IT sector in India is indeed part of the wider ITES, since it is enabled by IT and communication links with its customers. However, it can also be distinguished in its history, which began before the communications links were

its somewhat derided cousin, ITES.¹⁴⁰ However, because both sub-sectors resemble the same business model based on outsourcing contracts, it makes sense to analyse them collectively. For the purposes of this thesis, IT and ITES will therefore be viewed as part of the same spectrum, with software design at one extreme and call centre telemarketing at the other, and a broad range in between. A large number of companies who offer IT services also have ITES subdivisions, and the two are often conflated in the economist's dictionary. Much of the statistical data do not de-couple IT/ITES, and most social indicators work the same for both. In regard to this thesis, the research was carried out exclusively in the more narrow range of core IT; nevertheless, the social implications are, with minor deviations, similar for ITES/BPO.

Not surprisingly, given its history,¹⁴¹ this industry is hybrid in its ownership as well as in its client base. Almost invariably, today's global IT businesses seem to have Indian subsidiaries, with clients dispersed across the globe. NASSCOM, the industry's trade body, claims that 75 per cent of the Fortune 500 companies are served by the Indian industry (NASSCOM 2009a: 12). While some of these overseas businesses directly establish captive units in India, the majority operate through a contracted Indian company providing service to an offshore location. And while the global Multi National Corporations (MNCs) are increasing their market share significantly, 65-70 per cent of the service is still provided directly by Indian companies (NASSCOM 2009b: 6). As Western countries dominate the customer base of this sector – with 62 per cent of revenue created by contracts with clients from the United States alone (NASSCOM 2010: 6) – this sector acts almost like an intermediary between India and the West. However, this also makes the industry vulnerable to political decisions in countries where it has almost no lobbying power; thus, the political situation in the US in particular is actively and warily monitored for changes in the regulation of outsourcing (Hira 2004).

From the USA, the IT industry gets much of the inspiration, ethical beliefs and business models that makes it the 'poster child' of modernity in the Indian context (Nadeem 2009a). The industry pioneers new labour relations, develops India's human capital and can, in general terms, be seen as "exemplar of good entrepreneurship and corporate governance to the rest of India" (Arora and Athreye 2002: 253). It is, together with its ITES sibling, the most prominent sector to make its profits mainly in foreign markets and to thrive on the exchange of ideas, people and, of course, money with predominantly Western clients. No other Indian sector is as much exposed to globalised business values and practices nor as

cheap and reliable enough to enable the current outsourcing model. For a detailed account of the various ways of outsourcing-based business relations in India, see Rafiq Dossani and Martin Kenney, 'The Next Wave of Globalization: Relocating Service Provision to India', *World Development*, 35/5 (2007), 772-91.

¹⁴⁰ ITES comprises all back-office services, from simple telemarketing by call centres to the complex filing of tax returns, that are enabled by software technology and communication links between international customers and the service provider in India. Also called BPO, Business Process Outsourcing, it thrives on the considerable wage difference for these services in India and involves tasks that are considered to be monotonous, repetitive and which do not require advanced qualifications. Compared to the supposedly 'elite' IT industry, ITES has an image as the poor cousin of IT, and jobs are often seen as stopgap rather than career options. However, there are jobs in ITES that require high cognitive ability, whereas some jobs falling within the IT label often do not require higher qualifications than needed for basic ITES tasks.

¹⁴¹ For an historical review of the beginnings of information technology in India, and the co-operation with the United States, see Ross Bassett, 'Aligning India in the Cold War Era: Indian Technical Elites, the Indian Institute of Technology at Kanpur, and Computing in India and the United States', *Technology and Culture*, 50/4 (October 2009 2009a), 783 - 810.

much a hybrid of Indian and Western cooperation. These factors have important consequences, both in IT's relation to the world outside India, and in its position in the domestic context.

4.2.2. IT's mediating role ...

By its very essence, Indian IT lives in two worlds and must constantly balance the challenges posed by public expectations from both. In this delicate situation, the sector plays a valuable bridging function between India and the global community, particularly the West. This bridging function, or hybridity, results in a double-headed set of expectations regarding the industry. It is scrutinised by the public and by the regulatory bodies on both sides of the deal, and must comply with the unwritten rules of two cultural systems. If it resorts to business practices that violate international labour standards, it would hamper its competitive edge in the customers' markets; on the other hand, it would undermine its standing in India by openly challenging the social and moral beliefs of the Indian public.

4.2.2.1. ... towards the world

To the outside world, IT is proud to claim that it has brought India back onto the global stage; that it has transformed the nation's image from one of dysfunctional administration, political stagnation, and endemic poverty, to that of an emerging economic giant with an edge in brainpower and technology. In its official publications, NASSCOM continually claims that IT's success is showcasing India to the world:

The industry has played a key role in enhancing the brand image of India, by accounting for over 10 per cent of total FDI in the last decade, over 200 cross border acquisitions between FY2005-FY2009, and establishment of over 900 MNC captives in the last decade. (NASSCOM 2010: 8)

And this claim is not altogether unwarranted: While India has been welcomed to the global stage by an ambivalent West, where it is celebrated as a democratic balance to authoritarian China (Richardson 2002), it is also feared as a competitive threat to the West's own service industries (Knights and Jones 2007). The (sometimes euphoric) optimism that India's on-going development has created in parts of the Western world (Friedman 2005) is matched by complaints of job losses and poor quality service as the result of outsourcing. Thus, even though the new India is not always perceived positively today, it is undoubtedly true that the nation is now an economic power to be reckoned with and not ridiculed.

In terms of political influence, the Indian IT sector is delicately positioned between two very different value systems (or modes of expectation), where it can play both sides against each other while depending on both of them at the same time. From the perspective of (mostly Western) clients, the Indian IT sector provides a cheap and tested means of business outsourcing. Nevertheless, while India appears to be the best choice for such outsourcing at present, it is only one amongst other alternatives; thus, the industry can do little more than cautiously lobby for its interests without actually having a strong negotiating position. Competition from countries like China, the Philippines or Vietnam provides a strong argument against the client countries being solely dependent on India. Politically, the outsourcing

business depends on acceptance from the customers' countries and, even though the present consensus seems to be one of approval, this is subject to change. From the business side, the Indian IT industry is one voice amongst many others, with no particular influence or leverage. The clients of the IT industry, who are politically often extremely influential players in their home markets, are unreliable partners, in the sense that they could, and would, choose other destinations for outsourcing if and when circumstances change. If Indian IT has any influence on political debate in Western societies, then it is only conveyed indirectly through international organisations, under the general topic of free trade.

4.2.2.2. ... in India's domestic context

The situation for IT looks very different in India itself. The industry has come a long way from its modest beginnings in the 1980s to its roaring success in the late 2000s,¹⁴² and while it now has a great deal of political influence, it is at the same time not fully integrated into the local economy. Against the oft-heard claim that it developed independently of the state, the industry was in fact boosted by massive Indian government intervention, prioritising IT and providing legal privileges (Parthasarathy 2004; Saraswati 2008). So rather than being a purely private development, IT is better understood as the result of a successful cooperation between private initiative and government patronage (Balakrishnan 2006). And although this points to a close private-public partnership, the IT sector is still not intimately connected to the rest of the Indian economy, where the relationship is not fully understood given its unique and uneven development (D'Costa 2003). The irregular development, and the specifics of its enclave-like characteristics, are thus not comparable with the oft-cited example of California's Silicon valley – especially as the dense networks between companies, research institutes and start ups emblematic of the original Californian setting are mostly lacking in its South Asian counterpart (D'Costa 2006).¹⁴³

While the IT industry is certainly the well-protected poster boy for successful economic projects under the government's watch, its actual relation with the state administration is far from conflict-free. As IT creates a great deal of attention, and faces occasional opposition, the cosy relationship between (mostly

¹⁴² Contrarily to popular belief, the Indian IT industry is not a recent and immediate success story but has a complex history of at least 35 years. Even though liberalisation from 1991 and the global Y2K problem mark important turning points for its development, they are neither starting points nor immediate breakthroughs for the industry. The very fact that IT existed long before 1991 in India indicates that liberalisation took many more and much smaller steps than usually imagined. And even though the Y2K problem might have projected Indian talent onto the global stage, the boost it provided was more symbolical than real in economic terms. However complex the history of IT in India might be, its cultural significance in Indian society is a recent phenomenon. As the original business model was the controversial Body Shopping, where Indian employees being paid Indian salaries were sent to the client's site, the impact of IT in India itself was non-existent for a long time. Only with the improvement in communication links and the consequent turn away from body shopping to outsourcing – where the client is serviced from offices in India – brought IT to the centre of domestic attention. In this regard, the IT industry in India itself became a real factor only at the end of the 1990s. And because this study is concerned with the social change attributable to IT in India itself, only this time period after 1995 is of relevance here. For a history of the Indian IT sector, see Dinesh C. Sharma, *The Long Revolution - the Birth and Growth of India's It Industry* (Noida: HarperCollins, 2009). See also – for a much shorter review of government policies towards IT development: Subramanian Ramesh, 'India and Information Technology: A Historical & Critical Perspective', *Journal of Global Information Technology Management*, 9/4 (2006), 28.

¹⁴³ For an empirically informed account of the use of Internet communications in local government in Bangalore, see Veena V. Raman, 'Information Technology and Participatory Democracy: A Case Study of Bangalore City', PhD. Thesis AAT: 3334015 (The Pennsylvania State University, 2006). According to the author, its potential is largely under-used and not appreciated in its potential to enable citizen-bureaucracy communication in dual directions.

state level) politics and IT business is faced with a dilemma: The state is confronted with the assertive demands of a powerful business lobby, while at the same time having to cope with the potential for a popular backlash if any preferential treatment of the IT sector becomes too obvious amongst the non-IT electorate. Sandwiched between these opposing demands, the weakness of local government is dramatically exposed, which in turn hinders any meaningful embedding of the IT sector in the local economy. As Balaji Parthasarathy writes:

The small domestic market can be understood in terms of the characteristics of the state. Even as the growing embeddedness of the state allowed it to take some measures of husbandry, it was confronted with declining autonomy. Its failure to bring about socio-economic transformation for vast sections of society led to challenges from those sections. The outcome is weak governance and insufficient bureaucratic cohesion, reflected in the inability to encourage the use of productivity enhancing IT in various economic sectors since the economic restructuring that such usage will entail is likely to prove politically unpalatable to one social group or another, which could then undermine the government. (Parthasarathy 2004: 682)

So the political situation actually impedes the full integration of the IT industry in the Indian economy. Thus, despite all the hype and undeniable achievements, IT in India remains a phenomenon that must be measured against the very improbability of its existence.

However, the significance of IT goes far beyond the factual: Partly due to the industry's symbolic importance, and partly because competing lobbies are muted or missing, IT exerts considerable influence on political debate in India. In a country with a huge problem of under- or unemployment, any employment provider naturally receives a warm welcome. Moreover, because IT and ITES generate earnings in much-needed foreign exchange, they are more valuable than their mere economic size would suggest. Last but not least, the symbolic importance of this industry, both as a flagship for India's technical abilities and of the modernisation of its society, further increases its clout. The result is an inflated domestic power that is a clear contrast to its modest standing outside the country. In actual fact, IT and ITES account for far more than the modest 5-6 per cent of GDP would seem to suggest. Even though they might, in reality, be as dependent on their Indian employment base as on their Western clients, this is not how it is perceived in India itself.

Due to IT's political clout, the industry's claims and demands have a great deal of force, especially in the clusters where IT is a prominent local force. And while these demands are (not surprisingly) mainly driven by self-interest, they nevertheless create spin offs for the modernisation of the whole country. In this regard, the IT sector very much reflects the recently established consensus on economic development goals:

Liberalisation and globalisation are now widely seen as inevitable and as a welcome change of course, in contrast to the 'bad old days' of the planning regime and the continuing depredations of a 'corrupt' and 'inefficient' bureaucracy. This reorientation away from Nehruvian nationalism and towards market-led

development reflects the increasing ‘hegemony of the logic of corporate capital’ (Chatterjee 2008: 62), a hegemony that has not come about spontaneously but has been carefully manufactured and orchestrated. (C. Upadhyा 2009b: 90)

With all its influence and power, IT is one of few outspoken advocates for a capitalistic reformation of India (Saraswati 2008). As the industry’s revenue sources are overwhelmingly outside India, its business model depends upon liberal and open exchange with other economies. In effect, the success of IT can be seen as an insurance against a possible backlash in favour of former autarchic policies: As long as this sector can successfully lobby for its own interests, India will remain an economically open country.¹⁴⁴

More indirectly, but not less importantly, IT assumes a role model function for other Indian industries: What is considered best practise here is almost automatically considered to be the future for the rest. With the implementation of international codes of conduct, IT follows norms regarding best business practises that, in turn, prohibit discrimination based on the socio-cultural background of employees (Dasgupta 2008, 2009). Therefore, all companies have to apply equal and transparent recruitment and promotion procedures, and prevent gender- or caste-based discrimination within their daily work routines. This contrasts markedly with traditional Indian business practice, where cronyism, blood ties and family connections, caste quotas and all manner of social preferences are considered to be prevalent. Yet, while IT boldly and publicly challenges such behaviour by its insistence on the exclusive principle of meritocracy, it never goes so far as to openly confront orthodox religious and social attitudes; due to its hybrid nature, IT is itself part of the Indian economy and society, and therefore cannot fully escape its social context. Thus, the IT industry ostentatiously stands for clean business codes of conduct at the same time as being forced to accept less-than-ideal compromises for political goodwill. The sector often disagrees with the political direction of the state or central government, but would rarely challenge the supremacy of political power.

Equally complex is IT’s relationship with the cultural environment in India. As already noted (C. Upadhyा 2009b), the industry faces opposition from various social and political quarters. This is especially so in Bangalore, where the industry is embroiled in a number of disputes, ranging from land use to nationalist demands of Kannada speakers (see 4.3). While it is sometimes portrayed by Hindu nationalists as an agent of foreign powers, and as a bad influence on Indian youth, the industry cannot afford to openly take sides, preferring instead to ride out the conflict between its role in modernisation and the resultant conservative reaction. IT clearly enables young people, not least women, to challenge long-held traditions and family pressures (Atmavilas 2008; Chand 2008; Kelkar et al. 2002), but it is unable to take a public stand for fear of a backlash. Timid and often covert sniping at the repressive forces of Hindu orthodoxy (as, for example, in the advertisements for the Wipro ego laptop¹⁴⁵) is often the only

¹⁴⁴ For an in-depth analysis of the relations between the IT industry and the political sphere, see Simanti Dasgupta, 'Bits of Belonging: Information Technology and the Changing Rationale of Governance and Citizenship in the Indian Silicon Plateau', Ph.D. diss, AAT 3355136 (New School University, New York, 2009).

¹⁴⁵ In the “I am e.go” campaign a line says “I don’t need no moral police”. http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=G3EYI9W_fxw – accessed 28.01.2011

indication that the industry is fighting for its own interests in the cultural field.

In yet another twist, the political position of IT employees is not necessarily in line with the industry's social role. Popular opinion suggests that many IT employees support the Hindu-nationalist BJP rather than the Congress Party,¹⁴⁶ with anecdotal evidence supporting the view that a highly modern workplace does not necessarily bring along a modern mindset (van der Veer 2005). This results in an ambiguity that seems contradictory, at least at first sight: While the IT industry undermines the traditional social order by weakening dependencies on kinship, caste and family, it nevertheless has a workforce that is, at least partially, on the conservative side of Indian society. Perhaps as a result of this industry's exposure to non-Indian values and ideas, and to globalisation (Nadeem 2008), the revival of tradition, rediscovery of ancient values, and reverence for the collectivist features of family life (Shah 2009) are popular amongst young IT employees. As Shehzad Nadeem puts it;

The identities and aspirations of the ICT workforce are defined increasingly with reference to the West. Outsourcing has emboldened a class of cultural emulators and made their protest visible. Radical in their rejection of old values, conspicuous in their consumption, workers construct an image of the West as a social utopia, which is used as a benchmark, a standard against which to measure India's social progress. The infusion of new money and jobs, however, feeds popular anxieties that stretch virtue into vice: too much personal freedom, too much consumerism. Globalization does not herald an era of unprecedented personal or consumer freedom, a belated "modernity," nor does it signify a crisis of the "traditional" Indian family. It is an Indian morality play where the pleasure principle clashes with the demands of custom and obligation, where *kama* (pleasure) and *dharma* (duty) meet in uneasy suspension. (Nadeem 2008: 44)

Seen in this context, the cultural position of IT is neither consistently projected nor genuinely upheld by its employees. The prominent leaders of IT¹⁴⁷ consistently lobby only for their industry's core interest, namely an open, capitalistic economy, more efficient and effective state services, and a fundamental reform of the educational system. Aside from these fundamental issues, however, the essence of IT's socio-economic position is best described in the term 'meritocracy'.

¹⁴⁶ For a review of the relationship between state-level politics and the IT industry, see Narendra Pani, 'Icons and Reform Politics in India: The Case of S. M. Krishna', *Asian Survey*, 46/2 (2006), 238-56.

¹⁴⁷ In the Indian public, the IT industry is associated with and represented by a number of prominent faces, with Subramanian Ramadorai (long-time CEO of Tata Consultancy Services), Shiv Nadar (chairman of HCL Technologies), Azim Premji (chairman of Wipro Limited), N.R. Narayana Murthy (founder and mentor of Infosys) and Nandan Nilekani (co-founder of Infosys, now Chairman of the Unique Identification Authority of India UIDAI) amongst the best known. Perhaps the most politically active figureheads of IT in India, both co-founders of Infosys, are Narayana Murthy and Nandan Nilekani. The former enjoys the status of a public celebrity and respected voice in relation to almost all problems and occasions, e.g. Narayana Murthy, *A Better India - a Better World* (New Delhi: Allen Lane by Penguin, 2009b)., whereas the latter is author of the book "Imagining India" Nandan Nilekani, *Imagining India - Ideas for the New Century* (New Delhi: Allen Lane by Penguin, 2008). Nilekani subsequently became chairman of the Unique Identification Authority of India (UIDAI), a central government position with cabinet minister rank. Both are pressing hard for a modernisation along the lines of a greater accountability of the state, comprehensive educational reform, more space for private initiative and responsibility. As apparent from their book publications, both seem to find have adopted a role in influencing public opinion and, due to their celebrity status, have achieved this to some extent.

4.2.2.3 The concept of Meritocracy

Meritocracy is portrayed as *the* fundamental principle of IT, internally as well as externally. Given that IT is not a political movement with a manifesto to change society, the concept of meritocracy, often advocated with missionary zeal, comes closest to an ‘ideology of IT’. It is used as a means of emphasising the importance of a good education, and – much more radically in India – of justifying the creation of wealth in combination with a strong business ethics:

In the Indian context, where business is usually associated either with inheritance, lack of quality education or amassing illicit wealth, the founding of Infosys by a group of middle class professionals based solely on their education and ethics is upheld as an unprecedented phenomenon. The possibility that one can benefit from one’s education and transform it into wealth without compromising one’s ethical principles is a unique experience. The achievement of Infosys has influenced the imagination of the middle class because it marks a moral departure in the creation of wealth. Infosys thus acts as a metaphor for success exemplifying the ethical standard and professional competence exclusively of the middle class in India. (Dasgupta 2008: 218)¹⁴⁸

Politically, then, as well as economically, an insistence on the general applicability of the meritocratic concept contrasts sharply with the Indian tradition, and is therefore highly controversial in public debate.

The ideology of a meritocracy provides the language with which to connect the development of personal expertise and the improvement of the nation. In a society historically rooted in caste, class, and regional divisions, the ostensible meritocracy of the IT workplace provides a set of ideas about how India ought to be run. Belief in a meritocracy is pervaded not only through the institutionalized practices of the IT workplace, but also [...] in the actions of IT workers and the industry. (S. Radhakrishnan 2007: 152)

Meritocracy itself would not be nearly as controversial if confined solely to the workplace; however, its proclaimed general applicability brings it into conflict with wider Indian society. The implication that social inequalities are only legitimate if based on personal difference in ‘merit’ – that is, personal achievement – is nothing less than revolutionary in a society steeped in hierarchy, ascribed status and great power disparities. Nevertheless, radical as this concept is in the Indian context, it is both a-historical and technocratic – or, more bluntly, socially sterile. Because IT is not a political movement, and its political concerns are primarily focussed on furthering and protecting its own position, the concept of meritocracy is narrowed to suit these interests. In the political arena, the concept of meritocracy is mostly used to oppose any attempt to extend affirmative action policies, prevalent in the public sector, into the private sector in general, and IT in particular.

The staunch opposition to reservations or affirmative action that is the dominant position of most IT (and other) industry leaders is closely linked to their support for liberalisation. It is this connection that has elevated the ideology of merit to an article of faith. (C. Upadhyay 2007: 1866)

¹⁴⁸ It can be argued that, before 1991, private wealth was generally considered unethical because it inevitably involved corruption in a system where there was simply no ethical way to get rich. This attitude is still to some extent engrained in India, with the repercussions of this still evident today.

This showcases both the IT industry's political position (free-market-oriented) and its sense of purpose or mission (to pioneer a capitalist business culture in a transforming society). In the context of this thesis, this is both a unique feature of IT in itself and characteristic of the industry's position in the dispute about caste-based reservations (Madheswaran 2008; Nivedita 2009).¹⁴⁹

4.2.3. Work organisation in the IT industry

The IT sector worldwide differs from more traditional workplaces in its basic beliefs about the role of the employee (Andrews et al. 2005; Barrett 2005; Dean 2007), with the Indian IT sector being no exception. As IT employees have considerably more professional expertise than usual elsewhere, workers' relative autonomy is accordingly much higher. And as these pockets of autonomous expertise cannot operate in isolation, effective connection and communication between employees is an economic necessity – hence the emphasis on 'soft skills' in the training of prospective employees (see chpt. 5). With the explosion of technological knowledge and the ever-increasing complexity of work tasks – against the backdrop of limited human capabilities – the ideal-typical all-rounder is replaced by the expert in a particular area. Moreover, because on-the-ground experience develops amongst those closest to the problems at hand, expertise is not concentrated in the organisation but remains scattered in many small clusters. Thus, a hierarchical top-down model, where information and expertise are concentrated at the top of a pyramid and decrease according to rank and job description, is obsolete here. The new work environment, then, is a network where information is exchanged according to necessity, not hierarchy.

In order to build a work system that efficiently connects these pockets of expertise, a comprehensive flow of information must operate unhindered by status differences in either direction. Therefore, the whole work organisation becomes based on the active participation of employees who are confident enough to contribute in discussions, able to express their views, and to discuss and challenge ideas from their superiors, and ultimately share responsibility for managerial decisions. Accepting that professional employees have to be involved in decision-making, and that expertise could be found at all levels of the organisation, results in a fundamentally egalitarian value system. Organisationally and ideologically, the concept of empowered employees is a direct result of the advances in technology and the interconnected complexity of work tasks. Needless to say, this system of work organisation is no egalitarian utopia, and indeed would be unworkable without clearly defined managerial roles. Nonetheless, it is necessarily based on close cooperation between employees with diverging expertise, free information flow, small power distances between superiors and subordinates, and a generally flattened work hierarchy.

Admittedly, the Indian IT industry – with its specialisation at the lower end of the value-added chain in

¹⁴⁹ For an analysis of caste-based reservations as form of rent-seeking, see Evan Osborne, 'Culture, Development, and Government: Reservations in India', *Economic Development and Cultural Change*, 49/3 (2001), 659-85. For a non-scientific, but telling description of the extension of reservations, see Salil Tripathi, 'India's Creeping Caste Entitlements', *Far Eastern Economic Review*, 170/8 (October 1 2007), 49-52.

the global division of labour – is not as much a pioneer in new work relations as the core centres of IT overseas, where employees enjoy considerably more autonomy (Ilavarasan 2007, 2008). But compared with mainstream Indian work organisations, where bureaucratic hierarchies, great power distances between superiors and subordinates, and enormous expertise concentration in the management level is a given, even the hybrid IT workplace is fundamentally different (Hill 2009; Krishnan 2010). The gap between the cultural environment that prospective IT employees are used to and the one prevailing in the sector is significant; therefore, the need for so-called soft skill training is emphasised by the industry. Consequently, job preparation training for a position in the Indian IT industry is dedicated to improving these soft skills, both in terms of language proficiency and the ability to adapt to the corporate work culture within the New Economy, with such skills updated regularly by intermediate training sessions. The research discussed in chapter five deals with the implications of this specific aspect of IT work practices.

4.2.4. Caste composition of IT's workforce

The caste composition of the IT workforce seems to present a paradox: Even though it is an open secret that the great majority of the workforce hails from an urban, Hindu Upper Caste background, there is surprisingly little data on the issue.¹⁵⁰ Of the few small-scale, non-representative studies – none, so far, focusing on this thesis' topic – the one by Carol Upadhyay and A.R. Vasavi is the most comprehensive. Here, in a sample of 132 respondents, they find the following caste and religious distribution:

Table 4.2.4 Caste Composition of an IT workforce sample (C. Upadhyay 2006) N 132

| | |
|------------------------------|--------|
| Brahmin | 48.00% |
| Dominant Agricultural Castes | 15.00% |
| Vaishyas | 13.00% |
| Kshatriyas | 10.00% |
| Christian | 5.00% |
| OBC | 3.00% |
| Muslim | 2.00% |
| Others | 2.00% |
| Scheduled Caste | 1.00% |

Other studies seem to confirm these general findings. In a sample of 100 respondents, Oommen and Meenakshisundararajan find that 75 per cent belong to “Forward Castes”, while 20 per cent are from “Backward Castes”, five per cent from “Most Backward Communities”, and none to Scheduled Caste or Scheduled Tribe (Oommen and Meenakshisundararajan 2005). Even in the not-so-elite ITES section, the same situations appears the case: In Babu P. Ramesh’s sample of 278 BPO employees, 96.4 per cent are

¹⁵⁰ No official statistics on this topic are available, and, because it has political implications for or against caste-based reservations, the industry itself is reluctant to explore it.

from “Forward Castes” and 2.2 per cent from “Backward Castes”, with the remaining 1.4 per cent classified as “others” (B. P. Ramesh 2004). The most recent addition to this small sample of research is the network study undertaken by Nilanjan Raghunath. In his sample of 78 IT employees in Bangalore, mainly drawn from middle and higher management level, he finds 23 (29 per cent) *Brahmins*, 19 (24 per cent) *Kshatriyas*, 18 (23 per cent) *Vaishyas* and 17 (22 per cent) *Shudras*,¹⁵¹ while only one is from a religious minority, in this case a Muslim (Raghunath 2010: 12). Even though Raghunath’s sample recruitment is not based on a random design, but rather on network effects, it offers a rare and valuable glimpse into the caste composition in the higher ranks of IT.

This bias in favour of Hindu Higher Castes is anything but surprising, especially given the fact that higher education in India is already dominated by High Caste Hindus and Dominant Agricultural Castes. As Satish Deshpande calculates, using NSSO¹⁵² data, Hindu Upper Castes make up 36.9 per cent of India’s urban population, but 65.7 per cent of graduates in tertiary education (Deshpande 2006). So, despite the small data base and the confusion about differing official classifications of caste communities, two main trends are clearly visible: First, the old elite of Hindu Upper Castes and Dominant Agricultural Castes is more highly represented amongst IT employees than their share of the general population would indicate; and second, the issue is sensitive and shrouded in considerable secrecy. Although a comprehensive investigation, clarifying the outstanding questions, is yet to be conducted, the (apparent) caste composition of the IT workforce appears to be a good indicator for the economic power of certain caste groups: That is, because IT offers prestigious employment, with a high entry level selection (in the form of cultural capital plus the expenses of a relevant technical education), those who are accepted into the industry can be seen as the elite of contemporary India. The picture, then, is of continuity and change, the old elite of High Caste Hindus is as equally overrepresented as are some religious minorities (notably Christians), while Lower Caste Hindus and, especially, Muslims struggle to get in.

4.2.5. Conclusion: Why choose IT for a study of Caste?

From all that has been said, the Indian IT industry is a rather exceptional sector and not easily comparable to any other in contemporary India; thus, little that can be said about caste in the empirical chapters to follow is applicable to the rest of the country. In fact, it would be fair to assume that the reality of caste within the IT industry contrasts markedly with the lives of the majority of Indians. Nevertheless, since the IT industry is an active agent in wider society and has a clear agenda, its relationship with caste may provide valuable insights into future social developments in India. If this sector provides the blueprint for a modernisation of India along capitalistic pathways – something that will only be known in the decades to come – the role of caste evident already in IT would be relevant for the rest of India. Whatever the future might hold, it is not overly speculative to view IT as spearheading a particular modernisation model, with far-reaching implications for the reinterpretation of caste.

¹⁵¹ This category most likely comprises Dominant Agricultural Castes, among others, so the notion that all *Shudra* are ‘Low Caste’ is misleading.

¹⁵² National Sample Survey Organisation http://mospi.gov.in/nss_4aug2008/web/nss.htm

4.3. Bangalore

4.3.1. The city of Bangalore – before and after the IT boom

The IT industry in India is clustered mainly in the four Southern Indian states, in and around Mumbai, and in the region around Delhi. While, contrary to popular perception, Bangalore might not be the paramount centre of IT, the city still constitutes the largest single agglomeration of IT corporation offices in India and hosts around 40 per cent of the total IT sector (Kambhampati 2002; Taeube 2005). In the last five years, a growing expansion into ‘second tier’ or ‘third tier’ Indian cities has slowed the growth of Bangalore, though without undermining its importance for the industry. Bangalore not only embodies IT symbolically, it is also dominated by the sheer presence of IT like no other city, and therefore deserves special attention. This city is the ideal-typical cluster city, a feature seen as characteristic for the IT industry globally, as well as in India (Grondeau 2007; Khomiakova 2007; Sonderegger 2008). Because of IT's dominance over other sectors in the region, the city is uniquely placed for observations on the changes that the recent IT boom has brought in its wake. As this city provided the primary location for this thesis' research, some background information is relevant to the empirical chapters that follow.¹⁵³

For anyone studying the IT industry, the choice of Bangalore would be an obvious one. But it is too narrow to see Bangalore only through the lens of the relatively recent boom in IT. To adequately explore why and how this city came to be the symbol of IT in the Indian context, one has to go back into the city's history. That “Bangalore was known to be a sleepy old town until the late 1980s and referred to as a ‘pensioners' paradise'; a quaint place for retired people” (Bharadwaj 2005: I) indicates how far the city has come. A rather small and unimportant provincial town in the British colonial period, Bangalore experienced unprecedented growth rates after independence, acting as a magnet for migration from the surrounding areas. Due to its elevated position at around 920m above sea level, it has a pleasant year-round climate, and consequently has become popular as a place for retirement. After a number of central government institutions and educational or scientific institutes were established, Bangalore experienced a continuing influx of relatively highly educated people, mainly in government service. In the 60 years from 1941, according to official census data, it grew from 411,000 to 5.69 million inhabitants (Nair 2005: 101).

This rapid expansion meant that the modern city had to be designed from scratch, even though the two original centres, Bangalore and Cantonment, each have a century or so of history. What was left of the original urban planning was soon overwhelmed, encroached upon or encircled by newer and often unplanned or illegal developments. Land conversions have meant, among other things, that the ecological resources of the city have been dramatically degraded to the point of impending ecological collapse (Narayanan and Hanjagi 2009). The anarchic city structure and chaotic traffic, exacerbated by poor or non-existent planning, tell of this rapid development. The experience of Bangalore today is that of an uncontrollable juggernaut that may soon choke on its own developments (Heitzman 2004)

¹⁵³ For a short, yet largely uncritical, overview, see H. S. Sudhira, T. V. Ramachandra, and M. H. Bala Subrahmanyam, 'Bangalore: City Profile', *Cities*, 24/5 (2007), 379-90.

4.3.2. What makes Bangalore unique?

In social and cultural terms, Bangalore's massive increase in population and its rapid rise in importance have had positive effects.¹⁵⁴ Without the burden of a great historical past and in the absence of a population that could lay claim to traditional rights to the city, Bangalore is much more open to newcomers and new developments than comparable Indian cities. With the exception of certain neighbourhoods – such as Malleswaram,¹⁵⁵ with its obvious prevalence of orthodox, *Brahminic* and Kannada residents – no quarter is fully dominated by one community. With most development only a few decades old, and most inhabitants relative newcomers, the lack of tradition allows for more social freedom. This city provides niches for a wide variety of people, be it orthodox, strictly vegetarian Tamil *Brahmins* or beef-eating Muslims. It is not the case that an absolute social accord prevails amongst this diversity; there have been communal tensions in the past, largely centred around the issue of the status of Kannada in public life (Stephen 2005). However, the fact that no linguistic group, caste or community can claim dominance, coupled with a striking anonymity, makes for a city where a diversity of cultural orientations coexists in mainly peaceful, if not always harmonious, ways.

In terms of its diverse population, Bangalore is an exceptional city in comparison with the other major Indian centres. With an estimated population of around 8 million in 2011,¹⁵⁶ it is the third largest Indian city – admittedly, a distant third after Delhi and Mumbai. Given the proximity of all four of the Southern Indian states, it is not really a city that is genuinely Kannadigan. Instead, it increasingly acts as a Southern metropolis for the peoples of Tamil Nadu, Kerala, Karnataka and Andhra Pradesh, as well as for a smaller proportion of (mainly) professionals from all over India. And while Kannada is by far the most common language in the city, it is spoken by significantly less than 50 per cent of the population. Indeed, in Karnataka as a whole, the proportion of Kannada speakers is already as low as 65 per cent (Nair 2005: 245). Due to the traditional orientation of Northern Kannadigans to Bombay/Mumbai, and the fact that the city is only 25 km from Tamil Nadu and 100 km from Andhra Pradesh, Bangalore has never been a centre for Kannada speakers alone. Thus, as migration is still accelerating due to the recent boom in IT and other service sectors, the city's 'melting pot' tendencies are likely to be accelerating as well.

This diversity is strongly connected with the changing economics of this metropolis. In the years from independence to the 1980s, Bangalore was regarded as a city mainly for scientists, government bureaucrats and pensioners, who settled there because of the relatively cool climate. Important educational and scientific institutes, such as the Indian Institute of Sciences (IISc) and the Indian Institute

¹⁵⁴ Bangalore scores relatively high in terms of Human Development, if compared with the Indian or Karnataka average – for the numbers, see K. Devaraj and B. V. Gopalakrishna, 'Human Development in Karnataka State: An Inter-District Disparities. (Report)', *Indian Journal of Economics and Business*, 9/1 (2010), 159(16).

¹⁵⁵ "Malleswaram started out in the early 1900s as an upper-caste locality and remained largely unchanged in this respect—something of a backwater in fact—until the 1990s. Then came the economic boom." Tulasi Srinivas, 'Divine Enterprise: Hindu Priests and Ritual Change in Neighbourhood Hindu Temples in Bangalore', *South Asia: Journal of South Asian Studies*, 29/3 (2006), 321-43 at 326.

¹⁵⁶ Estimates vary widely: The official census for 2011 is not yet available, while the last one in 2001 put the number of Bangaloreans (both rural and urban) at 6,537,124. http://www.censusindia.gov.in/PopulationFinder/Population_Finder.aspx accessed 28.01.2011

of Management (IIM), as well as government undertakings like Hindustan Aeronautics Limited (HAL),¹⁵⁷ made this city a hub for researchers and scientists from all over India.

The well-known Indian Institute of Management, along with major public enterprises such as Hindustan Aeronautics, Bharat Electronics, Hindustan Machine Tools, and the Indian Space Research Organization, are visible manifestations of India's Cold-War strategy to make Bangalore the center of Indian defense and aerospace research and development and electronics production. (Audirac 2003: 22)

Effectively, the city was still seen as a safe backwater for government-dominated research and education till the mid-1980s.¹⁵⁸ Thus, well before the IT boom, population growth was becoming an issue, with the city already encroaching into water reservoirs, which were drained, and into the surrounding areas, which were suburbanised.

4.3.3. The IT boom and public reaction

Development took a new form with the arrival of the companies that still dominate (the image of) Bangalore today. In 1984, Infosys decided to move its headquarters from Bombay to Bangalore, with many other firms, such as Wipro and Mindtree, following suit. With the arrival of IT, city planning had to make concessions to accommodate this industry, in addition to the general influx of people from outside. Consequently, enclaves like Electronics City, founded in 1978 but only becoming important in the 1990s, and the International Tech Park (ITPB) in Whitefield (plus numerous smaller tech parks within the city), were developed to provide the office space needed. Consequently, almost all parts of Bangalore are now penetrated by office space that caters to IT or ITES companies, while IT employees, easily distinguishable by their Western dress and company logos, are to be found in every part of the city.

This adds to the feeling that the city has been taken over by an industry, which creates a sense of alienation amongst those residents who settled there before the boom. The highly uneven distribution of wealth, and the reluctance to address issues that are not relevant to IT, impacts negatively on the less well-off parts of the population:

Issues of poverty remain submerged by the euphoria over the expansion of the information technology industry and Bangalore is, in many senses, a "divided" city. The glass walled computer-ready office complexes, exclusive shopping malls and entertainment facilities that rival the best in the country contrast with the dense squatter settlements and their very poor services in central areas of the city. (Benjamin 2000: 38)¹⁵⁹

And while IT continues to make the headlines, a major opposition is visible in the complaints about colonialisation of the city and the destruction of the older (if backwater) city of Bangalore. In this regard, IT is criticised not only for usurping the image of Bangalore, but also for the inflation of real estate and office rents, and even for the price rises of food and clothing. While many of these claims have validity,

¹⁵⁷ Established by the British administration in 1940.

¹⁵⁸ The main reason why so many important institutes were sited in the city was the safe distance from Pakistan and the enjoyable year-round climate. It is also possible, however, that exactly the absence of interfering traditions and vested interest made the city attractive for the central government.

¹⁵⁹ See also: Christoph Dittrich, 'Bangalore: Globalisation and Fragmentation in India's Hightech-Capital', *Asien*, 103 (April 2007), 45 - 58.

the opposition to the IT industry also plays on the fears and prejudices of public opinion in Bangalore. The former elite and social agenda setters, for example, now feel threatened by a force that dominates the limelight, even if it represents only a small proportion of the city's inhabitants. The attention formerly accorded to the established educational and research institutions has been overshadowed by an IT industry that is punching above its actual weight. However, as long as the opposition to IT is as fragmented as it is today, the industry will continue to triumph over other sectors in the public imagination.

Not surprisingly, similar processes can also be observed in the city's cultural life. IT is often blamed for the changing attitudes of young employees, who are thought to indulge in mindless consumerism and over-consumption of alcohol, and to be overly sexually promiscuous. The moral backlash,¹⁶⁰ often expressed by an odd coalition of right wing Hindu-orthodox, who see their culture under threat, and left wing socialists, who despise capitalist consumerism, has already resulted in a curfew, requiring all businesses to close by 11:30pm. Admittedly, because IT represents young modern individuals who earn more at the beginning of their careers than their parents at the end of theirs, the accusation of consumerism is perhaps justified – but the notion that all IT engineers are morally liberal, easy-going hedonists is certainly a flawed exaggeration:

In cities such as Bangalore, the boom in urban consumption is quite visible in the mushrooming of opulent apartment complexes and upscale shopping malls, hotels, and restaurants; the exponential multiplication of motor vehicles clogging the roads; and the growth in foreign travel and other leisure activities. Yet in the absence of reliable data on consumption, it is difficult to separate the hype from actual practice or to analyse the operations of consumption as social practice. (C. Upadhyay 2009a: 256)

The issue of consumerism, and the concurrent moral questions, is perhaps best seen in the context of a generational shift. For those who grew up and were socialised under Nehruvian notions of austerity, it might indeed be a sign of the moral decline of India to see affluent young people frequenting the newly-built malls of Bangalore – with the IT industry being the most obvious cause of this seeming decline in traditional values. However, at least during my stay in Bangalore, I rarely encountered anything that I would consider a mindless waste of money. Rather, without invoking moral beliefs, those who earn more than their parents have simply adapted to it by moving up in the consumption ladder – without excess, but without austerity either.

4.3.2. The Future of Bangalore: Privatising the Public?

The consumption patterns attributed to the IT boom in Bangalore have important consequences, albeit not so much in excessive consumerism, but in a privatisation of the formerly public domain (A. Ghosh 2005). Because municipal services are generally weak and overstretched, private money is increasingly spent to compensate for their shortcomings. The most visible aspect of this can be seen in the sprawl of

¹⁶⁰ This discourse also occurs within the new middle classes – with both liberal and conservative tendencies finding their expression there. For an empirical example, see Margit Van Wessel, 'Talking About Consumption', *Cultural Dynamics*, 16/1 (July 1, 2004 2004), 93-116.

privately-developed apartment complexes for the middle classes and the elites all over Bangalore. Indeed, Bangalore is now characterised by a multitude of gated and guarded apartment complexes acting as safe compounds in a city of seeming chaos. For those who can afford it (and a wide range of price options are available), the retreat into a commercially-organised private zone seems an attractive means to escape the shortcomings of the municipality. This, in turn, undermines the idea of the public good itself. As predominantly richer-than-average citizens opt to forgo the struggle for public service and escape to the private field, the poorer masses can expect even less from local government because influential advocates are no longer there. With the success of the privately-managed apartment complexes, the state is both relieved of financial burdens and, at the same time, in danger of becoming redundant. As weak city management is undermined in the public eye due to its own inefficiency, the authority of the state at both local and national level is, ultimately, threatened. In both respects, there is a dramatic contrast between official proclamations of India's rise to superpower status and the reality of ineffective local administration.

The real estate boom and high level of demand for housing have driven Bangalore real estate prices to Mumbai levels and beyond, gradually displacing the old middle class and the poor from the city. Rising property values and changing residential patterns are an important sign of the rise of the new middle class in the city. These new residential arrangements, and the lifestyles they promote, are feeding into the creation of a hegemonic and homogenised middle class cultural style, built on globalised or hybrid imaginaries, as the names of various apartment complexes and their marketing campaigns testify (Palm Meadows, Venezia, Green Acres, Eden Gardens, etc.). Real estate advertisements emphasise their Western or global affinities, comparing life within these gated communities to that in Switzerland, California, or Scotland. They also provide privatised solutions to urban environmental degradation, such as full power backup systems (in case of power failure) and assured private water supply through tubewells, tanks and water filtration systems (in a context where most Bangalore localities receive municipal water for a few hours a day, if at all). Living in these globalised cocoons, the new middle class is partially shielded from the reality of urban life in Bangalore and so are not impelled to engage with the city's pressing environmental and urban problems (except when they drive out into the traffic). (C. Upadhyaya 2009a: 260)

In many respects, such as planning new 'layouts' or enforcing existing building codes, the administration is (or becomes) virtually invisible. The sovereignty of the city government, already weak to start with, is increasingly undermined by unenforceable legislation and the failure to provide basic necessities to its inhabitants. For most residents, some private initiative is needed to make up for the lack of public utilities, be it uninterrupted supply of electricity or the provision of tap water. Small wonder that the internationally renowned IT-enclaves function like islands in an ocean of mismanagement.

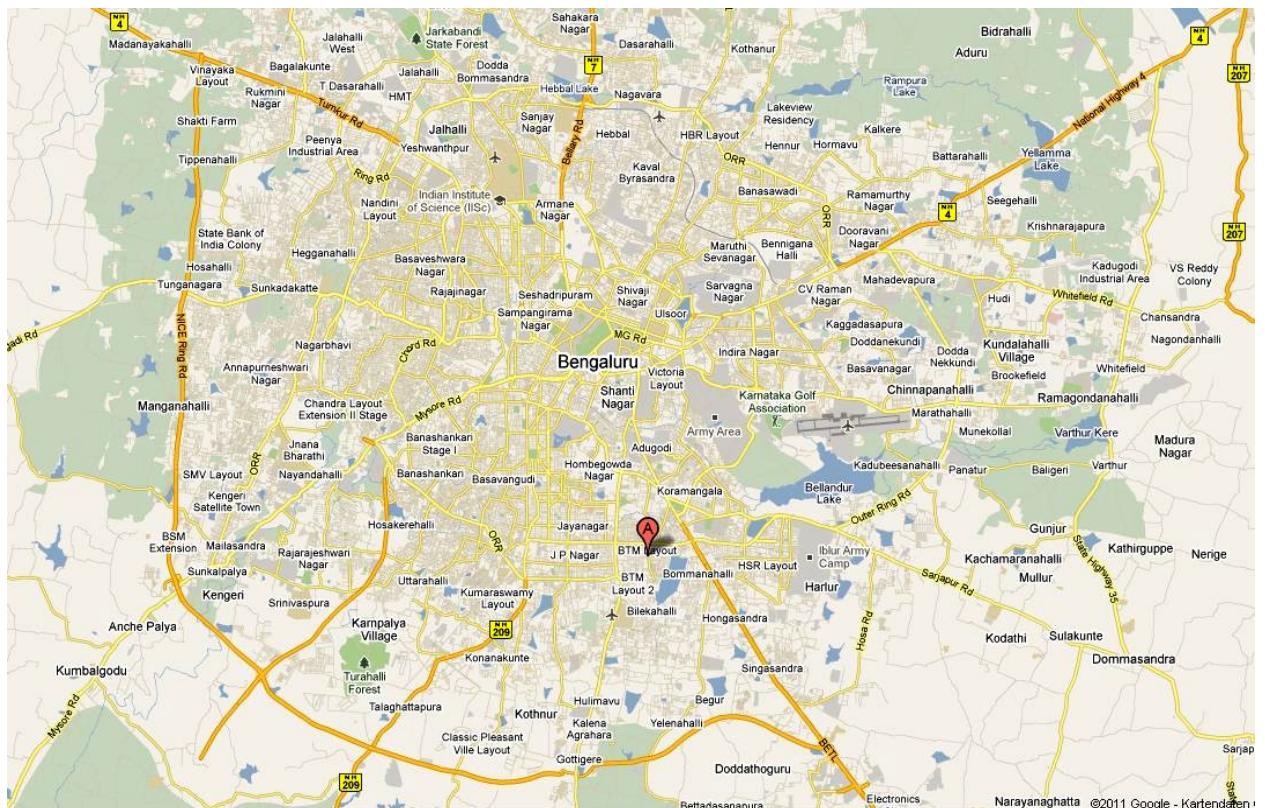
In response to and in stark contrast with the rest of the city's dearth of urban infrastructure such as water, electricity, sewers, roads, and parking, ITPL and Infosys City [Infosys campus within Electronic City] provide their own dedicated utility infrastructure including water, power, sewer, and telephone exchange, as well as such amenities as satellite communications; shuttle service; commercial space; and training, recreation, and entertainment facilities. (Audirac 2003: 22)

Both the apartment complexes and the tech parks are well-kept oasis in a city that appears ungovernable at times,¹⁶¹ and which in most cases lacks basic facilities. To what extent the rise of private industry and private organisation will influence the further development of the city will become more and more apparent in the years to come. For the moment, both worlds seem to coexist in nominally independent, but uneasily interconnected, parallels.

4.4. BTM Layout, Second Stage

4.4.1. The South-West in general, and BTM Layout in particular

Although there are IT companies spread all over Bangalore, most are concentrated in the south, with Electronic City as the main centre, and the west, with Whitefield and the former airport as agglomerations. As an effect of the IT boom, the economic centre of the city has shifted considerably to the south-west.



While a proposed IT corridor might never see the light of the day, the vicinity of Electronic City or Whitefield is already having an impact on the nearby suburbs. Areas such as Koramangala or BTM Layout are now preferred residences not only for IT workers from Bangalore itself, but increasingly for outsiders to the city. The effect is visible in the abundance of Paying Guest (PG) accommodation offered there, often to defined groups of customers.¹⁶² A place like BTM Layout, which has little to offer except

¹⁶¹ In many ways, the private life of IT employees (and the countless members of the middle classes who are emulating them) has come to mirror the spatial seclusion and organisational superiority of the tech parks where they work.

¹⁶² In advertisements for PGs and eateries, there are clear markers for the preferred clientele – such as “North Indian Veg” or

proximity to Hosur Road and hence to Electronic City, is now a highly sought-after destination for IT employees, mainly from outside Bangalore. As the Bangaloreans who work in IT are scattered around the whole of Bangalore, the concentration of non-Kannadigans is most marked here: While there are quite a few residents from the Southern states, the presence of North Indians is most visible in the number of places that cater for them. The whole area, already an established quarter, is partially taken over by newer developments; the newly-built gated apartment blocks, and attendant PGs and commercial buildings, are now surrounded by established family homes with small gardens. The outer ring road, which connects the area with Hosur Road to the east and Bannerghatta Road to the west, is literally dotted with office buildings, while the ‘hinterland’ is primarily residential. Within these inner residential areas, countless small establishments, from restaurants, barber shops, laundry services and the ubiquitous PGs, cater to the IT population, although the overall character of the area is not visibly changed.

4.4.1. The PG experience

During my research, I deliberately choose to stay in a PG that catered for IT employees, with the location proving ideal not only for the relative comfort, but also for its proximity to my research subjects. A brief description of this unique living environment is therefore appropriate.

The PG scheme has evolved gradually from modest beginnings to today’s growing popularity. As A. S. Sandhu describes it:

[The PG is]... a paying guest accommodation, [...] in which bachelors living in big cities away from their family can live with another family. What began as a relationship of people moving in to live with the family in return for a monthly payment for food and boarding, has transitioned to a situation in which the renter can rent a room by himself in dormitory-style housing, or can share a dormitory room with others. (Sandhu 2008: 38)

A PG, the most popular residential arrangement for IT engineers who are never sure how long they will remain on a project or in the city, has certain characteristics: As a hybrid between guesthouse and rented apartment, it provides facilities on a medium-term base, with a supposed minimum rental period of three months, but often a casual arrangement regarding the termination of the stay. In my case, a prior notice of one week was sufficient to leave the room without losing the deposit. Rooms are normally shared with one or two others, and bathrooms are attached or communal, according to the market position of the PG and, not least, the price. Rents can range from a rock-bottom INR1.500 per month, providing a bed in a basic dormitory, shared with at least five others, up to INR8.000,¹⁶³ where one can expect half of a self-contained double room, with air-conditioning, in a PG with amenities such as gym, eating hall or cinema. For INR3.500 to 4.000, it is realistic to expect a decent place on a double-sharing basis in one of Bangalore’s most popular IT suburbs, with a wide range of options above and

¹⁶³ “Andhra –Style Veg & NonVeg”.

¹⁶³ This particular example is taken from Hyderabad's Madhapur area, that is – due to the local price level and its proximity to the Hi-Tech City, considerably more costly than the PGs in Bangalore.

below this price.

The popularity of the PG scheme, which, according to my experience, is far more widespread for unmarried people than a shared apartment, tells of the short time horizons that prevail in IT. The main alternative, the privately rented apartment, shared between two to four people, would be considerably more economical, but the need to pay a deposit of up to ten months rent, long fixed-term contracts, and a generally low availability, make this option less attractive. Temporary arrangements, as in the PG scheme, are much better suited for the IT population, where employment fluctuations, short-notice postings to other sites and a generally high uncertainty in work-related matters are prevalent considerations. During my time in the PG in BTM Layout, there was a constant flux of occupants, with departures and replacements almost every week. In this regard, the PG system is a near-perfect adaptation to the flexibility demanded in IT, although it is equally clear that it creates an existence that is ill-suited to fixed settlement and family life. Not surprisingly, given this setting, most inhabitants of the (gender segregated) PGs were bachelors from their mid-20s to early 30s, with some older exceptions.¹⁶⁴

4.5. Summary

This chapter has attempted to give an outline of the Indian IT industry – from the social milieu of the new middle classes, to the social embeddedness of IT itself and, last but not least, to the living conditions of actual IT employees themselves. This has provided a necessary background to make more sense of the discussion in the empirical chapters to follow. Within the middle classes, caste is often portrayed as an unmentionable topic, although it is very clear that old hierarchies prevail and that caste is practised in private. The very term “middle class” already implies that criteria such as education and employment or consumption patterns matter more than birth, caste or family tradition. However, since every individual can invoke these criteria differently according to circumstances, the relation between middle-class and caste background is fluid and contextual. In certain professions the match between cultural traditions and the job specifications is conspicuously pronounced – so the affinity between the ‘intellectual’ work in the IT sector with the intellectual tradition of *Brahmins* – but even here the relationship is anything but straightforward. Any individual still has to invoke this affinity and it seems that those who would be in the position to do so, seem rather reluctant.

The (apparent) caste composition of the IT workforce needs to be seen against this backdrop. Since this is the most elite workforce in India (as far as the private sector is concerned) the caste composition could be seen as a benchmark for the economic power of certain caste groups, whereby the high representation of Hindu High Castes tells of continuity, while the concurrent overrepresentation of Christians hints at social change. Especially the high representation of Brahmins could point to the

¹⁶⁴ This should prevent an outright generalisation; the research took place amongst a certain segment of IT employees and the findings are therefore only relevant for this segment.

cultural affinity mentioned before. However, whether this connection is seen and how it is interpreted by the employees themselves is not known so far. The empirical chapters to come will therefore try to shed some light on this question although it is already clear that the issue is anything but unidimensional or unambiguous. Nevertheless, the question is worth a try and could best be observed in concrete, local settings – with Bangalore a prime example. This Indian city – the ideal-typical melting pot – is unique in its capacity to accommodate all manner of castes side-by-side. If Bangalore stands for the future of India – and there is reason to believe that it does – then it offers a valuable vantage point from which to view the future reinterpretation of caste in the national context.

5. The Research Projects

5.1. Introduction and methodological reflection¹⁶⁵

The empirical research for this PhD thesis has been undertaken through four interconnected projects, each using differing methodology. Given the constraints imposed by any such study, this represents neither the full extent of the necessary or desirable research, nor the most exhaustive coverage of the problems at hand. Nevertheless, the projects do provide valuable insights to validate the theoretical assumptions made earlier. Moreover, as the topic is a sensitive one in the Indian context, with some data hard to come by,¹⁶⁶ the research represents a pragmatic approach, orientated towards maximising coverage rather than following systematic text-book methods. One of the most urgent requirements – representative quantitative sampling of the caste composition of the IT industry's workforce – is, unfortunately, largely absent. In the current political climate, any investigation into the caste composition of IT's workforce could (and would) be used in political arguments for or against quota reservation in private industry. Hence, in order to forestall such debate, the IT industry is vigorously opposed to any research that could possibly trigger it.

For these reasons alone, the projects follow a methodologically eclectic but nevertheless triangulated approach (Karsten and Karen 2009), aimed at empirically assessing the issues discussed in the theoretical chapters. Although I originally planned to use more quantitative methods, due to lack of support and resources to conduct a quantitative survey on my own, the following is rather small-scale and almost exclusively qualitative. While this necessarily leaves some questions unanswerable, the completed research is still valuable: In the combination of mostly qualitative methods (with the exception of chpt. 7), the factual reality of caste in the Indian IT industry is assessed in different perspectives, providing a deeper and more complex picture. The following projects were conducted between March and November 2009:

5.1.1. Project 1: Interpreting the work environment in IT

The self-projected values of the IT industry, as indirectly assessed through the image presented in the training manuals of Infosys' Campus Connect initiative,¹⁶⁷ were balanced by interviews with IT managers with personnel responsibility,¹⁶⁸ and an ethnographic film project about work conditions in IT (Sonti 2006). The Campus Connect bridging programme is designed to provide a smooth transition for aspiring

¹⁶⁵ There is an expectation that PhD candidates in sociology should 'jump through the hoop' and deliver a lengthy methodological chapter. Since this is an established tradition, I will not completely break with it, however, this procedure will be kept to the bare minimum here. All methods used in this thesis are standard social-science methods and will be further discussed in the respective chapters.

¹⁶⁶ For the problems and difficulties of research in Indian IT, see Carol Upadhyay, 'Ethnographies of the Global Information Economy: Research Strategies and Methods', *Economic and Political Weekly*, 43/17 (2008), 64-72.

¹⁶⁷ <http://campusconnect.infosys.com/WhoWeAre.aspx>

¹⁶⁸ The interviews – four in total – are used to provide a context and have little stand-alone value. However, since they were conducted with one high-ranking HR manager and three soft skill trainers, they provide insights about the overarching concept of work values in IT.

college graduates seeking a career in IT, focussing on the skills necessary within the sector's prevalent work environment. In the last couple of years, tens of thousands of aspiring IT employees have undergone this training, and its significance should not be underestimated. Of particular relevance for the research at hand, the programme's training manuals offer an inside-view into the ethical and behavioural attitudes that are passed on to would-be IT employees. An exegesis of these manuals could provide a valuable self-image of IT's value system, although such an approach also has limitations. While my analysis offers an indirect assessment of some of IT's projected values, it is not a first-hand observation of empirical conditions in the workplace. In consequence, analysis of the manuals can only sketch out IT's idealised value system, without providing a richer picture of actual working conditions. However, in combination with the interviews, and in addition to the ethnographic film, this provides a starting point for the interviews in chapter six. And by adding greater detail to the general descriptions of value systems in the New Economy, this also further outlines the cultural changes expected of anyone joining an Indian IT company.

5.1.2. Project 2: The qualitative, semi-structured interviews

The social climate in the workplace, and employees' opinions about social and political topics, were accessed in heuristic, qualitative, semi-structured interviews. The basis for this approach was a study of a specific private-initiative affirmative action; the Special Training Programme (STP) (Murthy 2008). This programme aims at improving the employability of technical graduates from SC/ST backgrounds through a six-month-training-period and, afterwards, invites well-known IT companies to hire their alumni.

In total, 71 people were interviewed in the course of this project: 50 were participants of STP in its various forms, 14 were general employees (that is, mainly from Hindu High Caste background) and seven were senior-level employees. The interviews with the STP alumni, all of whom were asked the same questions, followed a fairly routine pattern: While discussion was encouraged, few respondents expressed opinions beyond merely replying to the questions posed. In stark contrast, the non-STP interviews were less formal and less centred on a pre-determined set of questions, with the same also being the case for the manager interviews. While most of the STP-related interviews took place in offices (either close to the respondent's workplace or in iiit-b¹⁶⁹) and were therefore more formal, some STP-related and most of the non-STP interviews were conducted in less formal, more personal settings.

While this research was mainly guided by the question of IT's social role in the reinterpretation of caste, other related subjects – such as women's empowerment, cultural change and societal fairness – were covered as well. The interviews allowed comparison between the views of IT employees from SC and ST background, on the one hand, and those from the so-called mainstream, that is, predominantly High Caste IT employees, on the other. By balancing the views of the STP trainees and alumni with interviews

¹⁶⁹ The International Institute for Information Technology Bangalore (iiit-b) acted as provider of the STP training sessions – and served as a meeting place for most of the STP-related interviews. <http://www.infosys.com/newsroom/press-releases/Pages/IIIT-B-improve-employability.aspx>

with ‘general category’ employees and managers, the project looked at social norms and the work environment in the industry, and how this connects to caste and other social background issues. The research, therefore, attempts to examine both sides of the issue: That is, how STP alumni described the social reality they face in their work environment, and how their views differ from the ones provided by the ‘general category’ employees. Altogether, this project provided a rare perspective from people of Low Caste or tribal background who are largely under-represented in the IT industry. The chapter also includes a timely analysis of a pioneering affirmative action initiative in praxis.

5.1.3. Project 3: The socio-psychological experiment

A socio-psychological experiment was conducted in Hyderabad that, although ultimately failing in its original intent, still provided valuable information. The experiment attempted to test the hypothesis that people would discriminate subconsciously against job applicants if their caste identity was known, using made-up IT job applicant CVs. The experiment itself was prepared and pre-tested in a large IT company in Hyderabad. It aimed to assess social preferences by asking participants to rate CVs that were exactly the same in terms of qualification, but which were from (fake) job applicants of different local origin and caste background (visible by their surnames and birthplace). The expectation was that people would subconsciously recognise each applicant’s social background and that any resultant prejudices would be evident in the way the applicant’s employability was then rated. However, although the design and the methodology did not work in the specific setting, and the project had to be abandoned, it nevertheless yielded some interesting results: First, that caste is not reducible to a *Brahmin*-SC/ST contrast; second, that caste status appears to be largely anonymous in the IT workplace; and, finally, that the level of knowledge about caste is very low amongst IT employees. It appears that caste surnames are – with a few salient exceptions – not recognisable by a majority of respondents, and that considerable confusion and ignorance surrounds the caste phenomenon amongst young IT employees. At the same time, an overrepresentation of Hindu High Castes and some religious minorities was revealed, even in the limited sample of the pre-tests conducted.

5.1.4. Project 4: Balancing the research with participant observations

The three formal projects are, finally, complemented by participant observation. While staying in a paying guest house (PG) in the BTM layout in Bangalore from March-June and August-November 2009, I had regular social contact with IT or (to a much lesser extent) ITES employees. On a number of occasions, over a shared lunch or tea, in the gym, in an eatery, or simply by hanging out in the PG, it was possible to observe not only the proclaimed attitudes to caste, but also the lived reality of this phenomenon. And, because the other projects mainly took place on company premises, or were otherwise concentrated on the work environment, this informal observation (discussed in chpt. 8) provided a necessary balance to the insights of the formal research projects. As this ‘quasi-ethnographic’ approach was more concerned with private matters, it highlighted a number of issues that had proved

difficult to evaluate previously. Especially since some of the factors that constitute caste are neither openly narrated nor consciously experienced, the position of an outside observer is fundamentally necessary to balance the personal accounts given in the formal projects. Without the insights gained by this method, the research would have taken a different direction and its value potentially eroded.

5.1.5. Reflection upon methodological shortcomings – outlook

All methods used in sociological research have, of course, their specific advantages and disadvantages. In the case of this particular project, there are a number of instances where the research could have yielded improved results. Some critical reflection is therefore important.

First of all, this research is not validated by any statistically representative form of data. No reliable data set about the caste composition of the Indian IT industry is available and this project has done nothing to fill this gap. As stated before, the quantitative aspect of my research project was not particularly welcome to the industry representatives I had contact with, and not all proposed projects found approval and support. The projects that were supported are, therefore, more qualitative than quantitative – with the exception of the planned experiment – and thus lack statistical validity. A (partially) relevant objection to the research is that it is overly subjective and thus lacking in objectivity. Since this is a problem common to all qualitative social science methods, this cannot be fully rebutted. However, there are three main lines of argument to address this objection: First, in all the interviews, the subject of caste was addressed as neutrally as possible. People from both sides of the reservation controversy were interviewed and I was always concerned to maintain the perspective of a neutral observer. The person of the interviewer is, of course, influential in all interviews, but I consciously tried to keep this influence neutral in respect of the main subject of caste. Second, the sources used as the basis for my analysis of the relevant situation in IT – the training material, the participant observations and even the pre-test for the experiment – are openly available to other researchers' interpretation. Of course, any such interpretation would be differently nuanced, but I doubt that it would come to vastly different conclusions. Third, the research projects are internally balanced by the triangulation of different methods. As so many fundamentally different methods were employed in this research, the convergence of all somewhat neutralises the shortcoming of each. As far as qualitative methods are concerned, this is the best available control mechanism to limit (if not fully exclude) the deficiencies of a single method.

Interestingly, the method of the socio-psychological experiment failed in the context of this research: It was both too narrow to include the complexity of caste and too specific for this setting. As an experiment always aims to control all variables except the one under examination, the design proved unsuitable in a context where the setting was unfamiliar and the variables difficult to manipulate. Similarly, the complexity of caste was not reducible to the distinction between *Brahmin* on the one hand and SC or ST on the other; nor did the participants' knowledge of caste-related matters prove to be

sufficient to validate the experiment. As a result, in its essential conditions and its intrinsic methodological narrowness, this experiment proved unviable.

At the same time, however, an interesting contrast emerged between the results of the interviews and the participant observations. While the meaning of caste was regularly underplayed in the interviews, the importance of caste proved much more salient in the informal observations. However, although methodological purists might object, this is not a real contrast resulting from the methods used, but rather an example of complementary symbiosis. The interviews, directed at caste in the workplace, obviously produced different results from participant observations, made in the living quarters of IT employees. In this particular case, the use of different methodologies proved advantageous to the overall research; neither single project came close to the complexity of caste within IT, but the combination of all provided a multidimensional picture that is elaborated and internally triangulated.

Apart from the specific methodology, there are other reasonable objections to this particular approach. This research does not cover the IT industry in all its complexity. Rather, it relies on a non-randomly selected sample and makes no claim towards representativeness. In particular, the selection of the interviewees (see chpt. 6) are biased by my focus on the STP project – therefore, many more SC/ST members are represented than indicated by their representation in the IT workforce. In addition, I was unable to recruit women outside the STP sample. This does not render the interviews meaningless, but it does prohibit overly broad generalisations about the whole IT workforce. With that caveat in mind, and without claim to representativeness, a number of the interviewees reported the same opinion and – with few exceptions – the interviewees could be classified in categories. Thus, while the research does not attempt to quantify these categories, it is doubtful if a bigger, more representative sample would have resulted in a very different pattern of results. The problem of underrepresentation of women still persists, but since a male researcher would always be faced with this problem in these cultural circumstances, a solution would have to be left to a female researcher.

Linked to the problem of selective sampling is one that relates to the diversity of the IT industry. The research was enabled to a large degree by the generosity of Infosys and its representatives, and for this reason alone is not representative of the rest of the industry. Infosys itself is an elite and therefore rather exceptional company, a hallmark of transparency and openness and – especially in the Indian context – an active agent for the modernisation of Indian society (Dasgupta 2008, 2009).¹⁷⁰ Without the support of

¹⁷⁰ Compare the statement of Infosys on <http://www.infosys.com/about/who-we-are/Pages/index.aspx> - accessed 03.02.2011:
Vision: "To be a globally respected corporation that provides best-of-breed business solutions, leveraging technology, delivered by best-in-class people."
Mission: "To achieve our objectives in an environment of fairness, honesty, and courtesy towards our clients, employees, vendors and society at large."
Values: We believe that the softest pillow is a clear conscience. The values that drive us underscore our commitment to:
Customer Delight: To surpass customer expectations consistently
Leadership by Example: To set standards in our business and transactions and be an exemplar for the industry and ourselves
Integrity and Transparency: To be ethical, sincere and open in all our transactions
Fairness: To be objective and transaction-oriented, and thereby earn trust and respect
Pursuit of Excellence: To strive relentlessly, constantly improve ourselves, our teams, our services and products to become the best

Infosys the whole research would have taken a different direction. Furthermore, the STP sample, in particular, represents a somewhat elite selection of people who work in Bangalore's best known IT companies. In order to balance this, the recruitment of the non-STP sample was done independently of Infosys – although I would still concede that the sample in total is biased towards the upper end of the IT workforce. This could imply that conditions are different in smaller and less well-known IT companies; however, as this research is deliberately directed at a socio-economic avant-garde, this does not provide a fundamental objection to the questions asked. Rather, it once again confirms the direction of the research agenda by concentrating on those who are now considered an elite role model simply because they are the potential vanguard of India's future direction of development.

Finally, a more fundamental problem could be seen in the perspective on caste that the author displayed in the first chapters of this thesis. Guided by a particular – decisively unorthodox – perspective on caste, it could be assumed that certain, more traditional aspects of caste are under-researched or simply ignored. There are, indeed, some indications of this: The research is not so much centred on the ritual or religious aspects of caste but, rather, is more concerned with the social practices and consequences of this institution. Furthermore, by researching only in a particular sector of society, neither covering the totality of caste relations in a given locality nor all the aspects of caste in the lifecycle of an individual or social group, it offers a limited perspective on caste. Truth be told, this is very likely the most valuable objection to the findings of this research. The scope is indeed limited by the focus on the IT industry and the reliance on (mainly) young IT engineers living separately from their families. It therefore offers only a glimpse of the contemporary practise of caste in a limited context. The only claim this thesis makes, then, is that this narrow glimpse, this very particular perspective on caste, is indeed valuable for an understanding of this institution in a rapidly modernising society.

5.2. ‘Soft Skills’ training

One of the main obstacles to becoming an IT employee is not so much the lack of technical qualifications but, rather, the need to adapt to the new work culture. The IT industry offers a unique work environment (see chpt. 4) and for young graduates this represents something of a hurdle. (As indicated in the interview analysis in chapter six, the judgement by recruiters about one's cultural ability to fit in was often the most difficult test.) Consequently, literally thousands of aspiring IT job candidates with sufficient technical qualifications fail to pass the job interview – mainly because selection is based on communication skills, with technical qualifications taken for granted.¹⁷¹ The importance of communication skills, often overlooked in more traditional economist analysis, is itself a result of the much greater emphasis on the role of the single employee in group discussions and group decisions in the New Economy workplace (see 4.2.3). Investigating the cultural adaptation process, both with a perspective on modernisation in Indian society as a whole and the significance that this process holds for the practice of caste, is therefore worthwhile

As important as communication (or ‘soft’) skills are to the IT industry, empirical research into the subject is not unproblematic, even if it is met with much less resistance than, say, quantitative research. The training sessions are regarded as confidential, the materials protected by copyrights, and participants restricted in divulging details. Thus, even though direct observation would have been the ideal, I was never in the fortunate position of being able to attend one of the training sessions in person. While not having the opportunity to observe the training (and, perhaps more importantly, the reaction of the participants) is regrettable, given the constraints on the research the only practicable alternative was to use the available sources to the maximum, even if some aspects could not be fully covered. For example, the NIAS ethnographic film project (Sonti 2006) offered a behind-the-scenes view of team-building training within two companies, including interviews with the actual soft skills trainer. In my own research, I also had the chance to interview one senior HR manager of a well-known IT company and three of the trainers who taught soft skills and language proficiency courses within the STP programme in Hyderabad. Additionally, the training material of the Campus Connect initiative was made available to me. These manuals, the main source of this chapter, proved invaluable because they outlined not only the tasks of the training itself, but also the ideas behind it. With this range of sources, it was at least possible to reconstruct the broad details of the training.

The following analysis is therefore based mainly on the printed training material, downloadable from the Campus Connect website. It comes in five parts: “Adapting to Corporate Life”(CampusConnect [2009]-d), “The Art of Communication”([2009]-b), “Discussions, decisions and presentations”([2009]-c), “In the world of teams”([2009]-e), and “The hidden data of communication”([2009]-a). Each manual provides the outline of a full-day-training schedule. While these manuals have little to say about how students

¹⁷¹ In most cases, those selected for a job interview have already cleared the tests on technical qualifications.

themselves react to the IT culture, they nevertheless offer a tremendous opportunity to analyse the IT industry's projected self-image.¹⁷² Further, the manuals include rules and guidelines with far-reaching implications for personal behaviour in a company, with the tacit understanding that these rules have generalised validity. Of course, the manuals do not offer a complete view of the industry's ethos, and have no stated intent beyond being a guide to a career in India's IT sector. Nevertheless, the manuals cannot be viewed independently from their societal background, and they often seem aware of this connection. In the discussion of ethical dilemmas (CampusConnect [2009]-d: 1.11), in particular, the scenarios are not orientated exclusively to the business world, but are applicable to wider social contexts.

5.2.1. The manuals at first glance

Broadly speaking, the manuals appear to be somewhat generic, as if taken from a (Western) standard template and only superficially adapted to the Indian context. Regional or cultural characteristics are neither mentioned nor discussed and there is no specific link to the Indian situation. The author of the manuals remains anonymous and his or her intentions can only be guessed. Nevertheless, the very construction of the manuals reflects IT's loose connection with Indian society, and the industry's cultural orientation to the globalised business environment, based on a superficial adaptation of Western concepts. Importantly, the main challenge is not mentioned – that is, the transcultural transferal of a business concept based on a primarily egalitarian rationality into a society that is steeped in notions of hierarchy. Moreover, with its unspoken assumption that the value system can be transferred without major obstacles or cultural resistance, the author(s) of the manuals either ignore the problem or assume it will be resolved effortlessly. No background is given about the history or special situation of IT in India, and the specifics of the corporate model are not explained. It is taken for granted that young employees will simply accept the new value system and that the only thing they have to learn is how to seamlessly adapt. Not surprisingly, the manuals' rules and guidelines are projected in such a way that they appear mere common sense, without alternatives. It seems to be assumed that most participants would be overwhelmed by any background discussion of corporate culture, and thus the path of least resistance seems to have been chosen to avoid controversial topics altogether.

Given the degree of adaptation and reorientation expected of the participants, the absence of any background information could be interpreted as an authoritarian assault on the value system of participants; that is, it appears to disregard the participants' cultural circumstances, even if no direct challenge to individual values is posed. Although the IT boom and the cultural changes within its workforce are cause for cultural friction within and outside the industry (C. Upadhyा 2009b), these manuals promote a strategy of side-stepping the discussion entirely. On the other hand, since IT regards itself as an engine of reform and is therefore motivated by a certain sense of a mission, it is possible that

¹⁷² The ethnographic films cover some soft skill training and seem to indicate that the employees' reaction is often lethargic, but not motivated by resistance or hostility. *Coding Culture: A Set of Three Documentary Films on the It Industry in Bangalore* (2006), Gautam Sonti (dir.).

most of the cultural changes expected of the trainees are simply seen as natural and therefore taken for granted. The extent to which this cultural transmission is either deliberately hidden or, by contrast, seen as a natural adjustment process without any alternatives, is an issue worthy of further analysis.

5.2.2. The actual recommendations of the manuals

The strategy of avoiding areas of controversy is obvious throughout the manuals. Instead of discussing the participants' own situation, a 'blank slate' approach is adopted, even if it is tacitly assumed that people start from very different cultural backgrounds. The manuals are, of course, not explicit about things that are merely presupposed. English, for example, is taught in specifically designated training sessions. However, while English is not explicitly discussed here, the importance of the language was established in all four relevant interviews:

We had oriented the students to English usage in a typical industry [...] Communicational skills that are required for their role that they are going to play in the industry. It is not about grammar, it is not about how good my vocabulary strength is, but business communication: How do I interact with the team, with the client, with the manager, mail etiquettes, telephone etiquettes... (0521M002)

The manual on corporate life, for example, appears to be aware of the cultural differences within Indian society, but tries to ignore them, or better yet, downplay them and merge them into a new 'corporate' value system:

We all live in different communities and are born into different cultures, which are often reflected in the clothing that we wear. When you go outside your community or culture group, others may identify you as being different. A business or organization is a "culture" in itself. When you work for that organization, you become part of that culture. When you are a member of that "culture", you are expected to reflect the values of that organization. (CampusConnect [2009]-d: 1.1)

The first and most obvious manifestation of this corporate culture is in the dress-code and the appearance of the employees. Correspondingly, considerable effort is put into establishing standards of personal grooming and dress. The expectations seem to be at the lower end of the social spectrum, with the guidelines including advice on bathing or showering before going to a job interview (including the rule that nails and hands should be clean) (CampusConnect [2009]-d: 1.3). As IT engineers could come from diverse backgrounds, with IT assumed to be a vehicle for social mobility, it seems necessary to be explicit about bodily hygiene and basic dress codes. However, it does not end with this. Adapting to a corporate culture in this context means adapting to formal Western or formal Indian fashion and eschewing anything that could be seen as too casual or too sexually charged. Clear and explicit guidelines are given for formal business, informal business and casual wear, with the emphasis always on the modest, conservative side.

Furthermore, the remodelling of aspiring IT employees does not only involve implicit and explicit compliance to a business dress code or with hygienic standards. Guidelines also detail how to behave in

typical work-related situations, with special attention on potential *faux pas* and embarrassment. In this context, most guidelines appear generic and could have originated anywhere in a global business culture. No specific Indian cultural codes are addressed nor are specific Indian habits, like eating without cutlery, even mentioned. The cultural origins of the recommended/requested practices can only be indirectly inferred – for example, when table manners and dining etiquette are discussed. Without much adaptation to the Indian context, different dietary requirements are ignored and the consumption of meat is taken for granted. While this is questionable even in a Western context, it seems even more inappropriate with regard to the prevailing High Caste background of the contemporary IT workforce (see 4.1.4), large sections of which are traditionally restricted to a vegetarian diet. Nevertheless, potential differences in caste background do not feature at all, with controversial cultural differences with regard to food being avoided by the adaptation of Western culinary rules. It seems that belonging to the corporate environment involves the acceptance of Western food habits, and the preferences and tastes that come with it.

Q: What if I order from the menu but am served the wrong thing?

A: If it's a big mistake, you can discreetly mention this to the server immediately so that it can be corrected. If the error is small [...] ignore it. Fussing over food can make you look childish, finicky and concerned with the wrong things (no assets in a job candidate). Your goal is to appear gracious.

Q: What is appropriate to order for dinner?

A: Simple foods that are easily eaten with a fork and a knife (meats, simple salads and soups). Avoid spaghetti or other things with red sauce, huge deli sandwiches, greasy hand-held items like pizzas, and gassy food like beans, broccoli or cauliflower. Sometimes you may not have a choice. Follow your host's lead. (CampusConnect [2009]-d)

Two striking characteristics seem to be the common thread of these dining rules; a disregard for Indian food and an unquestioned assimilation of a formal Western style. Perhaps unintentionally, the manuals reveal the power disparity in the relationship between the cultures in question; one provides the example to be followed, with the other not even mentioned.

Apart from guidelines concerning dress and Western eating etiquette, the manuals have more general rules of behaviour that are perhaps the most interesting for this analysis. Under the heading "Dealing with people", a set of attitudes is fostered that creates an overall picture of idealised social interaction in the globalised India. By assuming the complete domination of market forces – *a-priori* to this kind of corporate ideology – a view of humanity and personal conduct naturally follows. The most general rule can be summarised in the guideline 'be considerate to anyone regardless of position or personal standing' and is explicitly rationalised by the ever-changing work environment and the hidden power of subordinates to influence decisions. As the manual explains:

In these days of rapid advancement through technology, it is very possible that a salesman who was a nuisance becomes an important client, or an administrative assistant becomes a manager. Mergers and

acquisitions can cause a former competitor to become a co-worker.

This can make things awkward if you treat people differently depending on their “corporate standing.” If you show respect and courtesy to everyone, regardless of position or company, you avoid discomfort or damaging your chances in any unexpected turn of events. (CampusConnect [2009]-d: 35)

Needless to say, this is an almost complete reversal of traditional Indian ethics, where prestige, social standing and economic abilities are often instantly ranked into a form of hierarchy, and persons are treated very differently according to their assigned position (cf. chpt. 8). As much idealised as this might be, it is nothing less than an abrupt and open refusal to accept prevailing Indian social conditions and to live instead by the unwritten rules of globalised – or rather Westernised – business norms. Politically, it represents a clear departure from the submissive role that was expected from corporations under the *licence raj*; the corporation here is not subordinated to a national project or culture, but rather defines the cultural forms of the future according to its own needs and concepts. In terms of business ethics, it is an attempt to establish a pure form of performance-driven rationality that ignores all forms of social interference and is unreceptive to corruption or political intervention.

In terms of work ethics, this is not much of a surprise: In most Western countries, the IT industry also consistently acts as a pioneer in new work management models, based on mature, empowered employees. Employees are not seen as mere recipients for orders but as valuable assets, with the ability to contribute on an equal footing even if status and competency differences persist. The adaptation process in the Indian context is therefore quite a challenge and needs its symbolic expression as a break with the past. Perhaps the most striking symbol of this cultural shift is revealed in the abolition of the Sir/Madam salutation, replaced by the simple use of first names. According to the soft skill trainers interviewed, parents of IT employees are startled when they get to know about first name usage, with most trainees quite hesitant about it at first. But the change is much more comprehensive than that: The whole concept of hierarchy needs to be reworked and the position of superiors defined anew. As the manual explains:

The only thing you owe your boss, above and beyond what you owe peers and subordinates, is more information. Very quietly, be sure he or she knows what you're doing, is alerted as early as possible to issues that may arise, and is aware of outcomes and milestones. Your boss should never be surprised.
(CampusConnect [2009]-d: 1.8)

The boss is, according to this work philosophy, much less distant to the employee and much more dependent on the information flow towards him/her. If the power differential became too great, this valuable information flow could be impaired or biased by the need to please superiors. In order to prevent this, subordinates need to be empowered to state their position (relatively) unimpeded.

In terms of a unified corporate culture, and as a way of facilitating team-based decisions, all levels of the organisation have to be in sync with the goals and objectives of the corporation. As the training programme says:

If the lowest echelons of the workforce each become trained in understanding the company's objectives and work practices through group decision making, then each will be better able to solve work-related problems in general. (CampusConnect [2009]-c: 1.1)

When decisions are taken at the "lowest echelon" and in the form of group discussion, the role of the individual employee is both empowered and disempowered by the necessity to integrate into the group. For the company, this provides advantages that are economically relevant. In the euphemised words of the training manual:

The group provides an environment where the individual's level of responsibility and authority is enhanced, and where accountability is shared: thus providing a perfect motivator through enhanced self-esteem coupled with low stress. (CampusConnect [2009]-c: 1.1)

Here, the contrast is perhaps greatest to the observed situation with regard to work satisfaction (see 6.5.1). While the training tells of the advantages of the new work philosophy, the obvious downsides (see 4.2.3) are naturally ignored or denied. In everyday practice, this model is much more likely to lead to greater social pressure from the group on individual team members, with stress levels only elevated by the increased responsibility.

This again points to the radically different work environment in IT, based on a value system that could be unclear or challenging for young trainees from diverse backgrounds. In order to provide guidelines, some examples of ethical dilemmas are discussed, with the underlying ideals obviously exposed. Of course, as expected in a discussion of ethical dilemmas, the need to act ethically in business situations, no matter how disadvantageous it might be in the short term, is emphasised. Interestingly, though, no justifications for ethical behaviour are given, with references to law and religion only mentioned in passing. The examples for ethical dilemmas, to be discussed by the trainees, are generic, and are presented in the form of short, de-contextualised descriptions of situations with value conflicts:

Leena is head of the quality control division of a company that prides itself on its merit-based pay system. One of Leena's Sr. Quality Control Engineers, Aftab, has done a tremendous job all year round, and has saved the company from many embarrassing situations; he really deserves recognition. But Aftab is already at the top of the salary range for his job grade. The company has too many people in the grade above him, and so he cannot be promoted either. What should Leena do? (CampusConnect [2009]-d: 45)

Apart from the names, which appear to be adapted to the Indian context, this situation is unrelated to specific Indian conflicts; indeed, none of the eight examples covers anything remotely resembling a typical Indian problem. Most of the portrayed situations are de-contextualised and could happen in any business in the world, such as the personal use of company's resources. When culture-sensitive values are concerned, they are not taken from an Indian context, and must seem rather strange to Indian college students – for example, when asked to discuss the conflict between fundamental Christian belief systems and the rights of homosexuals. Even the highly controversial topic of affirmative action is situated in London and revolves around the question of whether someone with limited command of

English deserves to be employed because his ethnic origin (first generation Punjabi) qualifies him for preferential treatment under company's policies. In this way, the manual avoids controversies by only discussing topics with no emotional connection to the trainees. While this clearly loses out in relevance, it avoids alienating those who might be offended by topics that are personally relevant and emotionally disturbing.

For most participants, the remaining examples are therefore nothing more than strange and somewhat distant scenarios without much connection to their own lives. However, this seems to be the price to pay if this exercise in ethics is to avoid a personalised and potentially damaging debate about more relevant issues. Nevertheless, this more abstract approach to ethical problems does in fact create opportunities for an open debate – something that is not taken for granted. At first glance, any position could be taken in the debates (which are indeed encouraged), and no preferences are given that would hint at the underlying rationale of the exercise. Furthermore, the seemingly non-controversial nature of this particular example is deceiving: The very idea of discussing ethical dilemmas with young, aspiring graduates in technical subjects is entirely novel, and contrasts dramatically with established methods, where individuals are almost never faced with decisions like these. These ethical discussions, then, are clearly in sync with IT's role in the modernisation of India.¹⁷³ The fact that the trainees are deliberately taught to be aware of ethical dilemmas points towards their greater autonomy in the workplace. The design of these dilemmas, where different positions are encouraged and no final answer is even envisaged, goes against the grain of authoritarian and non-reflective ethical systems.

In sum, the ethical discussions are a clear departure from Indian traditions. Not surprisingly, they also portray the company as ideal and above human fallibility. As no business objectives are discussed, it appears as if the sole aim of the particular company is to conduct an ethically oriented project for the best of mankind. Infosys' slogan “powered by intellect – driven by values”, in addition to the countless social initiatives that its leaders are engaged in, all point to the same image projected by India's IT industry: To be more than an economically oriented sector like any other, but rather an active pioneer for a better future India.¹⁷⁴ And although this stance is highly idealised and might not match reality – the Satyam example is a warning example¹⁷⁵ – it is a clear and open challenge to the established way of doing business in India. The audacious manner in which a hitherto alien and disconcerting vision of society has been abruptly thrust into a society following different, and often opposing, cultural traditions, tells of IT's powerful presence and sense of mission.

5.2.3. Interpretation: The ideas behind the manuals

Working within the New Economy carries a number of consequences for those opting to join. Former

¹⁷³ Compare the role of reflexivity in modernity in chapter 2.1.6.

¹⁷⁴ Compare: Murthy, *A Better India - a Better World*.

¹⁷⁵ The revelation on 7 January 2009 that Satyam Computer Services Ltd had continuously and over many years fraudulently inflated its balance sheet greatly damaged the reputation of India's IT sector. It highlighted the fact that this sector is not immune to incompetence or fraudulent practices.

management duties, like the calculation of work schedules, the allocation of tasks and the responsibility for timely project conclusions, are transferred to the group level, while controls are installed in the form of shared group responsibility and peer monitoring. In the case of conflicts, the fault lines are within the group and confrontations are most likely kept at this level without being referred to higher management. With this in mind, the stated enhancement of self-esteem and low stress levels turn out to be the opposite: High stress levels are often quoted as typical for a job in IT (C. Upadhyay and Vasavi 2006), and potentially difficult group dynamics are not necessarily beneficial for the employees' self-esteem. Rather, a high level of confidence is an essential prerequisite for survival in this environment. For exactly this reason, the soft skill training – large parts of which are aimed at encouraging higher confidence levels – is conducted before the graduates join the companies.

The training programme anticipates and pre-empts the socialisation process that is necessary to adapt to this environment. It aims at cushioning the shock that may result from the sudden change of the cultural reference system. The work environment in IT, with its reliance on project-based, often short-lived team assignments, requires an openness and flexibility that cannot be expected of average college graduates. Therefore, the whole team-building process, facilitated by shared problem-solving tasks under the guidance of the trainer, is essentially a socialisation process for a work environment in which interaction with unknown persons is the norm rather than the exception. Furthermore, it is deliberately meant as a means to smother cultural discrepancies and to enable communication flows between people from diverse backgrounds. A great deal of effort is put into teaching strategies that avoid embarrassment and conflict – literally by inculcating compassionate, reciprocal and goal-oriented communication techniques. While in most Western countries a baseline of cultural homogeneity and behavioural standards can be expected of job candidates, the culturally diverse landscape in India, and the often dismal education system, means very low initial levels of behavioural homogeneity are likely. As already observed in the manual on expectations in the corporate world, standards are established here that elsewhere would be considered part of (early) childhood education under ideal circumstances. And while the diverse profile of job candidates might pose a challenge for the soft skill trainers, it is symbolic of the social mobility fostered by the IT boom. Moreover, while the modernisation process in the training is a truncated and necessarily incomplete, it is nevertheless a dramatic adaptation to modernity (cf. chpt. 2).

As was expected from the outset, the whole design of the manual rests upon an implicit ideal of meritocracy that, while not directly addressed in the training, is in keeping with the IT industry's role in pioneering new ethical and remuneration models (cf. 4.2.2.3 and 4.2.3). In the words of the HR manager interviewed:

[...] as I said, we live in competition, we need meritocracy, we are competing no longer with our neighbourhood companies, we are competing with global companies – so it becomes important that we raise the bar of whatever we are and not lower the bar. (0521M002)

Meritocracy, in its Indian version and in the Indian context, is a clear challenge to both the informal,

family-based model of the informal economy – where personal connections trump expertise and performance – and the bureaucratic model of the public sector – where political considerations, cronyism and alliances based on social identity all too often override the performance principle. But in this unquestioned acquisition of foreign concepts lies the danger of glossing over the deeper, more structural deficiencies that stand in the way of any smooth transition to a post-traditional ‘modern’ world.

The projected ideal of ‘meritocracy’, that which underlies the training programme, rests on the ideal foundation of fairness and openness. It also – wittingly or unwittingly – assumes that everyone has had the same access to education, otherwise fairness would be severely impaired. In the Indian context, where the opportunities for a decent education are unequally distributed amongst the population, this ideal can only be maintained if contradictory or disturbing elements are ignored or declared irrelevant. In a society where cronyism, corruption and unequal access to education is a lived reality, the mere invoking of meritocracy will not change entrenched social divisions; access to education would still be the domain of the select few. For all its good intentions, an unfettered meritocratic concept in the Indian context could actually harden existing inequalities and thereby undermine the fairness and openness that it proclaims to promote.

5.2.4. The issue of Caste in the training manuals

Not surprisingly, the word caste does not figure in any of the training materials. It is not quite an elephant in the room, but it is remarkable that an issue that is so closely connected to the cultural background of the trainees is not discussed at all. The reason can only be seen in a conscious avoidance of any discussion of caste by the leaders of the IT sector:

The day you apply to Infosys or any other IT organisation, you will be asked to fill the company’s profile form for recruitment. There is nowhere where you need to state which caste you belong to or which sub-caste – so that is the first indication. When companies are looking for talent like Infosys, we are interested in meritocracy, we are interested in the quality of competence that one possesses – that is the first indication. Second, once that guy is in or during the time of test or interview, there is nowhere any trace or any indication of where are you from; which part, what sub-caste, what is your background, background in terms of caste. (0521M002)

For this reason, and unfortunately so, the training leaves aside the most interesting topics for this research project. By taking this exercise in ethics to a very abstract level, the training steers clear of the heated controversy surrounding caste reservations, women rights or the changing relations between individuals and families. Knowingly or not, the soft skills training process appears virtually neutral within the Indian cultural field.

If caste has an influence – on entering the workforce or surviving/thriving within it – then it is more indirect. For example, possessing a self-confident personality, crucial for passing job interviews, might be

differently spread in socio-cultural communities. The STP training in particular expends much time and effort on raising self confidence amongst SC and ST trainees who have historically been at the bottom of the social hierarchy. As socio-economic conditions in India are still connected to caste status, it is only logical to expect caste-based differences in the level of confidence. For these reasons alone, finding the necessary self-confidence is unlikely amongst those who grew up under wretched conditions and with the tacit or explicit knowledge that they are inferior to the rest of society. This stigma, still attached to those who are in the double bind of low social prestige and precarious economic conditions, is without doubt a hindrance to developing the kind of personality expected in IT. When following this line of argument, the rural-urban divide, often employed in official IT narratives,¹⁷⁶ can then be analysed, to an extent, in caste terms. In urban conditions, where caste-related subjugation and the knowledge about one's caste status is much less common and relevant than in rural areas, those from Lower Castes might well be untainted by the stigma of their social origin. By contrast, in rural areas, where the knowledge of caste membership is still prevalent, the stigma is felt and could easily be reflected in the personality of job applicants.

One different, albeit closely related, line of argument is that concerning the need for openness to Western influences – something that is not caste- or community-neutral either. Not entirely accidentally, the groups overrepresented in the work force – Christians and Hindu Upper Castes, notably *Brahmins* (see 4.2.4) – are the ones that are most open to the cultural influence of the West. However, the approach to Westernisation is different for these two main groups: The influence is most direct with Christians, who are integrated in a religion that is, at least from an Indian perspective, globalised under Western leadership.¹⁷⁷ How integrated the contact to the West is in the individual's biography depends on the personal or family history of conversion, which could have happened in the person's own lifetime, or have occurred generations or, in some cases at least, millennia ago.¹⁷⁸ Hence, Indian Christians' openness to the West is considerably stronger than the Indian average, and their strong representation in IT is not surprising. On the other hand, the openness of Higher Castes and especially *Brahmins*, while differently nuanced and motivated, shows the same general patterns. Since the upper echelons of India's Hindu population are generally the best educated and therefore the most exposed to cultural influences from abroad, they might spearhead India's opening towards the West in cultural terms. Attracted by the economic success and the globally advertised cultural example of the United States, the elite of Hindu India seems to be quite open to Western values or, at least, partial adaptations of it.

This, though, is not always the case, and rejection of the new work culture and its attached values is not unconnected to the cultural background of those who oppose it. According to the interviews with the

¹⁷⁶ A good number of official initiatives by the IT and ITES industry are directed at rural development and the bridging of the rural/urban divide, thereby evading the price and wage inflation in India's cities. See: Nasscom, 'Indian It/Ites Industry: Impacting Economy and Society 2007-08', (New Delhi: NASSCOM Deloitte, 2008).

¹⁷⁷ Christianity has a long tradition in India, dating back almost 2000 years, but is still perceived as a Western religion by most Indians, hence the rejection by Hindu fundamentalists. See Anurag Pandey, 'Communalism and Separatism in India', *Journal of Asian and African Studies*, 42/6 (2007), 533-49.

¹⁷⁸ As Christian missionary work in India is in most cases connected with the offer and encouragement of education at all levels, social mobility is high amongst Christians and a certain appreciation of Western culture or parts of it can be expected.

STP trainers in Hyderabad, there had been one very significant instant of refusal to adopt the Westernised work patterns: A cohort of urban Hyderabad Muslims, who took pride in their heritage as the inheritors of the Nizam culture, openly refused to acquiesce to what they perceived as cultural colonialisation on Western terms. In their insistence on the separation between men and women, the adherence to conservative Islamic dress-codes, including *burqa* for women and long beards for men, and the obvious contempt for Western cultural influences, they were the only obvious example of a group deliberately unable and unwilling to fit into the cultural environment of IT. As followers of a self-aware culture that sees itself in conflict with Western notions of modernity, their refusal can – if it is generalisable – be taken as an explanation for the significant under-representation of Muslims in the IT workforce. Furthermore, this example perhaps indicates that the relatively smooth adaptation process of most other socio-cultural groups is grounded in the fundamental openness of those cultures and religions that predominate in India, and their general compatibility with the Western ideas prevalent in IT.

5.2.5. Conclusion

The soft-skill training of young, prospective IT employees clearly has modernising, or even 'civilising' intentions. Even though it often avoids the main conflicts of Indian society, it is nevertheless a clear departure from everything deemed traditional in India. Walking the fine line between establishing its own values while not upsetting those of the trainees, the training deliberately avoids tensions within the Indian cultural context. By replacing unquestioned traditions with rational arguments and by reflecting upon previously ignored ethical dilemmas, IT tries to revolutionise established notions of business relations, with implications for wider society. It therefore projects and furthers a symbolic shift from the traditional bureaucratic, hierarchical system, which manifests itself in the public administration, to the globalised, team-based and less hierarchical system that is a feature of the New Economy worldwide. For India, this means a shift away from the formal behaviour adapted from the British before independence to an informal American-inspired approach, one that originated in private industry and which is more oriented towards goals than procedures.

Not surprisingly, this marks a radical departure from a static personal identity, based on position in a hierarchy, towards a more fluid, individualised, and ultimately self-empowered, professional self-image. This may seem ironic considering the pressure and indignities that are associated with the IT profession at the receiving end of global outsourcing. But since jobs are fundamentally insecure, employment periods are much shorter than in any other Indian sector, and responsibility for skill improvement and qualifications rests with the individual, this is a logical consequence. As market forces are unpredictable, and no comprehensive ideology or authority is left to provide guidelines or parameters for the establishment of identities, the individual is solely responsible for improving his or her market value. And market value is clearly enhanced by a flexible, adaptable personality, and by people who, even if not necessarily qualified in all relevant techniques, are still able to acquire the missing knowledge in the

shortest time possible. In order to be fully operational in a globalised work culture, the ideal IT employees need personalities that can cope with being subordinated into a team and, at the same time, are able to speak their own minds. And while such employees might have acquired a certain sense of autonomy, there is little doubt that this is ultimately subordinated to the overall aim of efficiency.

If, and only if, the training has lasting influence on the trainees, the ideal outcome would be self-confident and reflexive employees who are able to fit into a work climate that is both Indian and globalised with a Western pre-text. A neutral and respectful understanding is envisioned between the teams and between colleagues, one that would enable a fluid handling of contingent events, itself a prerequisite of the work requirements. Caste is not addressed nor even mentioned in the manuals, but the respect for every person regardless of social standing that is expected would prevent discrimination or disrespect on the basis of caste. From other sources it is apparent (cf. chpt.6 and Dasgupta 2008) that discrimination based on social origin, personal appearance or gender is strictly discouraged and sharply sanctioned in this industry. While it is still not entirely clear why the issue of caste is omitted from the training, it is apparent that caste is neither an acceptable distinguishing criteria between IT employees nor a direct factor in recruitment process.

Nevertheless, caste could play a more indirect factor even in this training. The willingness to open oneself to the Westernised work culture in IT could well be unequally distributed amongst Indian communities. As long as caste is correlated with socio-economic conditions, it potentially reflects on the individual's personality; therefore, some castes might be better suited to enter IT than others. However, if this correlation becomes weaker – and the tiny SC/ST section of the new middle classes hints at such a change – this line of argument would lose its force. At the moment, some castes and communities are clearly overrepresented in IT and in openness to the West, and their educational achievement and confidence levels might be responsible for this. But, fundamentally, this appears neither systemic nor unchangeable in the future. The rise of Lower Castes in politics – often Dominant Agricultural Castes – could well be a sign of what could happen in the IT workforce. As confident personalities and cultural openness to the West are not exclusive to only some communities, there is at least the potential for a significant change in the future.

6. The qualitative Interviews

6.1. Methodology

This chapter is based on an extensive series of interviews with people who are, in most cases, currently working in IT. The majority of the interviews were conducted in connection with the Special Training Programme (STP), a scheme that aims to increase the employability of technical graduates from SC and ST background within the IT industry, where they are hitherto largely absent. The support of both Infosys and the International Institute of Information Technologies Bangalore (iiit-b) provided an opportunity to engage with those who are both significantly under-represented in the IT workforce and who have been traditionally subjected to the harshest forms of caste-based discrimination. The perspectives and opinions of the STP trainees, can then be compared to the views of independently-recruited High Caste IT employees.¹⁷⁹ Within this context, the question of the role of caste in IT's work environment is then pursued from two different angles; from both the perspective of the mainstream and from that of those who are potentially on the receiving end of caste-based discrimination.

The STP project allowed unique access to a population that is almost impossible to approach independently – that is, IT employees with SC or ST background. I could evaluate the success of their training scheme and at the same time interview them about their own perception of caste in IT, their own experience of being from a traditionally marginalised group and their view on general social change in IT and beyond. In order to balance the views of the STP alumni, interviews were also conducted with IT employees from general backgrounds, recruited independently of STP. Last but not least, and to provide a more comprehensive picture, trainees from the ongoing STP group in Bangalore and Hyderabad were interviewed, as well as managers from the industry. In total, 72 people shared their views in this project: 51 were participants of STP in one form or other (43 STP I alumni Bangalore, 4 STP II trainees Bangalore, 4 STP II trainees Hyderabad), 14 “general background”¹⁸⁰ IT employees, and 7 managers and experts from the industry itself.¹⁸¹ Revealingly, the recruitment method is apparent in the gender balance; while 18 of the STP trainees and alumni were women (35 per cent – higher than the industry’s average), the independently recruited general IT employees were exclusively male, with only one woman amongst the industry’s experts. This reflects both the male dominance amongst IT experts and the limitations a male interviewer is faced with in recruiting female interviewees.

In addition to dissimilarities in gender quota, the interview location also differed between respondent groups: The interviews with general employees were mainly conducted in private places, often in my (or their) PG room, while the expert interviews and most of the STP interviews took place in offices.

¹⁷⁹ Since the IT workforce is dominated by High Caste Hindus (chpt. 4.2.4), their view is taken as the ‘mainstream’ view.

¹⁸⁰ ‘General Background’ refers to those who are not eligible for reservations in India – that is, those who are not SC, ST or OBC. In all likelihood, they are Hindu Upper Castes – in my sample this was the case with one exception, a Christian.

¹⁸¹ All the STP interviews were recorded and transcribed, however, one of the non-STP interviews and three of the expert interviews were documented by minutes only. The interviews are marked: STP stands for the first batch of STP in Bangalore, STP II for the second one, while GEN is for general IT employees and EXP for experts.

Additionally, the chosen interview methodology varied somewhat. The interviews with the STP alumni were all conducted in a semi-structured way; that is, I asked all participants the same questions, but also tried to encourage an open discussion to get a narrative that was not based on preconceptions. The idea was therefore to allow more input from the participants themselves, although this did not work out as imagined. Most of the STP interviews ended up being more formal than I would have liked; the interviewees had no experience with open discussion, felt inhibited by my (Western) ‘oddness’ and by the official atmosphere in the office, and consequently retreated in many cases to monosyllabic or narrow answers. The participants also, unfortunately, saw the interviews as part of a formal process to which they had agreed out of personal gratefulness towards iiit-b, the organisation that undertook their training and enabled my research. Therefore, the content of approximately half of the interviews could potentially be biased by the interviewees’ desire to please the iiit-b institution, to portray the Indian IT industry as a pleasant place to work or to project a positive view of India to the outside world.

Nonetheless, while some of the answers might be affected by these three instances of *social desirability*, this is balanced by the views offered outside the offices, or by those interviewees who were independently recruited. Most especially, those interviews conducted outside of iiit-b, in coffee shops, restaurants or simply outside the work office, offered more space for in-depth discussions and enabled a far more discursive approach. This is clear from the recording times: Once a proper discussion ensued between interviewer and interviewee, the interview itself was considerably longer. The same holds true when the interviews were conducted not on a personal one-on-one basis, which was the norm, but in small groups of up to three people.¹⁸² In particular, when friends were interviewed in groups, the topics were discussed much more openly, and even dissenting views were voiced between different interviewees.

Since both experts and general employee interviews were purely voluntary, the character of most was more relaxed, less dictated by my structured question and more diverse in scope. And while the average age in both the STP alumni and general employees was around 25 years, the experts’ was above 35. This was reflected in how the interviews went: While it was a challenge to tease out information from the STP participants in most interviews, with the others I was sometimes required to redirect an uninhibited flow of information back towards the issues relevant for my research. All in all, there are fewer non-STP than STP-related interviews, although this is not surprisingly given that the former were not institutionally framed by any organisation. Nevertheless, the absence of an institutional framework sometimes proved advantageous, especially as those who agreed to be interviewed did so because they were interested in the topic, and not because they felt obliged to do so. With all this in mind, the limited number of non-STP interviewees – that is, 14 people – is offset by the higher quality of data and the greater range of topics. As a qualitative design, this set of interviews does not claim to be representative for IT, but it nevertheless offers valuable insights into the perspectives and perceptions of IT employees.

¹⁸² Of the STP-related interviews, 11 were done in small groups of two or three people, whereas three of the ‘General Background’ and none of the expert interviews were conducted in this way.

6.2. The wider perspective: Cultural change in contemporary India

6.2.1. Gender equality in IT

The changes that the phenomenon of caste is going through are ultimately part of a larger process, in which India is redefining its cultural values. This process, marked by the cultural consequences of the capitalist reorientation of India's economy and its increasing cultural integration into a globalised metaculture, heavily influenced by adapted Western concepts, has direct and indirect implications for caste. The interviews attempted to address more indirect factors, such as the changing role of women or the general perception of Westernisation, albeit with varying and not always satisfying results. Owing to the younger age and inexperience of most of my interviewees, the interviews often stuck to the narrower and clearly-defined topic of women's empowerment, while rarely elaborating on Westernisation.

The consistent view amongst the interviewees was that women faced no difficulties in getting into the IT sector, that they received equal treatment, and that there was no reason why their participation should be hindered in any way.

They [women] are well off. There is no difference in the kind of pay structure, no difference in the facilities they get. [...] initiatives have been taken in Infosys itself to have more women coming in. (0501M001-GEN)

In IT there are a lot of girls working in good position. After 4 to 5 years you can see 50-50. (0423M001-GEN)

They are equal, they have more chances in IT.

Why?

Because they are women.

Why would you say that?

In IT sector people like women in HR position. [2nd interviewee]: You see nowadays literacy ratio is increasing, they have also knowledge now. (0517M002-GEN)

Would you say that women are equal in IT?

Yes. Lot of women are there. Chances are also 50/50. I don't know 10 years back or 15 years back what was the scenario but now it has been neutralised. (0425M002-GEN)

This captures the officially projected HR preference quite accurately. It also indicates the idealisation of many of the High Caste interviewees, who tend to be oblivious to the barriers that women face in this sector.¹⁸³ Again, this is much in line with the industry's official position, although the empowerment of women is not nearly as simple as projected in the interviews so far.

The Indian IT industry is proud to be one of the most vocal supporters of a higher female participation in

¹⁸³ In much the same vein, this finds a parallel in the view of High Caste interviewees about the need for reservations.

professional and public life. Countless initiatives are aimed at improving women's status and at raising awareness of their specific needs and of their role in society. NASSCOM boasts that over 30 per cent of its total employment base are women (NASSCOM 2010) and women's empowerment is widely discussed in relation to the positive role of IT. Still, the topic of female empowerment is, at the same time, very much in conflict with traditional perceptions of the role of women in India. Strikingly, the conservative world-views, where women are largely confined to the household or to a restricted locality, and the more recent economic pressures to integrate women into the productive workforce are not openly debated or disputed in the interviews. In the views of the interviewees, a highly political struggle appears to be an almost naturally-evolving process – as exemplified here:

I as a male would rather walk in straight and join the job; as for women, they have more number of factors to deal with. They have number of things to think before they actually join a particular job. After a couple or three years, what if they get married? What if they want to continue their job apart from keeping their family life intact? In that way, IT companies are paying a great deal of thought on this so that women after they are married need not resign and go back. Things like flexible work hours. You have more number of programmes for their kids. You have separate crèches where kids are taken care of. Women's participation is basically low because these factors not been dealt with. (0501M001-GEN)

Here, the problems faced by women, overwhelmingly seen in the conflict between the requirements of a professional career and the duties of the household, are acknowledged, but not considered insurmountable. Greater societal consequences – for example, that women use their financial freedom to question traditional role models or to demand greater autonomy in families, marriage decisions and so on – do not appear immediate. In line with the literature (Desai and Andrist 2010; S. Radhakrishnan 2009), the interviews suggest that India does not seem to be on the brink of a social revolution, with gendered roles in every-day life as rigid as ever. The general view is that, even if greater opportunities exist and more freedoms should be encouraged, women are still relatively dependent on their families and on their boyfriends or husbands:

I have even seen in my college some who don't prefer to go to other places [...] they feel [...] they get better boyfriend if they follow the boyfriend. Still this is very less, whatever I see, in 15 girls you will see one who is not ready to go. [...] People who don't join or leave the work after marriage, but there are also girls who are working after marriage. (0425M002-GEN)

In this regard, the changing role of women is not the result of success in a political struggle, but rather of a naturally-evolving process, triggered by the requirements of the global business culture that, in turn, is based on cultural evolution in mostly Western countries. The process of adapting to this work culture, itself the product of historical processes, without understanding or appreciating the rationale behind it, comes across as apolitical and quasi-evolutionary. The implications of these economic changes on private life are not fully understood, nor does it appear as if they will have major consequences on the social role of women; even for women themselves it is an adaptation process rather than one of active agency. And as this process is not caused by political pressure from women themselves, the changes are

confined to a few, mainly economic, areas, without challenging traditional family structures. Only the future will tell how this economically-provided potential is translated within India's cultural setting. The tremendous social consequences of these changes are barely visible today and it is thus little wonder that the interviewees appear unaware of it.

6.2.2. The contentious issue of Westernisation

The same holds true for the even more ambiguous topic of Westernisation. Increasing Western consumption patterns are merely the most obvious sign of a (potentially) much more comprehensive shift; for the moment, however, a gap is still apparent between the adaptation visible in the main IT companies and the largely unchanged private parts of life (that is, if Westernisation is understood not in the sense of availability of Western consumer goods, but as a radical individualisation in private life). And even if Westernisation is perceived as largely positive, its potential impact is neither fully understood nor appreciated. As long as this cultural influence is restricted to the workplace, it is generally accepted; beyond this, Westernisation is either rejected or simply deemed irrelevant for Indian society:

Would you say Westernisation is positive?

In work: Yes!

...and outside?

Outside it is not working. [...] In my opinion it is negative if they try to change themselves to Westernisation, it is positive if the working culture is Westernised. (0509M002-GEN)

Of course, the cultural influences of the West are understood differently, as is only natural given the broad spectrum of viewpoints available, but they are generally appreciated. While it is not a given amongst the Indian public to see Western influences in a positive light, a generational shift is especially apparent here. Whereas the reaction of those who grew up before liberalisation is perhaps influenced by an ambivalent attitude to the colonial past, where a dismissal of anything British goes hand in hand with a deep-seated admiration, those who grew up after liberalisation are possibly more influenced by North American popular culture. Be this as it may, the result is a visible openness to aspects of Westernisation that are deemed positive, with a concurrent rejection of those features seen as incompatible with traditional Indian culture.

If asked in general terms about their view on the West, the response is overwhelmingly positive. With its rationalistic connotations, Westernisation is often seen as unavoidable, even if some Indian cultural traits need to be preserved (minutes 07.04.2009). If there is resistance, then predominantly religious reasons are invoked – both by Hindus and those from other religions:

I want to follow religion to the maximum extent, we believe drinking is a sin, but in Western culture – even in India it is becoming a casual thing now. (1008M001-STP HYD)

Even though the new virtual Western dominance is not always appreciated, the fundamental merits of

this cross-cultural exchange are never questioned in the interviews.¹⁸⁴ And whereas the contrasts with Indian culture (first and foremost, in my opinion, the different concepts of family and individual) are not discussed or even noticed, the only criticisms of Westernisation are directed at perceived excesses. Thus, while it is acceptable for women to become more independent, and to earn for themselves and enjoy some autonomy from their family, a lifestyle that undermines the family concept (that is, one that allows greater sexual freedoms or even challenges the authority of parents towards their children) is generally rejected as too liberal, or too Westernised. In this regard, the interviewees' answers are quite uniform and differ only in nuance.

6.3. Background: STP in the socio-political situation in India

Moving closer to the caste topic, it is advisable to take a look at STP first. As discussed earlier (chpt. 4), the Indian IT industry sees itself affected by political argument about implementation of caste-based job reservations for those of SC, ST or OBC background. This discussion seems to follow erratic cycles; while it has subsided recently, it was ferociously debated in 2006. The consistent position of the industry has always been that it rejects job reservation on the basis of caste because it would reduce competitiveness and also undermine the principle of meritocracy, whereby recruitment and promotion are based solely on skills and aptitude. Albeit engaged in a large number of social welfare projects (Dasgupta 2008), the sector is fundamentally opposed to the expansion of the quota system to private industry – a stance that causes some controversy in the public debate (C. Upadhyay 2007). In order to maintain this position while offering an alternative approach, Narayana Murthy – chairman of Infosys and one of the most prominent faces of IT in India – devised a scheme in which BE graduates from eligible caste background¹⁸⁵ would receive specific training for six months and would thereafter face open competition for job offers in the market (Murthy 2008). Thus, instead of lowering entry criteria for Lower Caste applicants, by training them in technical skills and polishing their 'soft skills', they would be brought to a level where they would be able to fulfil the expectations required of all other IT recruits. As an interesting side effect, this would also provide high-value job candidates instead of (politically) forcing the industry to hire those who might not be up to the mark.

In this way, STP was designed as an open challenge to the current reservation system, albeit not by denying that the social position of Lower Castes needed to be improved, but by addressing the inadequacies in the prevalent approaches to this issue.¹⁸⁶ And indeed, if STP was implemented on a

¹⁸⁴ This might be the result of the wide variety of notions that the term 'Western' carries. In the Indian context, the West can stand for anything from fast-food restaurants, consumerism, economic prosperity, to the individual freedom that is seen, not only in Hollywood movies, as the basis for the success of the Western model.

¹⁸⁵ This already indicates that the sample is not taken from the poorest section of society – all STP trainees have had to afford a BE education beforehand.

¹⁸⁶ Unfortunately, the political debate about caste reservations is poisoned by bitter factionalism, with any open challenge of the existent quota system often automatically branded as 'against social justice' or worse, as a 'High Caste position'. Given this, the STP program itself is not prominently advertised as an alternative to the current system, even though it would not be imaginable without this context.

larger scale, it would be much more radical in ousting caste as a factor in politics. It is an oft-repeated claim that the reservation system puts a premium on caste membership and thereby reinforces an identity that would otherwise be of much less concern in Indian society (Osborne 2001; Upadhyaya 1998). STP does, of course, unavoidably base its entry criteria on caste, but after the course is completed no entitlement is connected in any form to the caste of the applicant. According to this concept, caste would be an issue only up to a certain point, and of limited or no value for the persons after completion of an STP-type course. In this way, such an approach would hope to eliminate caste-based inequalities in a relatively short time, given that once education had enabled today's generation of SC/ST members to finance a proper education for their children the caste-based benefits would cease. Theoretically at least, the whole connection between socio-economic status and caste membership could be broken by bringing education to those who are traditionally neglected in both socio-economic and social status terms.

While a complete eradication of all historical injustices might be beyond the reach of such a small-scale scheme, as a pilot project and a real-time experiment it does attempt to symbolically prove the point that alternatives to affirmative action are not only possible but indeed practicable in a more market-oriented way.¹⁸⁷ Interestingly, Murthy does not elaborate on any macroeconomic failings of the existing reservation system (see chpt. 3.3.1). Thus, while most critics tend to emphasise societal consequences, Murthy hardly considers them – although he does imply downsides of the current reservation system by pointing to competitive disadvantages if they were applied to private industry. An *India Today* article (Murthy 2008) gives no further clarification about his beliefs, although the main points seem clear: As a convinced opponent of quota regulations, he condemns attempts to implement them further. However, as a compassionate capitalist and Indian patriot (Murthy 2009a),¹⁸⁸ he sees the need for social reconciliation and the raising up of disadvantaged sections of society. According to Murthy, STP should not only protect Indian companies from disadvantages in global competition (that is, those they would face if they hired unsuitable job-candidates), it should also be "a scheme, that did not diminish the confidence of these youngsters in this highly-competitive industry." (Murthy 2008) Consequently, the approach he tests and favours is a prime example of an alignment between industry interest and that of the recipients in question.

¹⁸⁷ Aside from all the political issues, the public sector example serves a negative contrast to the STP concept in terms of efficiency. The main criteria brought forward as the unique advantage of STP, is the fact that it complies with companies' hiring requirements and ultimately with a market-oriented economy. In this regard, STP seems to be future-proof whereas the reservation system is portrayed as an obstacle to the further development of India. The contrast could not be greater, even if the two systems in the end pursue the same agenda of bringing formerly marginalised caste groups into the Indian mainstream. Notwithstanding the different approaches, the fundamental limitations are basically the same: STP can only hope to educate a small minority and thereby serve as an example for future affirmative action projects – while the unequal and dismal state of the general education system ensures that the general inequality in India persists.

¹⁸⁸ His personal success story from rags to riches, from the son of a poor government servant to a globally known billionaire, is a popular story in India. Obviously, he has changed his political outlook considerably – starting from Marxism and arriving at 'Compassionate Capitalism' see Gurcharan Das, *India Unbound: From Independence to the Global Information Age* (2 edn.; New Delhi: Penguin, 2002) at 247.

6.4. STP in the eyes of its participants

Naturally, because the context of this study was the training programme and the views of its participants, a considerable portion of the interviews was dedicated to questions about STP. Hardly surprisingly, there was an overwhelmingly positive response to a programme that was for many the breakthrough into a longed-for career in IT. Out of 89 participants who graduated from the first batch of Bangalore's programme, 83 found placements in companies at the post-training recruitment drives, and an unknown number found jobs independently. Before joining STP, most of the trainees had been job seeking for several months (up to a year), and for this reason alone were grateful for the opportunity to break down barriers. The training itself was conducted in a welcoming, friendly and open atmosphere – again, a further reason to remember it in a positive light. The personal commitment of iiit-b's director, Professor Sadagopan, a well-connected and publicly known figurehead of IT,¹⁸⁹ can be described as the icing on the cake. For all these reasons, the response to questions about STP was, not surprisingly, rosy in tone and enthusiastic in content.

Nevertheless, this needs to be seen against the social background of the trainees. Before the training, there seemed to be a lack of confidence, shortcomings in technical training and a general inability to master job interviews – otherwise their earlier difficulties in finding an appropriate job would be inexplicable.¹⁹⁰

One good [thing] ... I mean, one very much aspect of this industry is a good communication skill, which is very much required and also the knowledge like we can gain every day, if you really want to become good in this industry. (RES2 0407M001-STP)

Therefore, the main aim of STP was to provide a double boost in confidence and employability to enable the trainees to survive in the industry. Not surprisingly, the trainees were encouraged to raise their aspirations and 'dream big' – and this was clearly reflected in the answers of the participants.

It was really memorable, sweet. I got many friends from there. After finishing that, I had three jobs at hand. Just imagine – when I finished my engineering in 2005 there was no campus interview as my college was very new. We were the seniors and mine was the first batch, we hardly had two companies as campus interview, but we were not so seriously prepared so I was not able to do that and 2005 went just like that after finishing my engineering. Then I attended this STP programme exam and I got through and I was there for six months under training. It was really memorable. All were supportive, especially Prof. Sadagopan, he is very cooperative and friendly. He knows how to handle the kids also, with the kids he will be at their level and with professionals he will be at their level. He is a fantastic person. (0404M001-STP)

Most of the interviews followed this pattern. According to the alumni interviewed, the best parts of STP

¹⁸⁹ Besides heading the iiit-b, he writes columns for the *Times of India* and publishes a number of blogs: <http://ssemergic.wordpress.com> and <http://sadagopans.blogspot.com>. Interestingly, he is also very visible in his social standing and personal appearance as a prestigious Tamil Brahmin.

¹⁹⁰ As a very simple example, a comparison of the personal appearance of the graduates of STP I with those of the (still-) trainees in STP II showed a clear difference in bearing and attitude. Whereas the still-trainees had the habits and attitudes of college students, the interviewees with two years work experience had a much more mature and professional demeanour. This says as much about the work environment in the IT sector as about the STP training.

were: The high standard of training, underscored by the ‘big name’ status of Infosys and iiit-b; the group experience; and, the team building in the context of the soft skill training. Very often, the participants highlighted the personal dedication of Professor Sadagopan, iiit-b's director, and mentioned the atmosphere of openness and encouragement. During the whole training, it was never in doubt that the trainees were anything but the best in their field, and could compete with anyone else on an equal footing. Interestingly, their social identity, the fact that they came from Lower Caste or tribal background, was never even mentioned in the training. As Prof. Sadagopan told me at the beginning of my research, the aim of STP is to get trainees out of their caste identity, and it would be best if they would forget it altogether. Patronising as this may seem from a Tamil *Brahmin* who openly celebrates his heritage, it nevertheless is very much in accordance with the general climate in IT (chpt. 5).

6.5. Comparing the views of STP alumni with the ‘mainstream’

6.5.1. Work satisfaction

Aside from the STP training itself, issues such as the general attitude of the employees towards the work, or their experience of the social changes brought about by modernisation processes, can be discussed by taking all interviews into account. Naturally, the interviews with the ‘general’ employees differ somewhat, but only in degree, not in direction. A lower level of job satisfaction is evident in these interviews, as is a greater assertiveness in regard to expected pay rises or bonuses. Of course, the average work experience is considerably higher than the two years in the STP sample, and that could explain the greater frustration, paired with a greater sense of entitlement. Additionally, no appreciation of the benefits of prior training sweetens the view of these interviewees and the more private atmosphere of the interviews might also allow for more critical assertions. However, their general employees’ views are still mainly in line with those voiced by the STP trainees. Even the points emphasised by Upadhyा and Vasavi (C. Upadhyा and Vasavi 2006), about the exploitative character of long work hours, the repetitious and monotonous work, the feeling of over-qualification and the related stress, are not seen as a major problem in the interviews:

When I started as a training engineer in the company, I used to work till 11 o'clock in the night to understand the things and I used to interact with people. I used to make myself uncomfortable making the other person comfortable just to get more knowledge – initially – but later on I understood that is not the way these companies work. Even if he is my senior – he is 20 years my senior to me – so well experienced and I should call him by name. This is Westernisation. (0509M001-GEN)

Even if it is acknowledged, it is rationalised in terms of the Indian situation of severe unemployment and the demands of customers:

Previously, before this IT revolution happened, there was a severe unemployment in India, even now also, people are in competitive mood, they have to show the competitive edge [...] so people will be interested

to work more, put more efforts, bring the cost down – so they will go for more work. I don't know the work pressure of other companies but my understanding on why people work more is they want to stick to their deadline, impress customers – so they will be working more hours per day. (0503M001-GEN)

The general mood of the STP alumni is in the same vein, even though there is considerably more enthusiasm and optimism, while the non-STP seem to be more frustrated the longer they have been in IT.¹⁹¹ Notably, apart from three engineers, all respondents from STP reported a high satisfaction level in their job. For many, it was simply a dream to work in this prestigious industry, with the ongoing recession only reinforcing this feeling of luck. Even when directly asked about the long work-hours and the perceived stress level, most considered the workload as part of the deal and more than compensated for by the good salary. Given the fact that most graduates of the STP scheme earn roughly three or four times as much as their parents, the satisfaction level can easily be put in perspective. Since most of the interviewees were relatively young (the average age being 25), and at the beginning of their careers, dissatisfaction about monotonous and repetitive work schedules might not be as high as with older workers.

It should also be noted that the economic climate during the research project may have influenced the views of the interviewees: In 2009, the consequences of a global economic crisis were still reverberating around India and a general feeling of anxiety could have muted any all-too open dismissal of the job quality in IT. The ongoing economic crisis at the time of the interviews can also be expected to have reinforced appreciation of holding on to a job, and to have fostered a perception of few alternatives, no matter how unsatisfying work might seem at the moment. As a consequence, and in contrast to the prevalence of job-hopping found by Upadhyा and Vasavi (2006), employment periods are generally longer and more stable. In comparison with all other available options, a job in IT is clearly losing its larger-than-life status as a dream job, but it is still prestigious and better-paid than most other work alternatives.

6.5.2. The role of Caste in and around the workplace

6.5.2.1. Is Caste a relevant question for the IT industry?

As a matter of course, a large number of interview questions were dedicated towards the general topic of caste and the more specific role of caste in the workplace itself. While this seemed only natural to the researcher, this was not the case with participants, and the questions were often met with considerable consternation or outright confusion. Contrary to my expectations, caste did not seem to be an issue at all and would not even be considered a factor in any kind of workplace-related issue. To a large extent, this seems to be the result of a deliberate policy by the IT companies to make the workplace as socially neutral as possible (cf. chpt. 5). Even in the STP training, directed exclusively at those from a certain caste

¹⁹¹ The most common refrain was: 'it is not rocket science' as all new jobs and projects proved very boring after the first few weeks.

and tribal background, caste was never discussed or even addressed by the trainers or the participants. Caste seems to be hidden behind a wall of silence, with my (perhaps naïve) questions about this phenomenon met either with unease or amused perplexity. In the words of a HR executive:

No one has any interest to find out the caste in the team that I have been working with and I am talking about myself being here for the last 13 years. Maybe people are talking about when you become personally very close, when I become personally very close to a friend with whom I spent lot of time outside work discussing not in a professional context [...] then perhaps that tag is already there they can't shed away. (0521M002-EXP)

Condensed into a few words, the workplace is characterised by caste neutrality and a general anonymity (which could appear surprising to outsiders). No caste-related discrimination was ever felt by those who would be expected to be at the receiving end, and, at least according to the interviewees, no instance of it was ever experienced, with even the likelihood of potential discrimination completely denied. Altogether, caste and caste-based discrimination does not seem to be imaginable within the Indian IT industry.¹⁹²

This might be the result of the policies followed by the companies to discourage any kind of social misconduct and to comply with internationally-accepted best practice guidelines for behaviour in the corporate environment. It might also be simply the result of the mixing of people from all over India, whereby the social marker of caste, which is often only understood in smaller localities, is pushed to the background, and more visible social identities, such as local origin and vernacular language, instead fulfil the function of social distinction. Furthermore, and this deserves consideration, it is claimed by observers that IT itself is taking the form of a social identity and is thereby overriding traditional associations. This elite workforce, generally considered at the top of the professional picking order, subsumes the traditional elite identities – in the form of High Castes and notably Brahmins – and merges them into a social group – or class - with a membership based on accomplishment and not birth. Of course, this process does not fully eclipse the traditional forms of identification, but at least in the eyes of the interviewees the extinction of caste as a marker of social identity and prestige seems very successful in this sector.

Against this, though, the clear dominance of Higher Castes and Dominant Agricultural Castes (see 4.2.4) did not seem obvious to my interviewees. The explanation is a simple one: The classifications used by anthropologists and sociologist alike are not perceived as social units by those who practise caste,¹⁹³ and even less so when compared to the obvious markers of language and origin. In all the interviews conducted, the only imaginable form of preferential treatment was based on in-group recognition based on language, not on membership of the same or similar caste:

¹⁹² As will be discussed later – this is most relevant for the flagship companies of IT (both Indian and MNCs) – and more scope for caste-based discrimination is imaginably in smaller companies where anonymity is less pronounced.

¹⁹³ Even seemingly clear-cut terms such as 'High Caste' (generally those twice born castes associated with *Brahmin*, *Kshatriya* or *Vaishya Varna*) are not entirely clear to the respondents since they include grey areas. Other terms – such as Dominant Agricultural Castes – are in most cases met with consternation and confusion.

Do you think there is a community or a group of people dominant in the IT industry?

I don't [know] exactly [if] I can say yes for this. But I can say some... not religion I can say, but some part of the state or some part of the country is dominating. Like if people more of Kannadigas or more Telugu people are there into the company then they prefer their people. If I am a Kannadiga or if I am a Telugu boy then I prefer only Kannada and Telugu boy. This is what happening in the present market, in the present companies in India. We can't say all but few companies do that.

So there is a kind of language based discrimination?

Yeah, yeah.

Is there also something like caste-based discrimination?

I don't think so. That might be a problem with smaller companies but not with a bigger company.
(0402M002-STP)

This interview fragment is illuminating in more than one way. On the one hand, the interviewee – who is employed in a smaller and therefore more discrimination-prone company – is openly claiming that there might be an element of preferential treatment for the co-members of a social in-group. According to his statements, this social in-group is not defined by caste, but by language, and with it, region of origin. Caste does not seem to be plausible as a defining feature to separate the in-group from outsiders, and a short logical thought experiment shows why. Any smaller company with less than 100 employees could not possibly be dominated by just one caste group (assuming that the exact caste membership is only revealed *after* recruitment) as too many subdivisions of caste exist in India – there are, after all, at least 5000 *Jati*. Any attempt at preferential treatment for a certain caste would alienate a majority of those who are not from the preferred caste group. Caste neutrality is, for this reason alone, an imperative for the work climate.¹⁹⁴ So any attempt to build a company based on specific castes, or to create an image that attracts only certain castes, would simply be futile.¹⁹⁵

In the rare instances when caste differences – or the High Caste dominance within the IT workforce – are acknowledged, they are rationalised with historical explanations, thereby indicating that it is an issue that will be solved in due course:

[Historically] only Brahmins coming from the very educated background, [...]Brahmins basically in Hinduism means like the 'purohits' who learn and who are basically the educated community we say. So [...] people will be coming from the same background and now even they are brought up in the same manner and they will be getting the more and more amount of education. So that is the reason why we can see many Brahmins educated [...] Whereas when it comes to Muslims and the Lower Caste Hindus [...]

¹⁹⁴ The attempt to discriminate would be further hindered by the fact that some of the employees would not reveal their identity; thus attempted discrimination would ultimately be foiled by the complexity and confusion that accompanies the caste phenomenon –knowledge about certain castes is simply too fragmented and flimsy to provide any basis for preferences (chpt. 7).

¹⁹⁵ Personally, I would not eliminate caste fully as a factor in the equation. The widely held respect and admiration for Brahmins could feature positively, whereas the notion that someone (from Low Caste) came through college with the help of reservations, may result in negative opinions. After all, the fact that those from Lower Castes, especially, do everything in their power to keep their identity a secret needs to be explained in a consistent manner.

neither the Muslims nor the Lower Caste Hindus have been [...] educated from a very long time. They have been getting education from very recent times. And moreover they will have so much financially fit also to go to the, [...] IT industry ... basic requirement is you should be an engineer or MBA or BBA graduate like that. [...] and the Low Caste people or the Muslims and all, they will not be so much educated or so much financially fit to that. (0425M001-STP)

According to the interviews, the influence of caste in the workplace can be almost completely ruled out, even if doubts regarding smaller companies and some obvious markers of identity persist.¹⁹⁶ If there is discrimination or identity-based preference, and no workplace would be fully free of this, then caste is submerged under identities that are more visible and, as they are based on broader categories, draw larger groups of followers. In the case of Bangalore, a conflict based on the disputed 'ownership' of the city tends to dominate public attention, with the caste issue further marginalised in competition with this powerful narrative of local dominance.¹⁹⁷ If anything, preferential treatment in an industry that mixes people from all corners of India would be based on easily-recognisable characteristics like this, instead of complex and murky caste alliances:

I should not talk like this because it might be a problem for my company. What happens is that we have certain practices – database practices, Java practises, Microsoft practises – things like that. There happens to be a particular practice, its head happens to be from a particular region, so it also happens that most of the people under that practise happen to be people from the same region. You cannot definitely say this is because of this, but you can draw inferences – saying probably this person has some kind of lenience for persons from that particular region. (0415M001-STP)

While language and regional origin are clearly visible, any underlying caste differences tend to be glossed over.

6.5.2.2. Anonymity and Caste

The disregard for caste is accompanied, and perhaps enabled to a certain extent, by the overwhelming anonymity in the industry. The vast majority of the STP interviewees never spoke about their social background with their colleagues and also insisted that the topic of caste was never discussed in the workplace.

Normal practice nowadays is we don't have last names. I don't have a last name, I have my first name and initials, so based on that you cannot make out who I am, I mean the community that I belong to. Generally we can clearly make out if it is a Christian or Hindus or Muslims. (0415M001-STP)

¹⁹⁶ At the end of my study I accidentally came across an apparently wide-spread stereotype about people from Eastern India. Easily recognisable by their facial features, they are labelled as 'Chinkies' (for Chinese Indians), are often not perceived as 'real Indians' and consequently subjected to severe discrimination. In Bangalore, they tend to be employed in low-paid positions in the hospitality industry despite their often high education and good command of English.

¹⁹⁷ A general feeling amongst those Bangaloreans of Karnataka origin (who feel that they are the rightful owners of the city) is the sense that too often IT jobs in the city go to outsiders from the rest of India. This perceived neglect of talent from Bangalore itself is much more of a concern than the inner division of caste and creed within Bangaloreans. Corresponding to the language dispute that erupted in the early 1990s, there is considerable tension between those who claim the city as their native place and those who have moved there more recently. Janaki Nair, *The Promise of Metropolis - Bangalore's Twentieth Century* (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2005) at chpt. 6.

Notwithstanding this kind of protection, for the STP alumni their own caste is overwhelmingly seen as information that is better not shared with outsiders. For whatever reason, it seems an established rule that the topic itself is better avoided and that, most especially, a Low Caste origin is something of a burden, despite all the contrary assurances about caste-neutrality within IT. Only two of the interviewed 43 STP alumni from the first Bangalore batch actually talked about their caste background openly, and only four would let their closest friends and colleagues know about it. A large majority would therefore prefer to hide their caste background – a precautionary measure that is facilitated by the companies' policies and the general lack of knowledge about caste culture apart from one's own (chpt. 7 & 8).

It is unclear if the absence of discrimination or discomfort in respect of caste background is an effect of this anonymity, or if the situation would differ if the caste background of employees was known. In any case, it clearly seems desirable for persons from ex-Untouchable origin to hide their background, to acquire a different identity and to merge into the mainstream without reference to an embarrassing past. The widespread 'acronymisation' of the surnames in South India, the adaptation (by Lower Castes) of caste-related names of traditionally higher status and the attempted avoidance of the topic of caste altogether all point to the same complex: It appears that caste itself is considered an embarrassing reminder of India's darker past, and that a Lower Caste status is still considered a disadvantage for any individual born into these circumstances. For all these reasons, open discussion is generally avoided in favour of a persistent silence:

So far, I haven't seen any discrimination as such, but people do tend to have such feelings. It is very simple, I don't divulge any of my past – what exactly our caste or such things. The thing [is] that most of us – not just in IT, I have also spoken to lot of relatives, friends – not everyone wishes to openly say that I belong from this community. (0415M001-STP)

Therefore, the topic of caste is not only avoided by the industry itself, it is also shunned by its employees, and especially so if they are from a Low Caste background. In light of the prominence of caste in the public sector, the avoidance of caste as a topic also has a number of political connotations in private industry. Not only is it a pre-emptive measure to forestall any discussions about quota reservation modelled after the public sector but, much more than this, the IT industry (in its self-perceived role as a societal moderniser) sees itself as the forerunner of a new Indian self-conception. It seems clear from its political stance, as well as from the utterances of its most prominent public figures, that the IT industry views the India of the future as one in which caste, linguistic and religious loyalties are more and more submerged by a general sense of Indian patriotism (chpt. 4.2.2.2).¹⁹⁸ Consequently, and with overwhelming unity, the issue of caste is treated as an obstacle to be overcome.

¹⁹⁸ The expectation is often that technology in general, and ICTs in particular act as 'great social leveller', even though this seems rather naive from a sociological perspective. View the foreword by Sam Pitroda in Sharma, *The Long Revolution - the Birth and Growth of India's It Industry*.

6.4.2.3. The contrast: Caste in- and outside of the IT industry

Notwithstanding the above, for the interviewees from Low Caste backgrounds the prevailing social inequalities of India, outside of IT or outside the main cities, are still clearly apparent:

Nowadays, at least in IT industry you don't see this [caste-based discrimination] but just go about 10 km from here, tell that you are from a backward community – that is the end of the story. It is even practised today, people from certain community are not allowed to touch water from the main source. (0415M001-STP)

Even if the tremendous changes in recent years or decades are appreciated:

What happens in my village, you know, it used to happen, you know, they were not allowed to drink water from the well. They are not allowed to visit temples.

Still now?

Not now. During my father's age. But now it is not seen. Now it is not like that. Now things have changed. People look for money. If you have money, you know, people give respect. If you don't have money, you know, you are not respected. Money is the criteria. [...] But still if I want to get married it is very difficult. (0407M002-STP)

The issue of social identity seems to be invoked primarily in situations that have a strong somatic dimension, differently nuanced in urban or rural settings. Consequentially, the rural/urban divide could then be understood by the different emphasis and likelihood of interactions with such a dimension.

When compared to other industries, the uniqueness of IT in its caste-neutrality is always mentioned, whereas other industries are generally considered to be much more caste-conscious¹⁹⁹ – although it is often difficult to tell if the reservation issue is mixed into the general discussion of caste. But in its dual break with the traditional Indian situation – in its antagonism to reservations, that sets it apart from government service, and in the meritocracy of recruitment, which is – according to the interviews – never fully implemented in other private industries – the IT industry pioneers a new, caste-neutral business model. Not surprisingly, this often creates an uneasy contrast with wider social conditions; that is, the people who work in IT are recruited from a country that is not following the vaguely egalitarian and meritocratic ideals preached by IT's leaders. Thus, even though I never came across any negative caste-based stereotypes in the interviews,²⁰⁰ there nevertheless seems to be a desire to prevent caste antagonism in the institutional framework:

If any of my colleagues discriminates anybody, nobody will support him. Nobody will support the discrimination. And if you see [his company's] policies, there are very strong rules, [against] discrimination. They can even terminate from your job if you discriminate. Not only in caste basis, even if someone is

¹⁹⁹ One of the expert interviewees hinted that something like a remnant of caste relations could be seen in the behavioural patterns between the IT employees and those waiters who serve them in the cafeteria (minutes 07.04.09).

²⁰⁰ The closest instance was the one where my key informant from the STP trainees talked about the Brahmin's patronising grip on everything deemed religious: "They think they are the shepherds and we are the sheep!" (minutes 29.09.09).

physically challenged, OK someone is black, that first. You cannot discriminate anyone. This standard is there in IT industry. But outside I don't think. You know, it depends upon how mature people are. (0407M002-STP)

However, the prevention of caste-based discrimination cannot fully erase the underlying feeling that a particular caste background is either an asset or an embarrassment. The striking lack of confidence of Low Castes – contrasting markedly with all those High Caste members who proudly proclaim their family's heritage²⁰¹ – tells of a partial survival of the status hierarchy, albeit one that is no longer systematically comprehended, but which nevertheless divides those who feel able to invoke their caste background and those who feel this should better be avoided. There is nothing resembling the working-class pride that is well documented in Western societies, and the status difference between physical and non-physical labour is still sharply accentuated. As caste is still linked to economic inequality, the removal of both is seen as the way forward, albeit with not too much optimism.

May be I cannot tell you what is ideal, but what I can tell you is what may be better. First thing is people are economically independent. Regardless [...] [if] you want to suppress me or not, I have opportunities in which I can stay independently. This brings in kind of equality. I may be of a lower caste but you are forced to do business with me because I have certain kinds of advantages of doing things, so this is kind of economic equality this has to be there. Obviously the thing is we try to remove caste, religion from as many things as possible, so far these are the two things I can think of. (0415M001-STP)

6.5.3. Caste and the issue of reservations

6.5.3.1. The views on reservation part I – the general category

The fundamental break between the groups of respondents comes, not fully unexpectedly, with the question of reservations. At this point, the different positions diverge diametrically, with only a few signs of any possible reconciliation visible. Those interviewees who benefited from reservations tend to defend the general need for affirmative action whereas those who feel that job competition is artificially aggravated by the quota system point to the inherent injustice, the widespread corruption and the misuse in practice of reservation (cf. Jeffrey 2010). Interestingly, both sides reject the argument that caste should be the criteria for quota allocation, and both likewise prefer a financial threshold as the criteria for affirmative policies. And while the interviewees consider the underlying caste question differently depending on their own backgrounds, they agree on the notion that a coupling of caste status and economic conditions would further entrench the problem. Consequently, the apparent signs of political use (or exploitation) of the reservation system are rejected across the board.

²⁰¹ It is generally much easier to talk about caste with someone from a High Caste, since he or she would most likely be proud of his or her caste background. Sometimes, this self-confidence can result in surprising statements such as the one from a Brahmin from Rajasthan – referring to his *Vaishya* friend: "We are both Aryans".

Interestingly, in both groups there is astonishingly little support for the expansion of reservation into the private sector. In IT itself, there seems to be no need for any kind of social considerations, not least because recruitment is seen as exceptionally fair and transparent. Access to a position in IT is seen across the board as a matter of qualification and skills. The scope for personal preferences, cronyism and discrimination is said to be limited by the transparency of performance criteria and the tough competition in the market. Fundamentally, everyone's chances, regardless of community or gender, are perceived as equal, as long as the qualification requirements are met. Of course, there are practical obstacles to this claimed equality, with those from rural communities perhaps oblivious to the potential opportunities offered by the IT sector. Still, most of the interviewees flatly deny that there are communities under-represented in IT (compare 6.4.2.1), or that certain groups have a much higher representation than their respective share of the overall population would suggest. Generally, the interviewees would not acknowledge the differences between communities if not confronted with them by the interviewer. If pushed, their speculations on the issue are very cautious, with the IT industry's generally discrimination-free work environment mentioned again and again.

See, if there are lesser Muslims, it is probably a matter of chance that they have not joined IT (0501M001-GEN)

There is a concerted effort to paint a favourable picture of the situation, even if some differences between communities are, at times, acknowledged:

In Indian education system we have a lot of freedom and government has also given a lot of facilities to the people. Suppose if I pay 10 rupees in a general merit category but the underprivileged or reservation category, they have to pay only two rupees and the rest – government will take care. So there are many other facilities so I don't think that is ever to stop anybody from getting educated and entering into IT industry. [...] You see so many people whose parents are agriculturalists and some of their parents are rearing cattle but their children are working in software industries as software engineers. So what I am saying is if you come to the company and find out these people, they are equally competent, to you may be their English is bit here and there but it is O.K. but they are equally competent from the technology point of view and their understanding is fantastic. (0509M002-GEN)

This generally rosy view can only be summarised as follows: The reason for individuals' apparent 'backwardness' is not seen as an issue of (low) caste status but rather as due to the fact that their parents are farmers (or rather peasants) and lack education. Caste or community is always downplayed or neutralised; it is never mentioned on first acquaintance and is generally considered as irrelevant within modern India. At times in the interviews, it seems as if caste is only sustained by identity politics, or that the interviewer is trying to delve into something almost forgotten in Indian society. It is not clear to what extent this is understood by the respondents, but it is crystal clear that this argument fits neatly into the self-legitimising narrative of an elite that claims to be a purely meritocratic one.

If social differences are addressed, the divisions between castes are generally trivialised, whereas non-Hindu religious denominations (such as Christians or Muslims) are regarded as divisions that matter. The shared identity of Hinduism trumps the differences between Hindu castes, and despite all integrationist tendencies, the differences between the dominant Hindu religions and those that are described as foreign are highlighted in social profiles.²⁰² In this context, any preferential treatment of, for example, Muslims is rhetorically coupled with the question of personal responsibility:

When government provides educational facilities it does not discriminate [...] If the Muslim parent does not send his kid to school, government cannot go to each house and pick them. Muslims are still not very open about sending their kids to educational institutions, they have their own way of educating. [...] you need to take into account that your own personal effort is needed [...] I can provide you only food; I can't make you eat – that's the way things are! (0501M001-GEN)

As a strong argument against the feasibility of government intervention, the role of the individual is emphasised, while structural or political arguments are ignored or not seen as relevant.

As mentioned earlier, the question of reservation is bitterly contested. As private industry is not yet affected by job reservations, the topic is almost exclusively viewed in relation to cut-throat competition in the educational sector. And since the education system is a bottleneck for most young people in India – and perhaps the most direct point of contact for the interviewees with the quota regulations – personal attitudes to reservation can be anticipated. For those who have to compete for the shrinking share of ‘open competition’, that is, unreserved college placements, the reservation system is at times almost depicted as a conspiracy against the public.

As of now you have people of number 3 lakh to 5 lakh sitting for merely 100 seats, so now out of 100 if you pass out reservation of 22.5 per cent, think of the general category who are eligible for that. If my father got a reservation and made sure I got good education why should I get a reservation? It absolutely makes no sense for me to avail reservation. (0501M001-GEN)

Some of the examples are obviously exaggerated to prove a point, or else echo arguments often heard in the public debate about admission to educational institutions:

[...] we were doing preparation of IIT, only six colleges are in India, we are trying to get admission because they are the highest level of education [...], so out of 300 marks he [from SC background] got 47, I got 108 marks. He got admission in IIT because of reservation, I did not get so – think about that he has less talent than me but he is there in that college! (0423M001-GEN)

In some instances, the dispute about the fairness of reservations seems to be based on an assumption that those who enjoy the benefits are simply not up to the requirements of highly-qualified jobs, and should not be in high positions:

²⁰² While Christians are sometimes seen as foreign incursion into India, they still enjoy certain benefits, since they are associated with the West and their numbers are small enough not to be considered a threat to the Hindu majority. The situation is fundamentally different when it comes to Muslims. The official statistics, according to which Muslims make up only 12 per cent of the Indian population, are often questioned and the fact that India has the second-largest Islamic population on earth is seen as a worrisome trend.

Think, if you are a doctor, one person is coming from SC category, he is getting reservation in doctor category – how can he save the life of other persons? He is not talented, he got reservation and got the MBBS degree! Think about; how he can save the life of other person? You are coming from general category without reservation, you have talent, you can save easily. (0423M001-GEN)

This equivalence of recipients of caste-based benefits with untalented, undeserving fraudsters indicates the stigma of Low Caste members in general and reservation-recipients in particular. But the underlying argument, that anyone who received admission under the reservation scheme is therefore a less qualified graduate, is particularly vicious.²⁰³ Blurring the fact that, under the current reservation system, entry criteria are lowered but not the final examination, this argument potentially stigmatises reservation-recipients for the rest of their lives. And by not taking into account any social history or personal obstacles that have been overcome, this also devalues the progress these students have to make to catch up from a lower starting level. It is hard to discern the degree to which this rejection is fuelled by a genuine contempt towards persons of Low Caste origin, or whether it is a caste-neutral rejection of the perceived violation of fairness built into the idea of reservation. The self-proclaimed justification for expressing such opinions will always be that it is not directed against those who benefit, but rather against the unfair nature of the system. However, the suspicion that it serves as a pretext for a subliminal but deep-seated disdain for the upward mobility of Lower Castes cannot be fully ruled out.²⁰⁴

Nevertheless, and in spite of the controversy and emotion the topic provokes, a cautious acceptance of the quota system by at least some of those from the ‘general category’ is perhaps discernable. In most basic terms, not all those who were ineligible for reservation places showed resentment towards those who were eligible:

If you ask someone from Bangalore, probably he will say reservation is something I would not accept. But having come from remote place I still believe reservation should be there although reservation does not apply to me. (0509M002-GEN)

But also in this case the loopholes and the misuse of the quota system is regarded as the most serious objection against the current practice:

Reservation should be on a case to case basis and it should not be on anybody [of this] category. [...] For example, if you have two candidates, both of them under reservation category, one person owns a Mercedes car, other person he does not even have sufficient money to educate himself. So to whom should be the reservation given? Obviously [to the] person who doesn't have money to educate himself. (0509M002-GEN)²⁰⁵

²⁰³ However fallacious this argument is, I have often heard it in conversations about the reservation system and it always proves to be the basis for a fundamental rejection of the whole idea of affirmative action.

²⁰⁴ The rejection of the existing reservation system was never justified to me as a rejection of the rise of Lower Castes. Realistically, denying the Low Castes a well-established route to social mobility would, in effect, mean that fewer Low Caste members would be able to improve their situation. This contradiction is open to interpretation and deserves further reflection.

²⁰⁵ It is perhaps a bit audacious to claim a relationship between local origin and the position on caste, but it seems that the idea of affirmative action is more familiar and accepted in Southern India – the interviewed above coming from Northern Karnataka.

Again, and notwithstanding the range of views offered, caste as a basis for affirmative action was overwhelmingly disapproved of by the respondents. Revealingly, this attitude is in line with the general attempt to downplay caste as a socio-economic factor and to hide it from public view. And, of course, the degree to which caste is seen as a factor in poverty depends on individual's political beliefs. Last but not least, affirmative action touches upon the sensitive issues of personal responsibility, the cultural construct of middle-class identity (where success is explained as the result of hard work and dedication, not benefits) and the notion of Indian modernity, where caste is often seen as an embarrassing relict from the pre-modern past.

Since the High Caste (or 'general category') interviewees did not benefit from the quota system, it can hardly be expected that they turn out to be staunch advocates of affirmative action. But the answers are more nuanced than outright rejection of the quota system. The most common refrains are presented with different emphasis: That the reservation systems has outlived its purpose; that it should benefit the poor and not those with a certain caste status; and, that caste benefits should not be inherited or skimmed off by those who apparently know how to exploit the system. If a quota system was devised that helped people from a poor background only, and if these quotas were restricted to a level seen as non-threatening for those who would not benefit, most of the interviewees would apparently support it. Against a backdrop of widespread poverty and of highly unequal access to education, the idea of social programmes to assist those who are at the bottom of the social pyramid is deemed necessary by almost every interviewee. But the bottom of the pyramid is not defined in terms of caste, even if empirical facts point to a strong correlation between Low Caste status and poverty.

Interestingly, caste as a basis for reservation is equated with corruption and identity politics, not with historical injustices and the need for recompense. Therefore, the original justification for the quota system, that it provides compensation for historical injustice towards those at the bottom of the social hierarchy, is neither understood nor shared. Whether as a result of an education that neglects to emphasise the official historical justifications for the reservation system or as a result of self-interest in an unreserved education system and labour market, the very lack of knowledge about the issue is striking and needs an explanation.

6.5.3.2. The views on reservation part II – the STP alumni

For the STP participants, on the other hand, the issue of reservations is also beset with negative feelings, even if they see the general need for affirmative action as more pressing than their High Caste counterparts. Reflecting the widely held notion that reservation on the basis of caste amounts to fraud, the STP alumni also tend to believe that those who use the system are taking the seats of those who deserve them more legitimately through their achievements and potential. In some instances, I was personally surprised by the amount of critical – and implicitly self-critical – awareness in regard to reservations:

So in the first 25 years OK, what you call reservation in government sectors didn't happen because they have to be educated first. So what they did, they just reduced the qualification I mean minimum marks, range, everything for backward community people, so that they could apply to some big big universities and government positions. [...] On the positive side we can say, lot of people you know, from backward community benefited from them. [...] The down side is that, you know, we are not utilising, a section of our community [is] not utilising their potential to the fullest. Do you get it? We are not working that hard. So what happens, when they give us people from our community they give you all those dummy posts – they call it dummy posts. Posted for some particular position and it has no real significance. (0324M002-STPII)

Consequently, the STP participants do not defend the current system, and view their own prior eligibility and use of the system more as a biographical stigma than a justified opportunity. Yet, however deeply entrenched the feeling that a reserved seat in a college translates into undeserved benefits, this attitude does not amount to a fundamental denial of the need for affirmative action. A paradoxical seeming situation becomes apparent in the interviews. While the personal use of reservations is often the subject of embarrassment, the general need for some kind of affirmative action is accepted and defended on logical grounds. Since most are aware that poor people – and again, most of the trainees are from relatively well-off families (see 6.2) – face barriers to successful entry into professional careers, provisions that would ease this process are supported. The main critique that the interviewees emphasise is therefore not the principle of reservations but their basis in caste identity. If given the choice, they would perpetuate the system, but change the entry criteria to those based on the financial circumstances of the respective family.

As for reservation in education – that is a must. Because I know... what conditions I was in and how bad it was... Seriously, we are provided money from the government to study [...] there were times when my parents were unable to pay me also, for my education. So it was government, like college – they do give us some stipend [...] so that was a lot of help. And regarding jobs, I don't think this is necessary. (0407M003-STP)

Reservations and caste-based discrimination are intrinsically linked, according to this interviewee:

Because it all starts at the school level. That is where you start filling in those fields called community, caste; whatever it is. [...] Concept of reservation came into existence because people then thought it is a lower community, and they were deprived of so many things. They were economically depressed. [...] So they thought, let us keep for the lower community something called reservations, this will help them. Later on things have changed with that. Now I feel it should be based on their economic status. (RES3 – 0407M001-STP)]

By preferring a form of affirmative action based on poverty thresholds rather than the current one on social identity, the view of the STP trainees and alumni is very much in line with those interviewees from 'general backgrounds'.

Overall, the topic of reservation was again narrowed down to the question of fairness in education. There is no narrative about Dalit liberation or the greater political implications of the issue, let alone knowledge about the historical origins of affirmative action policies. Hardly anyone would point to the harsh reality that no reservation system could ever solve the problems of the Indian economy completely. Again, an exception proves the rule:

[...] the ideal situation is that we have to do something where people don't go to a position where they want to achieve something and not being able to do that because of something which is not their fault – about which they can't do anything. For example, if there is a race, at the end of the race the winner gets the prize, what if I put a guy who is physically disabled along with those who are physically fit? It is not even a race. If they say I will have reservations, problem is persons who require reservation are very poor; at the end of it, if they say something like you start studying then it becomes fair practice, then you can get job on your own – but the problem is the guy has no means of affording even food. (0415M001-STP)

In many respects, the STP alumni seem to mirror the prevalent views presented by the High Caste IT employees, especially the de-legitimisation of social identity as a cause or criteria for benefits. This could be a sign of a hegemonic discourse in India, which the STP alumni (as representatives of SC and ST segments of society) merely acquiesce to; alternatively, it could be taken as evidence of a sweeping shift in public opinion that includes those parts of the SC/ST population that have joined the new middle classes. Whatever the case, renunciation of caste as a factor in public and, in particular, political matters is a salient feature of this section of society – the most affluent, modern, and therefore trendsetting, in India today.

6.5.4. Consequences of Caste in the private life of the Respondents

6.5.4.1. The rural / urban divide

On the whole, personal experience of caste varied considerably, according to where the trainees grew up and which college they attended. As a general rule, it can be assumed that caste consciousness and related social behaviour is much more pronounced in rural areas, whereas it appears to be almost completely absent in Bangalore itself, at least according to the views expressed in the interviews. This outlook could well be related to the young age of the participants – that is, those who have had limited experience of marriage arrangements and the accompanying caste considerations. But this perception must be taken seriously and not undermined by the researcher's zeal to prove prior theoretical assumptions. The situation in the colleges is also hard to appraise – the opinions expressed in the interviews range from complete ignorance of caste to a clear knowledge of castes because of the quota system. Altogether, one third of the STP respondents had faced discrimination based on their caste, either due to the fact that they grew up in rural areas, or that they were known to have benefited from reserved college seats. The reasons for discrimination can be quite different, but generally fall into two categories: Either it is based on traditional caste prejudice or, more recently, on economic competition

highlighted by the reservation system. This, in turn, raises an interesting question regarding the theory of caste, one that is directly connected to the modern reinterpretation of caste.

According to the interviewees, older, traditional or orthodox people (in rural areas) consider Scheduled Caste members an embarrassment and social nuisance, and try to limit social contact with them to the minimum. This resentment is directed against the existence of Scheduled Castes and Tribes as such, and the reaction ranges from avoiding social contact in general all the way up to a complete social exclusion. This form of caste feeling is firmly rooted in the traditional purity/impurity scheme and accords well with the classical interpretation of caste based on ritual notions and religious texts (see chpt. 1). The situation is fundamentally different in the social setting of the college. The conflict here is neither religiously inspired nor based on a traditional understanding of caste differences. The main resentment is the perceived unfairness of reservations on the basis of caste, primarily an ethical issue connected with economic scarcity, not perceived tradition. Conceptions of caste, in this case, are not necessarily related to hierarchies or pollution rules – again with the qualification that these traditional elements could play a residual role – but rather on economic competition.²⁰⁶ In effect, as long as benefits are attached to caste memberships, caste can be expected to survive, albeit in a much truncated form (as described in the Modern reinterpretation of caste in chpt. 1). However, as theoretically indicated, caste in this version is not the same as that portrayed in the classical interpretation, but is rather a modernised and slimmed down version of this malleable social institution.

The consequences of this reduced, modern reinterpretation of caste are very visible in the actual accounts given by the interviewees. First, it should be noted that most of the participants did not face discrimination at all in their lives. Those who did mainly reported small incidences, while others did not want to specify what happened. The instances of discrimination appeared not to have had much actual impact, with relatively few negative consequences. The only – and by no means insignificant – damage caused by these experiences is surely a diminished feeling of self-worth, resulting from the perpetuated notion that people of Lower Caste origin are not fully equal to the rest of society. This indicates that while caste hierarchy is clearly losing its importance, there are still on-going repercussions – most notably in the attitudes of Low or Scheduled Caste members themselves: While two thirds of the STP respondents had not faced obvious or actual discrimination, they overwhelmingly would still rather hide their social background from the public. And the very fact that virtually all STP respondents seem to share this feeling is telling. Caste hierarchies, even if unenforceable, contradictory and explicitly rejected, have an afterlife in this most modern section of Indian society. While caste may have lost meaning almost completely to those in the middle, those at the top, who still enjoy a certain prestige because of their heritage, and those at the bottom, who are still subjected to negative stereotyping, feel it the most.

²⁰⁶ In an abstract sense, anyone who received benefits that reduced the opportunities of the general audience would face this resentment. In this regard, these forms of caste-consciousness are not specific to caste itself and would be evident with any other kind of distinguishable social characteristic linked to such a benefit.

6.5.4.2. The issue of Caste and Marriage

As the literature suggests, and as confirmed in the interviews, one of the strongest bastions of caste is marriage practice. According to the IHDS – the best data source available on the topic – only 6 per cent of marriages in the representative All-India sample are inter-caste marriages, while the remaining ones are intra-caste (Desai et al. 2007). Thus, even if there is a trend towards more autonomy and consent by the respective partners, the actual numbers do not indicate a general decline of arranged marriages: The 4.94 per cent “self arranged” or love-marriages are still an exception to the rule, with 36.52 per cent “jointly arranged” and 58.54 per cent arranged by the family (23.18 per cent of the latter with the consent of the bride and 35.36 per cent without) (Banerji et al. 2008). Given this background, it is indeed interesting to see how marriage is perceived amongst the respondents.

These young IT engineers, mostly bachelors away from their family of origin, appear to be on the verge of a shift between the expectation of their parental generation and their own much more individualistic and *horizontal* concepts of family life.²⁰⁷ And while no clear consensus is evident on the best choice of marriage, whether ‘love’ or ‘arranged’, the fundamental rule of not alienating parents is virtually always obeyed. This can sometimes lead to a double life, where the moral standards expected by parents are much more relaxed amongst their children once direct parental control ceases. In general, both positions can be found: The claim that ‘love marriages’ do not succeed is balanced by the ‘emancipated’ belief that only the individual matters and that parents should agree to anyone their child chooses:

But problem is, most of this love marriages are not 100 per cent success always. Something like, physically, we can see it, we can attract that girl. After one year, two years, it will come out that we should go, we should divorce. I have seen. OK, arranged marriages are very less to go out. Because the thing when we are going to be arranged marriage, just we will see the family of father and mother. And what is their background, what is their parents, how they are, how the family... We will see all these things. (0426M001-STP)

On the other hand, the right to choose is emphasised, even if the choice has to be limited according to parental demands.

If I say my girlfriend is from a different place, different religion, I can convince my parents [...] I know her for such a long time, my dad would say it's at your own risk. Marriage is done, this is fine for me and my parents, but my grandparents definitely would not be able to understand this. They would say this is definitely not going to work out – forget about it, find another girl from our same religion. It is close to impossible to convince my grandparents. (0509M002-STP)

In the majority of interviews the shift amongst young professionals from completely arranged marriages, where potential spouses are recruited by their parents, to ‘parental approved’ marriages, where the spouses meet independently but seek approval from their parents before the wedding, is acknowledged.

²⁰⁷ The horizontal concept of the family is based on the relation of the couple in question, whereas the prevalent tradition in India emphasises more the vertical family connection – that is, the relations between parents and offspring in the contexts of many generations.

This finding is very much in keeping with the shift found in the IHDS sample mentioned above. Both in the IHDS and here, it is safe to assume that neither the traditional arranged marriage, where individual choice is severely limited, nor love marriages without the approval of both party's parents are becoming common amongst the most modern young Indians. As the approval of the couple's parents is deemed essential, the sanctions on those who marry without it are severe, often resulting in total loss of social support:

What happens if a girl from a different community wants to have a love marriage?

Inter-caste marriage see, right now [...] it would be a big problem. [...] at the end of the day the guy has to live with the girl. They go stay alone. That is it. They get married stay separately. It is like out of family. They have no connection with the family. (0418M001-STP)

This has several implications for the topic of caste. The potential for inter-caste marriages is considerably increased the more autonomy and discretionary competence the individuals in question have. However, this is in turn limited by the need for approval from parents, so the responsibility for social change rests primarily with the parent's generation. The kind of choice they allow, or ultimately agree to, limits the opportunity for inter-caste or inter-religious marriages. There is, though, considerable freedom in this: A number of my interviewees tell of inter-caste marriage, where the parents, often after considerable resistance, ultimately agreed to unions across caste, or much more rarely, across religious allegiances. Nonetheless, it would be totally wrong to emphasise this as a complete liberation of choices (cf. A. V. Banerjee et al. 2009b).

In relation to the caste background of interviewees, wide differences in attitude are apparent. In general terms, it appears as if freedom in marriage choices is less likely for those on the lower tiers of the traditional caste hierarchy than for those from privileged backgrounds. Thus, while interviewees from High Caste backgrounds tend to emphasise the new freedoms and choices they have, and suggest that caste is rarely an issue, the STP participants' views are markedly more sceptical:

The thing what happens is, their parents put a clause: get married to anyone, go for a love marriage, not at all an issue, but make sure he or she is of our caste. This is the only condition they put. Three of my very good friends working right now in [the interviewee's company] they say this. Lot of other things have also happened – he was in love with another person, everything was good but it did not work out because her parents put down the same clause and his parents also has put down the same clause. (0415M001-STP)

This certainly reflects the barriers faced in the marriage market, and indicates that perceived low status can undermine prospective grooms' or brides' market value, even if their social standing as IT employees places them in a higher bracket.²⁰⁸

²⁰⁸ A slight shift is visible in the marriage market: IT employment no longer tops the ranks; due to the insecurity of these jobs and the obvious vulnerabilities to global demand curves, it is now seen as a trade off between the still exceptional pay structures and the realisation that these jobs are never guaranteed. Government jobs, often reviled in the boom years both in prestige and pay scale, are no longer seen as a second choice, and the traditional regard for public service positions has experienced a revival. The dominant role for IT as an aspirational model for India's new role in the world has definitely taken a dent; the role model for capitalistic modernisation is no longer as shining as it once was.

If I want to marry a girl in Upper Caste, it is damn very difficult. It will come till killing me. They are even ready to kill me. It is like killing in the name of honour. You know, they cannot accept even in their dreams, you know, their daughter to me. Because I belong to Lower Caste. So that thing is still there. So if in my generation, if tomorrow I have kids, I think this will not go. This will diminish. Because I have maturity level [...] My colleague, he is Upper Caste. We can have an alliance with us, between us. But older people, my parents, they come from old generation. And if a girl, if I am looking to marry a girl who is of Upper Caste, her parents also come from old generation. So they know what is the caste difference. (0407M002-STP)

Seen against the ‘optimism’ (or euphemistic usage) of their High Caste peers, this qualifies the claim that caste has no meaning as long as the potential spouse comes from a ‘good family’. And ‘good family’ is, at least in the case of Low Castes or minority religious groups, nothing more than a codeword for a respectable Hindu with sound economic standing²⁰⁹ and the right origin from a pool of acceptable castes.

Nevertheless, even with the High Caste respondents there seems to be a gap between the liberal attitudes that are initially expressed, and the quite severe restrictions that only become obvious after deeper discussion. One of the respondents whom I met quite regularly first declared that a ‘love marriage’ would be not a problem for his parents and that he had already had several girlfriends. On closer examination, however, it turned out that his girlfriends were rather platonic affairs (if at all) and that even the tolerance of his parents towards ‘love marriages’ would have strict limits. His formula for a suitable bride was the usual “she has to be from a good family”, meaning (upon my further inquiry) someone coming from a respectable, vegetarian family from *Brahmin* or *Vaishya Varna* background (he being himself a *Brahmin*) (minutes 23.09.2009). This indicates both change and continuity: For him, this would already be a significant departure from orthodox tradition, in which his specific sub-caste would be the only suitable category. But even the range of choices he now enjoys is firmly limited; his bride should neither come from a poor family, nor should she belong to a different religion or a culturally different caste. If caste considerations are relaxed here, they are only relaxed to the extent that neither ‘class barriers’ nor cultural borderlines are being crossed.

Consequently, it is still highly unlikely that a Hindu-Muslim union would find approval in the eyes of the respective parents. The same hold true for unions between partners from culturally very different castes, even if marriages between spouses of different caste but similar cultural background are becoming increasingly common amongst highly-educated professionals. Stochastic factors also limit the chances of people from very different castes even coming into close contact. The fact that the new middle classes are recruited mainly from Hindu Upper Castes, Dominant Agricultural Castes and the occasional Christian (see 4.2.4), acts as a barrier to the casual mixing of people from very diverse backgrounds. As discussed later in chapter eight, friendship networks are, with few exceptions, restricted to a circle of people who share characteristics like language, region of origin, dietary preferences and (what I would call) cultural

²⁰⁹ The dowry system, discussed under 3.5.1. is a further argument against parentally non-approved love marriages. As salaries in IT have climbed to previously unknown heights, so have dowry expectation for the potential wives of IT employees. Compare Sharmista Self and Richard Grabowski, ‘Modernization, Inter-Caste Marriage, and Dowry: An Analytical Perspective’, *Journal of Asian Economics*, 20/1 (2009), 69-76.

proximity by choice. The same holds true for the IT industry: Even though this sector brings together a mix of people from all over India, there is a subtle pre-selection at work once the caste background is taken into account. As long as not all castes and religions of India are equally represented in the workforce, the chances of cultural clashes over caste differences are as limited as the possibility of encountering people from the very extreme ends of the caste spectrum. Thus, as long as the workforce itself is unevenly recruited from only a few sections of society, other sections are virtually cut off from social developments within IT. Finally, as long as the divide between a public disregard for caste, on the one hand, and a private observance of caste, on the other, remains in place, no social revolution should be expected from the mere mixing of different castes at the workplace.

With regard to the future of caste, this has several possible implications. For instance, it could mean that the increasing irrelevance of boundaries between castes that share roughly similar cultural patterns will overcome the strict restrictions imposed by *Jati*, although broader cultural divides would still remain. Alternatively, it could also mean that caste is increasingly in competition with more mundane, economically-relevant considerations. In the interviews, for example, it is clearly discernible that caste was never exclusively seen as the only relevant marriage criteria by participants' parents. In the more liberal families, alternative benchmarks for a good spouse, those that have always been considered alongside caste membership, are increasingly overriding traditional caste concerns; educational qualifications and economic success can easily trump caste allegiance. If this were to happen over an extended period, caste as a social institution would diminish in importance in the next few generations. However, there are serious objections to any such prediction.

First of all, inter-caste marriages are overwhelmingly seen as a second choice, as a compromise one has to make given changing circumstances. Even if approved by the respective parents, they are still not seen as ideal; the fear is always that (grand)children might not be raised according to family tradition and culture. Deep-seated opposition to the idea of caste intermixing is sometimes voiced even if it is accepted in a particular individual's case. Second, any such inter-caste marriages are only thinkable (or at least reluctantly accepted) in some parts of the Indian population, or in states, like Kerala, which have a long tradition of inter-caste unions. Within the Indian middle classes, normally deemed the most liberal, both caste-rejecting and caste-abiding sections exist side by side, with no clear trend visible.²¹⁰ Third, a backlash against inter-caste relations and marriages is always possible, not least within the Hindu nationalist movement that discourages those relations within its "moral police" programme (C. Shah 2008). Thus, even though a number of respondents state a preference for love marriage, strong opposition still exists with no general consensus upon its acceptability.

²¹⁰ Modernity and technical change can, ironically, give a new lease of life to pre-modern institutions: The wildly popular matrimonial online platforms, like shaadi.com or simplymarry.com, make it possible to find potential spouses exactly matched to caste criteria. Thereby they provide a deep pool of candidates that makes compromise on caste easily avoidable. In the case of simplymarry.com, it is even impossible to search for spouses without prior selection for preferred community and caste. Compare Subhasish Dugar, Haimanti Bhattacharya, and David H. Reiley, Jr., 'Can't Buy Me Love: A Field Experiment Exploring the Trade-Off between Income and Caste-Status in an Indian Matrimonial Market', *SSRN eLibrary* (2010).

6.5.4.3. Consequences for Caste in Modernity

As discussed in the first chapter, caste considerations in marriage are crucial for the survival of caste as a social institution; in the modern interpretation, the biological element of caste – epitomised in the prevalent caste endogamy – is the strongest of all three; and this is therefore most telling about the future of caste. If inter-castes marriages suddenly become the norm rather than the exception in India, the institution of caste would be gone within one generation. The significance of this biological element²¹¹ is certainly appreciated by at least some of the respondents. One possible result is an open contrast between an idealist desire to eradicate caste, on the one hand, and pragmatic resignation that this will never happen, on the other:

What could be the solution for caste?

Everyone should marry out of his caste. Seriously. Caste should never be considered.

[later in the interview] I don't think my parents will agree to marry someone other than my caste. Everywhere, not only in my place it happens, and 99 per cent it happens in India. (0407M003-STP)

Whatever opinion the individual respondent might have on the issue of caste, the significance of intra-caste marriages for the survival of this social institution highlights the relevance of these interviews even more; that is, even in the supposedly modern, highly educated (in a technical sense) and culturally influential circles of the new middle classes, the survival of caste considerations in marriage points to the resilience of caste itself. If there is change visible here, it is change at a glacial pace:

Where would you see the institution of caste in about 20 or 50 years of time?

In older days, they used to differentiate a lot. Now people are changing and they are into good qualification and good professional life – so I don't think they will think about casteism in future.

What about marriage? I talked to a lot of people who said, in my own life it doesn't matter anymore but when it comes to marriage my parents will look for someone of the same caste.

That's what my parents will be looking for – that I should get married to my own caste person. Maybe in 10 or 20 years down the line I may not be looking for that for my baby. It is changing, maybe my parents or my grandparents were really strict about these things and when it comes to my parents it has changed, but still they are in that circle.

What has changed between your parents and grandparents?

My parents, they never differentiate between this person is from high community or low community, they never think about that. I hope that many parents do the same nowadays. So in 20 years we will be parents and we will not think about that. (0404M001-STP)

Given that there is a certain ambiguity about the exact position of her parents, this interview is insightful in the way that it documents a shift that I would consider typical for modernisation in India. The

²¹¹ In one instance, one of my interview partners referred to the hidden power of caste by comparing different castes to different breeds of dogs (he used Doberman and German Shepherd as example) – even in the crossbreeds the original traits (bred into these dogs) would eventually resurface in the offspring.

interviewee's parents, who do not seem to care about caste hierarchy in everyday life, still consider only an intra-caste marriage feasible for their daughter. Thus, the parents both reject (or at least disregard) hierarchy and, at the same time, take caste into consideration in marriage arrangements; therein lies the core of the 'modernised' approach to caste that is encapsulated in the modern interpretation (chpt. 1.3.3). Here, the rationalisation of caste centres on the notion that one's own community needs to be preserved, no matter what position in any hierarchy it occupies. In the words of the same respondent:

[...] they do not agree for love marriage, first thing they see is caste – High Caste or Low Caste, they are not bothered, if he is from different caste they disagree. For example, a girl is from high community and boy is from low community, always problem is from girl's side family. But even if the girl's side agree – boy's parents may not agree even though girl is from higher community. (0404M001-STP)

The chance of 'status gentrification', through marrying into a family of higher status, is rejected in the same way that a 'status downgrade', through alliance with someone from lower standing, would be. The result, in keeping with the general trend of modernisation in India, is an unconnected, non-hierarchical and mutually exclusive caste fragmentation. And because the systematic nature of caste is almost absent here, the classical interpretation of caste (chpt. 1.3.1) loses its explanatory power almost completely. The modern interpretation, on the other hand, is confirmed by these accounts, even if every inter-caste marriage means that the whole caste idea is losing social credibility. As long as arranged intra-caste marriages are the norm, this form of caste ideology and practice is expected to be the dominant reinterpretation of caste within modernity.

6.6. Conclusion

As this chapter has covered a great deal of ground, a simple, straightforward conclusion seems impossible. However, a minimum baseline can be established once the main topics are considered. First and foremost, caste does not seem to play any role within the IT industry itself – both in the perspective of High Caste respondents and those from SC and ST background. Even if the workforce appears highly biased towards Hindu High Castes, Dominant Agricultural Castes and Christians, there seems to be no linkage to any particular community. No interviewee could imagine caste-based discrimination within the industry, with none actually experiencing caste-based discrimination either. In this respect, there was a general agreement between the views of the STP alumni and those of the mainstream IT workforce. However, there is still the issue that most Lower Caste and tribe members would not speak about their social background, in keeping with the industry's policy of avoiding social conflicts. In consequence, it is still an open question how far this reluctance to speak openly about caste is a result of the general anonymity in the IT sector, or of the persistence of the stigma attached to a 'disrespectable' caste (or tribal) background. There needs to be more research on this (as attempted, unsuccessfully, in chpt. 7).

When it comes to the private life of the IT workforce, caste is apparently of much more concern –

especially so once marriage decisions are considered. In accordance with other, large-scale studies, a picture emerges in which caste boundaries are increasingly traded off against other factors, although this does not warrant the conclusion that caste is losing its importance in Indian marriages. If anything, caste is considered one very important factor amongst others, with a strong reluctance to break with family traditions evident amongst the respondents. There seems to be a shift towards allowing more castes into the pool of eligible marriage partners, but this does not automatically mean that alliances across broad cultural divides (such as the vegetarian /non-vegetarian split), or even across religious boundaries, have become acceptable. The result could be the emergence of broad caste alliances, based on cultural similarities and comparable socio-economic status, although it is much too early to predict how this may work out in practice. For the moment, only incipient changes are visible with regard to marriage – thereby upholding the theoretical prediction that the biological element (chpt. 1.2.2) is the one most likely to survive under modern circumstances.

Clearly apparent in the interviews is the contrast between the IT workplace, on the one hand, and family expectations, on the other. Whereas the former simply ignores caste and declares it irrelevant, the latter is still very much informed by caste considerations, even if they are not obvious at first glance. Young IT employees tend to live a split life, conforming to the workplace ethos laid out by the IT industry, while not totally departing from the expectations of their family of origin. So while caste considerations are certainly less accentuated when young employees are separated from their family, there is still at least one instance where they are confronted with caste and its social consequences – that is, once the issue of marriage arises. This poses the interesting question of the extent to which these two value spheres can be kept separate, an issue that surely deserves more research. Against a general background of ongoing cultural change in Indian society, no conclusive answer seems possible at the moment, although promising avenues for further research are apparent. Two of these are explored in the remaining chapters.

7. A (failed) Experiment

7.1. Background

As the previous chapter has shown, there are remarkable inconsistencies within the prevalent arguments that caste has lost its meaning in modern/modernising India in general and the Indian IT sector in particular. In broad terms, there seems to be a split between a private and a public interpretation of caste – with a reduced and/or vanishing importance in the public sphere, and a still strong existence in the private sphere. This ambiguity is clearly revealed in the answers given in the interviews in chapter six: On the one hand, no participants from SC or ST background described any negative experience within the IT industry. As surprising as this is, the interviewees consistently claimed that no caste discrimination, or even the scope for discrimination, seemed imaginable within IT for those who have historically borne the brunt of caste-based discrimination in India. On the other hand, it was quite apparent to me (and confirmed in the interviews) that a Low Caste or tribal identity was seen as a potential burden, and almost never as neutral or something to be proud of. The industry's firm policy of avoiding the topic of social origin, and the consequent hiding of personal background by most interviewees in the workplace, seemed to indicate that caste is a hidden, not a resolved issue. If caste neutrality was indeed a general and reliable feature of the IT workforce, one's social origin should be of no particular concern; hence, the conspicuous avoidance of the subject, highlighted in the interviews, would be inexplicable under such circumstances. This suggests that the private/public divide needs to be artificially sustained in the workplace by a deliberate policy of restricting personal discussions to avoid a potential source of identity-based conflict.

As long as caste remains relevant in private circumstances, and as long as employees have to live a dual existence, the apparent caste neutrality in IT appears fragile. And as neat and clean as this division of private and public life seems at first glance, the potential for conflict is tremendous. In certain instances, for example, if work colleagues become involved in personal or private relationships, the 'double framing' of private and public potentially clash – and this is clearly seen by the interviewees in the previous chapter. In their statements about marriage preferences, caste always shows through – either as the main criteria for partner choice or as a touchy obstacle to so-called love marriages. In any case, these IT employees are confronted with the fact that their very identity includes caste as an important factor, not only on private occasions but most notably when it comes to marriage arrangements. With this in mind, it is legitimate to investigate whether this private caste identity leaks into the perceived caste-neutral work environment of the IT industry. That is, would someone who, willingly or unwillingly, factors caste into his or her private decision-making completely abandon this topic once he or she is in the caste-neutral, professional environment of IT? Could it be that private caste-notions still show through in professional settings, or that antipathies or preferences, based on caste identities, influence seemingly unrelated or caste-neutral decisions in the workplace? And, in turn, what conclusion could be

drawn about caste perceptions if such influences are verified?

Naturally, these questions require a completely different methodological approach. Most generally, it appears difficult to validate social preferences and antipathies in such a sensitive context. Since direct methods such as interviews are always liable to be biased by *social desirability* (in the sociological sense) this method is of limited use here. Furthermore, since often subconscious preferences need to be accessed, only indirect means are advisable – that is, it could well be that people are not aware of their actual or potential caste preferences, and would simply be unable to answer questions about it. For these reasons, a suitable methodological approach is needed; here this was provided by a socio-psychological experiment that would provide testable results without revealing the purpose and the aim of the project, and potentially yield conclusions that would otherwise be unobtainable by more direct methods. By using an experiment with a hidden research agenda, the problem of *social desirability* would diminish as the actual issue being tested in the research would not be obvious to the participants. Such an experiment could offer an interesting look behind and beyond the self-disguise that many Indians show about caste in their personal experience.

7.2. The Experiment

7.2.1. Methodological blueprint and adaptation

For the design of the experiment, a model was found in a different, but related context. The following is therefore based on and inspired by the famous studies on aversive racism developed by John F. Dovidio and Samuel Gaertner (Dovidio and Gaertner 2000, 2004), who pioneered methodological ways to investigate deep-seated partialities about race in the US. It was hoped that one of their designs could be adapted to the Indian context and – with modest changes – replicate the results that have been consistently shown in the North American setting. There, Dovidio et al. tested the hidden prejudices of white college students towards black peers in a two-step process. By first interviewing the white college students about their attitudes towards race and race relations, they established very high levels of stated anti-racism, a fact they tried to test further. They therefore let their participants rate fictitious CVs of both black and white applicants for minor positions in college administration. The hypothesis being tested was that aversions against black candidates would show in lower ratings for black candidates compared with equally qualified white counterparts. All fictitious CVs had been constructed to fit into three pre-tested categories: “clearly strongly qualified”, “ambiguously qualified” and “clearly weakly qualified”, with black and white candidates equally featuring in all groups. And while the results did not differ much in the highest and the lowest category, there was a significant difference visible in the way that the middle category was rated: While the white candidate got job recommendations from 76 per cent of the participants, the black candidate only received 45 per cent recommendations (Dovidio and

Gaertner 2000: 317). The authors concluded that even when racism was anathema for most participants, a deep-seated prejudice showed in instances when clear criteria for an appraisal were missing, and the results could be interpreted as revealing a form of hidden or ‘aversive’ racism against black people in the US.

Suitably adapted, Dovidio's design could provide a good basis for a similar experiment in the Indian context. A scenario needed to be devised that was readily comprehended by the participants and which could yield results representative of real situations in the IT industry. First and foremost, the CVs needed to resemble typical CVs in the IT industry. At the same time, the caste identity and the local origin of the fictitious job candidates had to be recognisable beyond doubt. The former was to be established by well-known caste names with a supra-regional appeal, and which should be known and associated with the right caste group by most respondents. The latter could be more easily established by naming the job candidates' birthplace and location of schools and colleges attended.²¹² Replacing the categories of white and black with the extreme ends of the traditional caste spectrum – i.e. *Brahmins* for whites and SC or ST members for blacks²¹³ – it could be reasonably assumed that negative stereotypes against Lower Castes or tribal members would show in the ratings if they existed amongst the participants of the experiment. It would be expected that, given unclear or ambiguous qualifications,²¹⁴ participants would take factors like social background into account.²¹⁵ If caste preferences towards both ends of the spectrum were as predicted, potential prejudice against people with lower social status would show in significantly lower ratings of their CVs compared to those of *Brahmins* with equal qualifications.²¹⁶ And if, as indicated in the interviews, preferences based on local origin are more important, they would feature more prominently when cross-compared to the differences on the basis of social background.

To summarise: The whole design was based on the assumption that caste membership is recognisable from surnames, plus other given hints. Furthermore, it relied on the presumption that mental associations with certain castes have a measurable influence when judging a person's qualification in unclear circumstances. Thus, if caste prejudices function so that those higher in the social hierarchy enjoy the benefit of the doubt, then those CVs in the ambiguous qualification slot would show higher ratings for *Brahmins* compared to members of Low Caste or tribal communities. However, if the participants clearly recognised the applicant's caste (or tribal) background and yet no difference in the

²¹² In both cases, the right association of the fictitious candidates to the established categories needed to be tested by pre-tests prior to the experiment itself.

²¹³ This approach is not without problems: There is a considerable difference between ST and SC members in terms of social prestige, with ST being much less the recipient of negative stereotyping. Furthermore, membership in SC or ST castes is much less visible than any black / white racial categorisation, with membership in these caste and tribal groups often hidden in public. So the context is very different from the one found by Dovidio and Gaertner.

²¹⁴ The middle category is of main concern, since qualification is most in doubt here.

²¹⁵ Taking into account the experience from the interviews from chapter six, it would be fair to predict that there are differing expectations about performance capabilities that are roughly associated with positions in the traditional caste hierarchy. To be more precise: it would be safe to assume that *Brahmins* enjoy the benefit of the doubt in the intellectual field, whereas those from lower social rungs are all too often depicted as taking advantage of government's benefits without the ability to perform on this level.

²¹⁶ In one case the design of the experiments could be altered without any prior tests: By basing the hypothesis on the middle category of the “ambiguously qualified”, only one control group is needed and the “weakly qualified” category could be cut out to save resources. Hence, only “highly qualified” and “ambiguously qualified” job candidates were needed.

average ratings between a *Brahmin* and a Low Caste/tribal from the same region was visible, then the hypothesis would be rejected. Popper's falsifiability criteria is taken into account, as the hypothesis is refuted if both *Brahmins* and SC / ST candidates with equal qualifications show equal average ratings. This result would then be compared to one based on local origin (broadly a North/South division), to assess which category featured more prominently. As the experiment was set to take place in Hyderabad, every candidate category was doubled to resemble an applicant from Hyderabad and one from the North of India.

For practical reasons, a concept had been developed (see questionnaire in the Appendix) that polarised caste differences into the extremes of *Brahmin* and Scheduled Tribes, not Scheduled Caste.²¹⁷ The choice for ST members over SC was simply based on the evaluated fact²¹⁸ that there is no widely recognisable SC surname in Andhra Pradesh that clearly identifies members of a Scheduled Caste.²¹⁹ For the ST category the name “Naik” was chosen as the most common surname amongst the Scheduled Tribes participants of STP Hyderabad, and consequentially used as a name in the CVs to indicate an Andhra Pradesh tribal member.²²⁰ In order to strengthen this connection and increase the chances of easy identification of a tribal member, the language Sugali was put in the CVs as the first language for those of tribal origin, whereas the *Brahmin* CV stated that the person could speak Sanskrit as one of his/her languages. Putting a tribal language in the CV would offer a further clue to social identity, and this proved an additional argument for choosing Scheduled Tribes candidates over those with Scheduled Castes backgrounds.

Altogether, the design allowed testing of two crucial forms of social preferences: Given that the participants would recognise the different social backgrounds in the CVs, it would be possible to distinguish between caste-based and regional preferences. In the end, eight different résumés were constructed in a way that portrayed a young job applicant with one of the following characteristics:

| AP Brahmin | Andhra Pradesh Tribal | North Indian Brahmin | North Indian Tribal |
|----------------------|-----------------------|----------------------|----------------------|
| Highly qualified | Highly qualified | Highly qualified | Highly qualified |
| AP Brahmin | Andhra Pradesh Tribal | North Indian Brahmin | North Indian Tribal |
| Doubtfully qualified | Doubtfully qualified | Doubtfully qualified | Doubtfully qualified |

²¹⁷ Tribes are not castes or vice-versa, therefore this interchange is a clear transgression of the original research plan. But this could be justified in two ways: Theoretically, they both are increasingly interchangeable once caste is interpreted in modern ways (chpt. 1.3.3.). Empirically, the situation of Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes is often equally marginal, even if the stigma attached to Scheduled Castes is somewhat more degrading. Considering these two arguments, the interchange is still a transgression, but narrowly justifiable given the methodological hurdles.

²¹⁸ For this purpose, the participant list of the STP programme, conducted by IEG Hyderabad, has been used in anonymous form.

²¹⁹ Interestingly, it was almost impossible to find a Schedule Caste name that was recognisable. Most members of Scheduled Castes would avoid showing their caste background, and would either hide their caste revealing surnames or adopt names from different castes to disguise the – still embarrassing – social origin.

²²⁰ Admittedly, the name Naik carries a different connotation in different parts of India and can easily be mistaken for “Nair” or “Nayar”, which would be associated with Kshatriya castes in most Indian states. Only in connection with a birthplace in Andhra Pradesh would Naik be clearly assigned to a ST member.

Apart from regional origin and caste background, all other qualifications were duplicated, with the participants asked to rate the employability of the candidate in the presented résumé. Disguised as a study on technical qualification in IT, the respondents were left in the dark about the real aim of the study and could only get indirect information about the social background of the applicants: The regional origin was easily assessable by the place of birth and the college locality of the applicant. Caste background was detectable by the surname and languages spoken, although these had to be less obvious in order to hide the content of the research. (See the pre-test results for further clarification, and the appendix for the exact questionnaires.)

7.2.2. Pre-test I

To test the given hypothesis, the following clues about the candidates' social backgrounds were given:

Table 7.2.2.1. The candidates for the pre-test I, according to the social background

| AP Brahmin | AP Tribal | North Indian Brahmin | North Indian Tribal |
|----------------------------|----------------------------|----------------------------|----------------------------|
| Surname: Shastri | Surname: Naik | Surname: Sharma | Surname: Bangdikar |
| Language: Sanskrit | Language: Sugali | Language: Sanskrit | Language: Lambadi |
| College: Hyderabad / AP | College: Hyderabad / AP | College: Ambala/Haryana | College: Ambala/Haryana |

Those four social categories were duplicated in two versions, thereby providing all social categories in a "highly qualified" and a "somewhat ambiguously qualified" version. The difference in qualification was as follows:

Table 7.2.2.2. Markers of Qualification in both the pre-tests

| Highly qualified | Ambiguously qualified |
|--|--|
| Aggregated Marks scored: 77.54 % (BE) 68.12 % (Intermediate) 83.28 % (ICSE) | Aggregated Marks scored: 57.24 % (BE) 49.12 % (Intermediate) 65.28 % (ICSE) |
| Languages: C, C++, Visual C++, HTML, ActionScript, UML, XML, Java | Languages: C#, C, HTML, Actionscript, UML, XML |

In all other respects, the CVs were identical. Therefore, eight different CVs were ready to be tested amongst 40 volunteers from the general IT workforce in Hyderabad.²²¹

²²¹ Fortunately, thanks to the help of IEG contacts and the approval from vice-presidents, the research project was run in a large branch of a MNC in Hyderabad. The pre-test itself was conducted around lunch time in front of the cafeteria within the

The first pre-test was planned with 40 participants – 5 for each of the 8 CVS – and completed successfully by 39 of them, one questionnaire was not returned. A whole series of problems occurred in this test, not least the reluctance of participants to reveal their own caste or religious allegiance:

Table 7.2.2.3. Social composition of the 39 participants in pre-test I

| Community | Respondents |
|---------------------------------------|-------------|
| Brahmin | 6 |
| Christian | 4 |
| Muslim | 2 |
| OC ²²² | 2 |
| Reddy | 1 |
| Koppuca Velama (BC-D ²²³) | 1 |
| Capu | 1 |
| Munurcapu (BC-D) | 1 |
| Kshatriya | 1 |
| Vaishya | 1 |
| Not given | 19 |

Table 7.2.2.4. Aggravated social composition of the 39 participants in pre-test I

| Community in categories | Respondents | Percentage share |
|--------------------------------|-------------|------------------|
| Brahmin | 6 | 15.4 |
| High Caste – excluding Brahmin | 4 | 10.3 |
| Christian | 4 | 10.3 |
| Dominant Agricultural Castes | 2 | 5.1 |
| Muslim | 2 | 5.1 |
| Backward Community | 2 | 5.1 |
| Not given | 19 | 48.7 |

premises of the company in Hyderabad. People were simply asked to fill out the prepared questionnaire (see appendix) that took approximately five minutes. Participation was voluntarily and induced by the offer of chocolate and my personal persuasiveness. This implies, of course, that the sample was self-selected; employees with higher levels of confidence, with more extroverted personalities or simply with more curiosity would consequentially be overrepresented in the sample. Whether this is caste-neutral could be a hotly debate question, but can be left aside for the moment. However, methodologically it must be clear that, since it does not select participants on a random base, this design cannot claim to be representative for all employees of this company, let alone of all IT employees in Hyderabad or India. However, since the object of the study was not revealed at the participant-selection stage, a self-selection bias by reference to their own attitudes to caste and social background can equally be dismissed.

²²² Stands for Open Category – generally used as a signifier for Non-SC, Non-ST and Non-OBC and usually associated with Higher Castes.

²²³ An official sub-classification of ‘Backward Communities’ in Andhra Pradesh – not relevant in other Indian states.

With this number in the unspecified social background category, any further reflection upon the social composition of the sample is meaningless. Nevertheless, at least it seemed as if the previously explored over-representation of Hindu High Castes, Dominant Agricultural Castes and Christians would be confirmed in this small sample. In contrast, the gender composition is much clearer, but even here the problem of missing answers is apparent. From 39 participants, 30 (77 per cent) were male, seven (18 per cent) female, with two persons not filling in the gender box.

The most important aim of the pre-test was to examine if the participants would correctly realise where the fictitious job candidates came from and what their caste backgrounds were. Therefore, two questions relating to regional origin and caste background were included, neither of which would feature in the main experiment but which were needed in order to test the viability of the design. Although the results were mixed, they pointed clearly to a general non-recognition with regard to caste:

Table 7.2.2.5. Correct identification of the applicant's caste and origin

| Applicant | Regional origin | Caste |
|---------------|---------------------|--------------------|
| North Brahmin | 8 out of 9 → 88.9 % | 4 out of 9 → 44.4% |
| AP Brahmin | 8 out of 10 → 80 % | 2 out of 10 → 20 % |
| North Tribal | 4 out of 10 → 40 % | 3 out of 10 → 30 % |
| AP Tribal | 9 out of 10 → 90 % | 1 out of 10 → 10 % |

While the regional origin was in most cases identified correctly, the overwhelming majority failed to point out the applicant's caste background. Unfortunately, the low number of respondents in each category does not allow for any further interpretation beyond the obvious, but the difference between region and caste is striking in its clarity. With recognition rates consistently lower than 50 per cent, the experiment would simply fail to deliver any meaningful result relating to the hypothesis, since the test rests upon the fact that caste identity is recognised by, ideally, all participants, and realistically by at least 80 per cent.

7.2.3. Pre-test II

For this reason, a second pre-test was designed, this time with more precautionary measures against any refusal to answer, and with much clearer hints about the caste background of the job candidate. First, I tried to keep the participation process as confidential as possible to encourage the participants to reveal information they would hide in situations where personal information could leak to someone else. Observations from the first pre-test suggested that lack of confidentiality could be behind some of the refusals to answer sensitive and private questions: In a number of cases, questionnaire were filled out while others (friends and colleagues) were present, this could clearly have resulted in discomfort and consequent refusal to fill in personal details, such as their own caste. To avoid this kind of undesired breach of confidentiality, I insisted that everyone filled out the questionnaire alone. Furthermore, I made

clear that all prompted information was crucial for my project and that complete confidentiality was assured.

The other challenge, the problem that most participants seemed unable to recognise the caste of the job applicants by means of the clues given in the CVs, was met by increasing the hints to the extent that the realistic aspect of the experiment was endangered. This time, the birth place was clearly indicated and explicitly mentioned in the CV. Additional to the two existing hints regarding caste background, two further clues were integrated into the CVs that would reveal the social background of the applicant: The applicant from a tribal background stated that he had received a scholarship designated for “socially backward communities”. Additionally, he had acted as a volunteer for the tribal section of the All India Human Rights & Citizen Option (AIHRCO). The *Brahmin* applicant was obviously not a recipient of any scholarship, but had been a volunteer for the All India *Brahmin Maha Sabha*. With this, more information about the social background of the applicants was given than could usually be expected in a technical CV for a position in IT.

Table 7.2.3.1. The candidates for the pre-test II, according to the social background

| AP Brahmin | AP Tribal | North Indian Brahmin | North Indian Tribal |
|---|---|---|---|
| Surname: Shastri | Surname: Naik | Surname: Sharma | Surname: Rathod |
| Language: Sanskrit | Language: Sugali | Language: Sanskrit | Language: Lambadi |
| Born: Narketpally / AP | Born: Narketpally / AP | Born: Chandigarh / Punjab | Born: Chandigarh / Punjab |
| College: Hyderabad / AP | College: Hyderabad / AP | College: Ambala/Haryana | College: Ambala/Haryana |
| # Volunteer in the All India Brahmin Maha Sabha | # recipient of a scholarship for socially backward communities # Volunteer of the Tribal Awareness Section of the AIHRCO | # Volunteer in the All India Brahmin Maha Sabha | # recipient of a scholarship for socially backward communities # Volunteer of the Tribal Awareness Section of the AIHRCO |

The second pre-test, this time with 32 questionnaires (of which 31 were returned) was conducted in much the same fashion as the first – that is, I stood in front of the cafeteria and persuaded people to fill out the questionnaires. However, small but significant changes had been integrated into the design to facilitate understanding of the crucial points. The name of the Punjabi tribal candidate was changed to Rathod, in the hope that this would enhance recognition rates. The whole experiment was also conducted in a more controlled way; participants were requested to fill in the questionnaire without someone looking over their shoulder, there was considerably less rush to get the questionnaires distributed and returned, and generally more time was allocated to every participant.

These changes proved to be quite effective, at least for the first problem. The rate of refusal to reveal one's own caste background fell dramatically and the data proved much more usable, albeit the problem of the very small sample size remained:

Table 7.2.3.2. Social composition of the 31 participants in pre-test II

| Community | Respondents |
|---------------|-------------|
| Brahmin | 8 |
| Christian | 4 |
| Reddy | 3 |
| Kamma | 3 |
| OC | 2 |
| Vaishya | 2 |
| Kshatriya | 1 |
| Yadava (BC-D) | 1 |
| Kumbala | 1 |
| Lingayat | 1 |
| Chettiya (BC) | 1 |
| Chowdhary | 1 |
| Ezhava | 1 |
| Not given | 2 |

Table 7.2.3.3. Aggravated social composition of the 31 participants in pre-test II

| Community in categories | Respondents | Percentage share |
|------------------------------|-------------|------------------|
| Brahmin | 8 | 25.8 |
| High Caste – excl. Brahmin | 6 | 19.4 |
| Dominant Agricultural Castes | 8 | 25.8 |
| Christian | 4 | 12.9 |
| Backward Community | 3 | 9.7 |
| Not given | 2 | 6.5 |

Here, previous findings about the caste composition of IT's workforce finds anecdotal confirmation: With 22 out of 31 participants (71 per cent) from Hindu High Caste or Dominant Agricultural Castes, the social exclusiveness of a position in India's IT sector is visible beyond any reasonable doubt. The gender

composition on the other hand closely resembles the one from pre-test I – males made up 25 (81 per cent) and women five (16 per cent) of the 31 participants, with one person failing to tick the gender box. Altogether, the social composition of the pre-test sample is remarkably consistent with the available data on the IT workforce in general, notwithstanding the fact that all these data rest on weak statistical foundations.

Unfortunately for the planned project, however, it turned out that the second pre-test also failed to yield the expected results. Even the highlighted clues about the caste background of the job applicants did not result in recognition rates that could be deemed sufficient to further pursue the experiment:

Table 7.2.2.4. Correct identification of the applicant's caste and origin in pre-test II

| Applicant | Regional origin | Caste |
|---------------|---------------------|---------------------|
| North Brahmin | 5 out of 7 → 71.4 % | 4 out of 7 → 57.1% |
| AP Brahmin | 8 out of 8 → 100 % | 5 out of 8 → 62.5 % |
| North Tribal | 8 out of 8 → 100 % | 3 out of 8 → 37.5 % |
| AP Tribal | 7 out of 8 → 87.5 % | 1 out of 8 → 12.5 % |

The exact place of birth, stated in the CVs, definitely increased the recognition of the regional location of the candidate, as did the constructed membership in the All India *Brahmin Maha Sabha*: The recognition rate regarding regional origin averaged close to 90 per cent and the *Brahmins* in the CVs were recognised with well over 50 per cent chance. On the other hand, the recognition rates for the two tribal candidates remained remarkably low – both scored lower than 50 per cent and in the case of the Andhra Pradesh tribal, the recognition rate was as low as 12.5 per cent. As with the first pre-test, it appeared that 'lower communities' and, in this case, ST members were difficult to identify by reference to their surnames, partially because their surnames are not known to outsiders, and partially because they try to hide their social background by using other surnames or acronyms.

The results clearly indicate the inability of the majority of experiment participants to identify social background correctly, especially where tribal candidates are concerned. Knowledge about tribal surnames and languages seemed almost non-existent amongst the pre-test participants. At the same time, the means to provide further clues about social background in the CVs appear exhausted: Given that the hints in the CVs are more than what can be realistically expected in a typical CV of a job applicant in IT, it seems impossible to proceed with this particular experiment design. With such a low rate of social background recognition, proceeding further with the experiment would only provide questionable results. If – in the most extreme case – the tribal background of the fictitious applicant was correctly identified by a mere 12.5 per cent of the respondents, no possible variance in the appraisal of the applicant's professional skills could reasonably be ascribed to prejudice about social background. If anything, this design would perhaps test the social appreciation of *Brahmins*, who had recognition rates

of around 60 per cent, but even this would be less than ideal methodologically, and doubtful for logical reasons.²²⁴ So even if the *Brahmin* candidates had been correctly identified by 100 per cent of the respondents, the fact that the tribal applicants have not, undermines the whole design.

For all these reasons, the planned experiment had to be abandoned. It would simply be scientifically dishonest and methodologically unjustified to proceed while ignoring the fundamental inadequacy of the design in this particular research setting. As long as the recognition rates are as low as they had been in the pre-tests, no conclusion could be arrived at based on a connection between perceived caste status and appraisal of professional qualifications. And since it seems almost impossible to increase the recognition rate by means that do not conflict with the general aim of the experiment – that caste or tribal background should be extraneous information and never explicitly addressed – the design proved inadequate.

7.3. Analysis and Interpretation

As disappointing as this was, the research project did provide useful information. While the experiment itself failed, it nevertheless provided additional insights, mainly in two areas: First, the social composition of the sample population that volunteered in the pre-tests provides hints about the social composition of IT's workforce in general. Second, and perhaps much more relevant to the conclusion of this research project, there is evidence of a perplexing lack of knowledge about caste and social background in general, and towards that of Lower Castes and tribes in particular. According to the pre-test alone, there seems to be a widespread anonymity and disregard for caste or social background amongst IT employees that is only manifested in their difficulties in identifying the social background of the job applicant in the experiment. Both findings deserve attention in the context of this research, and both are significant in their own way, with the latter more surprising than the former.

That the workforce in any profession that requires tertiary education cannot be equally recruited from all social groups is already evident from the NSSO data discussed in the chapter three (Deshpande 2006). And as acknowledged earlier, the small number of participants in the two pre-tests is not necessarily representative of the IT workforce. Therefore, no comprehensive claim for any extrapolation should be made here. However, as anecdotal evidence, it is very much in keeping with previous research about the caste composition of the IT workforce. In fact, some details still manage to surprise: Muslims, who make up around 40% of the population of Hyderabad, account for only two out of 70 respondents (2.9 per cent), while SC and ST members are completely absent from the sample. The OBC category, in Andhra Pradesh called “Backward Communities” (BC – 5 in a sample of 70), are marginally represented in the

²²⁴ If there is an undefined comparison group – and those tribal candidates who were not correctly identified as such must be seen as this – then it remains unclear in what form the recognised Brahmins might differ. A clear caste base for any difference in social appreciation can only be constructed if both sides are identified in caste terms, otherwise the difference could potentially be explained by a variety of external factors.

sample, and well below their share of the population. It remains a basic fact that in order to afford the education necessary for the IT industry, one has to be from a family that is able to pay the tuition fees – and this ability is highest amongst Hindu High Castes and Dominant Agricultural Castes. Christianity, in all its diversity and ambiguity, seems to be a route to upward mobility, as the high representation of this group shows. Most likely because of their emphasis on education and cultural openness to Western values, Christians present a much larger portion of IT employees than their share of the general population would suggest. Altogether, the following notion holds true (as it did before this project): In socio-economic, as well as caste and community-representation, the Indian IT workforce is very much differentiated from the general population of India.

The second finding, lack of knowledge about caste background, also deserves closer examination. If this result holds true in a larger context, which of course needs to be explored in further research, then caste would literally be meaningless in the workplace, as long as someone would not deliberately announce his or her caste membership. Due to this apparent anonymity, workers could hide their own caste identity and would be safely covered by disinformation, confusion and widespread ignorance about this topic. In fact, the actual situation in the workplace is rather more anonymous than the scenario given in the fictitious CVs. Since the experiment was constructed in a way that overemphasised the possibilities of caste recognition, it underplayed the factors that increase anonymity – as reported in the interviews (see chpt. 6). Since most people did not appear to be interested in caste identity, hardly any of their colleagues would be expected to inquire about it. Furthermore, as the South Indian tradition of shortening the middle and surname to the initials (such as Santosh M.N.) is in most cases printed on personal identity tags, the very possibility of getting to know someone's surname is considerably diminished. And even if the surname was ever revealed, it is doubtful if it would be successfully identified as belonging to a certain caste. This provides a good opportunity for anyone from Lower Castes or tribal background to fit into the IT workforce without ever revealing his or her social identity. Whatever the attitude towards caste might be in private, the high barrier between private sphere and professional caste-neglect offers the chance for people from Low Caste or tribal background to fit in without humiliation, embarrassment or discrimination. The only price to pay is hiding one's caste membership.

This is not to say that there is no influence of caste factors as such, only that it is impossible to determine it with an experiment like this. The real recruiters in this industry, who have not been the subject of this research, might be more aware of caste and community background than ordinary IT employees. Furthermore, there are many more ways to get to know someone's caste than by guessing from his or her surname. In private circumstances there is much less chance of hiding one's caste than in the public domain or the workplace. But, in relation to the actual work environment, the results of the pre-tests point towards an open space where it is possible to function without any consideration of caste at all.

In terms of caste theory, the lack of interest and the generally low level of knowledge about other caste or tribal traditions outside one's own in-group (as revealed in the pre-tests) could well be seen as an indication of the diminishing role of caste in the public sphere. If caste was indeed a major issue amongst young IT engineers, than basic knowledge and an easy identification of the most prominent markers of caste membership should be expected. On the contrary, in both pre-tests the community-related question of the applicants in the CVs caused irritation and confusion. It seems that the industry's attempt to eradicate caste considerations is not only shared by its workforce, but actually realised in widespread ignorance and refusal to discuss the issue at all. Nevertheless, an interpretation that brings this finding in line with the widespread practice of caste in private circumstances – e.g., the importance of intra-caste marriages – would provide a more nuanced explanation. In the modern interpretation of caste (chpt. 1.3.3), there is no knowledge about caste other than the individual necessity to practise caste. Caste is taken out of the public context and re-interpreted as a purely private matter, hence the embarrassment when questions about caste are asked in public. But the fact that all but a few respondents could name their own caste, often with the exact official category, such as BC-D, reveals the prevalence of caste in both private terms and government statistics.

It would therefore be premature to conclude that caste has no meaning for young IT employees; the findings so far only support the claim that caste is being privatised – much in line with the theoretical expectation of caste in modernity. In professional circumstances, caste identities are very much hidden behind more relevant criteria, such as qualifications and experience. The question of caste, as seen in the research process itself and in some comments on the questionnaire, is seen as irrelevant, if not irritating. In talking to the participants, the overwhelming majority of questions concerned professional qualifications, not the social background of the candidates. The role of caste in private life, especially in connection with marriage decisions and family culture, cannot be explored here. But with the findings established in the pre-tests, it could be assumed that the IT workplace is internally caste-neutral, as caste is neither visible nor relevant here. More research is indeed needed, but all the research so far (A. Banerjee et al. 2009a) seems to indicate that caste is only invoked once clear markers of qualifications are missing or not applicable – thus, not in the Indian IT industry.

8. Participant Observations

8.1. Introduction and Methodology

While the previous projects provided valuable insights, based on their design they also opened more questions than they could hope to answer. With the exception of some of the interviews, the projects focused more on the workplace than on the private meaning of caste, thereby overlooking one of the most central aspects of this social institution. And when the theoretical assumptions about caste in modernity are brought into the picture, the shortcomings of the previous research are even more accentuated: Once caste is reinterpreted in a modernised way, the family rather than the economic sphere is expected to be at the centre of caste. In this regard, the apparent gap between the virtually caste-neutral IT work environment and the obvious emphasis on caste in private decision-making, most notably the choice of potential spouses, still requires further explanation. In particular, because the planned experiment (chpt. 7) failed to answer the key question – how far caste considerations influence people's decisions about apparently caste-free matters – the subject remains unresolved. The translation from a public to a private interpretation of caste in modernity is neither fully revealed by the interviews nor by any possible observation of the workplace alone. Thus, as long as a more personal perspective on caste is missing, a complete picture does not emerge from the research projects conducted so far.

For these reasons, a less systematic but more comprehensive approach should be considered, incorporating any additional information, observations and background illustrations that are missing in the previous chapters. Drawing from participant observations and casual interviews conducted during my stay in Bangalore (where I lived for roughly 6 months in a PG in the BTM layout) and Hyderabad (staying for 2 weeks in the Madhapur area), the following will try to provide a background to the previous chapters and allow a deeper analysis of the research questions.

During my research in India, in March-June and August-November 2009, I lived in an area popular with IT employees due to its proximity to Hosur Road (which connects Bangalore's city centre to Electronic City, as well as links to Whitefield). This district caters to IT employees both in accommodation and food, while being close to the fashionable shopping and residential area of Koramangala (see 4.4). In effect, I basically lived a life comparable to IT engineers in one of the most popular IT residential areas of Bangalore. Of course, my temporary stay there was very different from the experience of real IT employees, for whom it is a more permanent place of residence. And, as with all (quasi-) ethnographic research, the possibility that a foreign researcher will miss details or the meaning of social practices cannot be completely ruled out. Notwithstanding these limitations and the difficulties of the research,²²⁵ the time spent in this part of Bangalore proved essential in arriving at the conclusions of this thesis.

²²⁵ Unfortunately, because I was not allowed to conduct ethnographic research in a company (even though I tried to get admission), I was unable to observe the IT employees' actual work experience; moreover, the family side of the picture is still obscure because my research concentrated on young, mostly male IT employees in their 20s, living separately from their families.

Methodologically, the approach here proved valuable in more than one way. By including the more casual aspects of the research process, a great deal of unstated and often non-reflective every-day behaviour is revealed, which may never have surfaced otherwise. As most of the observed behavioural patterns were new to me, they could not have been included in the interview questions. Furthermore, as most of these attitudes are not consciously considered by those who hold them, they would never find their expression in a (formal) interview either. Therefore, a new dimension to the research was opened up by including this participant observation, with more sources of information accessible than with more standardised social-science methodology. Nevertheless, despite these positives, the downsides should not be neglected either: In qualitative participant observations, the scientific ideal of ‘objectivity’ is fundamentally compromised as the role of the researcher (or ‘subjectivity’) becomes proportionally more important. A different observer or researcher might have come to different conclusions, and my perspectives are not totally excluded from the analysis. However, since this approach is used here in combination with other methods, there is considerable scope for triangulation and the thesis itself bases its empirical conclusions on the result of all these approaches. So, even if this chapter is rather eclectic and does not follow rigorous methodological guidelines, its result are not completely subjective, at least in the pejorative sense. Objectivity, in the sense of valid and reliable knowledge, is protected and enhanced by a constant process of self-reflection, questioning and, in the end, by the personal integrity of the researcher. Especially since it is much more exploratory and heuristic than the other projects – and this is clearly an advantage – it offers a much more nuanced perspective by taking into account issues that would be ignored by the narrower focus of standardised social science methods. In combination with the previous chapters, it brings this thesis to a conclusion that is more balanced than any single research project on its own.

8.2. Hierarchical Differences in everyday interactions

8.2.1. Observations in the BTM area

Before any caste consideration could ever come into play, it is obvious that all social life has a distinctive hierarchical structure. Marked status differences between people are pronounced and visible in almost all occasions where people interact with others from different backgrounds. Hierarchy can, of course, be attached to different markers, with several seemly at play in the Indian context.²²⁶ However, if there is one overriding rationale that is apparent on almost all occasions, then it is that attached to economic success. In the Indian context examined here, social status is most obviously linked to professional standing, where the modern corporate world and, especially, the IT professionals mark the upper end, with slum dwellers and ‘sweepers’ occupying the opposite end of the status hierarchy. Interestingly, the

²²⁶ The one obvious alternative to an economically-informed status system is one where religious values are at play, but this was not covered in the research at hand.

people from the lowest stratum are almost completely outside the social order – they are persistently ignored, never addressed and rarely seen as status counterparts in any way; they simply exist below the public radar screen.²²⁷ Hierarchical differences only become contested once there is something to make the contest worthwhile. So hierarchical competition starts at a level above those at the bottom.

Those one step up in the hierarchy, and therefore deemed worthy of notice and communication, are generally treated in an impolite and offhand manner, without the courtesy that is reserved for those higher up the social ranking. If, for example, someone works in a corner bakery, he is the subject of abrupt and unfettered demands from customers who apparently feel that their higher status entitles them to place orders in a somewhat military-like fashion. Requests for service are given in the form of orders and no mitigating niceties conceal the stark hierarchical differences between customers and server, which can at times turn into open disdain. Politeness, on the other hand, is reserved for those who are considered equally- or higher-placed in the social hierarchy. When perceived status differences are obviously extreme, such politeness can at times come across as excessive subservience by lower-status individuals in the face of seemingly nonchalant arrogance on the part of those of higher status. All in all, it appears that the social hierarchy is widely accepted and part of an unquestioned and quasi-natural everyday routine.

Of course, hierarchical differentiation in courtesy and respect is not uniformly applicable in all situations, nor is it met with unequivocal acceptance from all sides. However, as a general rule of thumb, the bitterest struggle for status recognition is conducted by those on the lower rungs of social acceptability – that is, by people one step above beggars, sweepers and the like. Generally, manners are considerably coarser amongst the less educated, who usually enjoy less social prestige. In consequence, slight status differences in the lower half of the social hierarchy are more openly pronounced, and often more rudely demonstrated. At the higher end of the spectrum, a lower class ‘earthiness’ is replaced by either traditional aloofness or conspicuous liberal disregard for conventional differences. Among strangers who cannot obviously be assigned to professions or status groups, any potential source of offence is cautiously avoided and, even if status differences are clear, no conflict is sought or provoked. Westerners, as in my case, are generally treated with great, sometimes overwhelming, benevolence, even if certain suspicion lingers in the views of the more orthodox residents in the neighbourhood.

Overall, the hierarchy is visible in almost every situation, although it is only quietly acknowledged rather than enforced or tested in open conflict. In the case of BTM layout, the middle classes – clearly a social elite in these circumstances – rarely come in contact with the rest of the population. The apartment buildings, even if not gated and segregated like quarters further to the west of Bangalore, create a barrier to interaction with lower status residents, and everyday affairs (such as grocery shopping) are usually conducted by servants. Thus, the rich and affluent rarely feature in day-to-day relations.

²²⁷ It is a consistent observation that slums and their inhabitants are not seen as part of the municipality or of the urban population respectively. Moreover, the popularly used term “urban population” seems to include only the middle classes and thereby excludes large numbers, if not the majority, of city inhabitants. Compare Barbara Harriss-White, ‘Destitution and the Poverty of Its Politics—with Special Reference to South Asia’, *World Development*, 33/6 (2005), 881–91.

However, even if public interaction does occur, the greatest status differences are not contested at all. An ideal-typical sweeper and an ideal-typical IT professional would, under normal circumstances, never clash or even meet. When the former is doing his or her work, he/she is simply ignored by the latter, and would never be addressed or seen as a potential subject for social conversation. This utter disregard of the lower social orders could well be interpreted as a remnant of old, caste-based attitudes, but it would, on the other hand, also fit into the modern reinterpretation of caste, where hierarchy plays much less of a role. In contrast, the harshest and most demeaning behaviour, at least in my eyes, normally occurs between people whose status brackets are not too distant from each other – whether in caste terms or not: The waiter at the eatery who takes customer orders and shouts them to the cooks and helpers; the corner-shop owner who lets his (often quite young) helper do the courier service for his older clients; the PG attendant who happily leaves the dirtier tasks, like cleaning bathrooms, to his younger brother – all represent minor status differences when seen against the broader hierarchy. But since these fine distinctions are those that are potentially in flux, they are the ones that need public manifestation and which are enforced by constant demonstrations.

Within this setting, IT employees do seem to occupy an unquestionably prestigious position; one that, while exceptional, leaves them as much outside as inside the overall status hierarchy. They do not have to defend their high position against challengers, so status-demonstrating behaviour is rarely seen in public, apart from the notable signs of group affiliation, such as business attire or the conspicuous display of corporate identity cards. And even though a number of IT professionals exhibit a ubiquitous condescension towards people with perceived lower status, their behaviour is still much more characterised by reticence and professional self-restraint than the open contempt shown by those who are not as established in social standing. The social distance between IT employees and the ones who come in daily contact with them – rickshaw drivers, restaurant staff, PG attendants, and so on – is so great that conflicts are improbable, if simply because of the lack of occasions for frictional interaction. Consequently, social contacts between these groups are characterised by distant and impersonal nonchalance (on the part of IT employees) rather than by open or enforced disregard or contempt. Those who cater to the comparatively affluent class of professionals are also economically dependent on them, and this fact, in addition to a status difference that is huge and indisputable, results in social interaction that is apparently free of conflicts or embarrassment.

This might well be a feature of the social distance that is characteristic for IT employees in the BTM area. As far as I can see, IT and its numerous representatives in the quarter are both inside and outside of the mesh of dependencies that creates the social fabric of the area. IT employees seem to be somewhat cut off from the rest of the area, and theirs can be justifiably called an enclave existence. Not least because a good number of those IT employees residing in BTM are from the Northern states of India, and more often than not unable to speak Kannada, they represent an alien element to the traditional residents. Economically, they constitute a driving force behind the development and expansion of the area, but

since most of them use it solely as a place of residence while working in the IT offices nearby, they are not as well connected to the micro-economy as those who spend most of their day there. Consequently, few points of contact exist between the ‘traditional’ local residents and those who primarily use it as a base for eating and sleeping. The numerous PGs frequented by IT and ITES employees are simply not attractive to local residents who live with their families. Those restaurants that advertise ‘authentic North-Indian home food’ rarely attract those who would prefer local fare and, perhaps more decisively, do not have to frequent restaurants at all. Altogether, the IT population is widely perceived as a ‘guest’ in the area, welcomed and crucially important, but culturally less integrated and with only few connections to the locality in question.

8.2.2. Obvious markers of hierarchical differences in public

Clothing and personal appearance make up the most distinctive markers of one's own place in this hierarchy, whereas language proficiency, posture, body language and gesture provide further indications of one's social standing. *Habitus*, as Bourdieu terms it, is certainly not totally caste-neutral, although the connection is increasingly indirect. Someone in formal (Western) business dress is automatically classified in the upper echelons of society whereas someone in a rough, dirty shirt and traditional wrap skirt is assigned to the lowest levels. A whole catalogue of fine-tuned gradations in dress and appearance marks subtle but distinct differences in social standing. In almost every social setting, hierarchical differences are evident in obvious and not-so-obvious demarcations: The conductors in the public buses are distinguished by their white or khaki uniforms, the former reserved for those working in air-conditioned buses who are therefore higher in pay and status. Auto-rickshaw drivers routinely wear uniform brown apparel, marking their low social status, with differences between faded and worn-out clothing and new and starched equivalents further fine-tuning social ranking within this bracket. The ubiquitous IT employees make themselves conspicuous not only by their neat and formal attire, but also by their publicly worn identity tags, which serve as distinct markers of superiority in a society where IT is seen (at least in some eyes) as the highest and most trendy lifestyle .

Interestingly, IT employees both conform to and break these unwritten rules of status-related clothing. In formal business attire (ironed long-sleeved shirt, formal trousers and polished leather shoes, or *salwar kameez* in women's case), they easily fit into the accepted style concept of the highest levels of social standing. But this standing is not always automatically matched to their outfit. In the residential areas like BTM, where many live but do not work, young men with Western-style t-shirts, short trousers and sandals, who stand out in their sheer defiance of Indian clothing conventions and traditions, are frequently seen. Short trousers, for example, are normally only acceptable for boys under 12- or 14-years-old. Worn by adults, such shorts would normally undermine social standing and place the wearer somewhere in the lower quartiles of the social scale. However, even though this casual and most informal dress code is obviously disliked by orthodox members of the old establishment in the area, it nevertheless does not diminish the status of those who wear it. Since they are obviously wearing it

voluntarily, and with a relaxed and Western-influenced attitude, they symbolise a break from the traditional style codex, thereby being spared the social disapproval that would normally come with such an affront. While conforming to clothing etiquette during work hours, at least some of IT's ambassadors radically break with established conventions in non-work situations, thereby revealing both the situational relativity of these conventions and the symbolic uniqueness of IT. In this case at least, the social status IT commands clearly overrides traditional perceptions of appropriateness, indicating both the exceptionalism of IT and its transforming effect on social customs.

8.2.3. Caste and the social hierarchy

Caste is directly and indirectly linked to social hierarchies, although translating both measurements into an integrated scale is not as straightforward as commonly imagined. Apart from a few cases where caste is openly displayed (such as in the small shoe repair shops that display pictures of B.R. Ambedkar, thereby marking SC loyalty), caste membership is simply unknown. Other than sweepers, who are exclusively recruited from SC or ST castes, or temple priests, who are easily classified as *Brahmins*, only vague caste attribution is available for people in public. Social status, therefore, is much more interconnected with openly observable features such as clothing style and profession. In most cases, a relatively weak caste association might still be assigned to certain *habitus* and dress styles, but this is seldom more than popular myth or simple imagination. In conversations, for example, I was told that those speaking the same vernacular language could distinguish *Brahmins* by their speech. This, though, could well be based on the popular equation of *Brahmins* with educated people, a correlation that would decrease in validity as other castes become more educated. There might be subtle indices that still help to identify someone's caste membership, but how far they transcend local or language barriers is highly questionable. In all but a few cases, status differences in public are attached to the obvious indicators of clothing, appearance and assertiveness, with little real connection to actual caste membership.

Nevertheless, an outright dismissal of caste influences in the social hierarchy would be both premature and unwarranted. As caste can operate subconsciously, it might survive in everyday practices, despite constant denial. While the experiment in chapter seven tried but failed to prove this point, the argument itself remains valid and in need of further consideration and research. With regard to the publicly visible social hierarchy, a number of factors depend on the correlation of caste with socio-economic status. In the modern interpretation of caste, hierarchy is no longer essential; nevertheless, as long as caste is not an economically neutral factor, hierarchy stands out. Although the traditional caste-based division of labour has largely lost meaning, connections remain – most notably at the extreme ends of the caste spectrum – that would prevent an easy dismissal of the economic dimension of caste. In the case of IT engineers, high social esteem might include a 'secularised' version of the idolisation of intellectual work – once the mainstay of *Brahmins* – while the other social extreme is represented by those who work at jobs no one else is prepared to take up. The more diverse the caste spectrum becomes in the IT

workforce, the less stringent this relationship will be, although for the moment there are still strong connections with old notions of hierarchy.

8.3. The public space

Following on from my observations, highly different and often contrasting lifestyles appear to co-exist, all flourishing in a metropolitan ‘social vacuum’ that lacks shared norms and mutually binding concepts of the common good. There is also a widely-felt concern about the absence of generalised trust, which, in turn, is intrinsically linked to the popular interpretation of the common good – the relationship between the individual and society, and the discourse in and about the public domain itself. Already, in the physical dimension of the public sphere, a void is evident simply in the way that the commons are neither protected nor claimed by anyone. Due to the weak state and municipal administration, and the immense economic pressure from interest groups and individuals, existing space that is not privately owned is (mis)appropriated for illegal but tacitly-accepted private use. Even in the parts of Bangalore that are not considered neglected or particularly rundown, the open space between houses automatically becomes a rubbish dump and grazing ground for errant cows, goats or donkeys. Parkland or green-space that is not fenced (and therefore secured) is often used for temporary slum dwellings that could become permanent if no eviction is ordered. Land seizures by the poor and encroachments on public land in the form of small shops or makeshift housing is inevitably followed by municipality attempts to raze the illegal buildings, before the cycle of building and demolition begins once again. All in all, a low level of law enforcement and a general sense of persistent irresponsibility is apparent when it comes to the public good, fostered by a weak city administration and the forceful pursuit of private interest at the expense of the almost invisible public.

In this climate, where public space often appears a no-mans-land, with norms for its protection weak and constantly broken, there exists, perhaps inadvertently, more room for tolerance of divergent lifestyles in close proximity to each other. Here, the physical environment can easily be seen as symbolic for the general lack of social cohesion or binding social norms. In spatial as well as in cultural areas, seemingly contradictory facts and practices can exist side-by-side without (much) friction or surprise. For example, it is not seen as offensive or even noteworthy for a poultry stall – where live chickens are slaughtered in front of the customers – to operate next-door to a cafeteria that proclaims itself purely vegetarian. While it would perhaps be different if beef cattle were slaughtered and sold there, in this case the contrast goes unnoticed and is taken for granted by those who are vegetarians by caste and tradition. Small markers of identity, such B.R. Ambedkar stickers at the entrance to a cyber café, are primarily meant as a symbol for those who share the shopkeeper's identity and are genuinely ignored by other customers, who might make up the majority of visitors. The general lack of awareness of other castes' cultural practices (see chpt. 7) means that many potential sources of conflict are overlooked, with

possible tensions defused by sheer ignorance. Thus, even outwardly political statements about caste conflict are lost upon an oblivious audience. A *Brahmin* friend of mine, for example, when shown a t-shirt with the slogan “SC/ST – Power to the People”, was neither aware of its political message nor of its challenge to his own cultural and social identity. Analogous to the public concept of space, the cultural one also seems a neglected emptiness.

In caste terms, these observations indicate a contingent interpretation of ‘publicness’, and reveal a number of social practices that are otherwise obscured by the smoke screen of non-interested tolerance. As long as no personal interests are compromised, the public domain is an open playing field for all and for every cultural peculiarity. In parallel to this public openness, though only loosely connected, is the fact that a city with no cultural hegemony (such as Bangalore) can accommodate a relative freedom of cultural expression that would be unimaginable in the countryside. In some cases, the parallel co-existence is reinforced by language barriers, with enclaves of non-Kannada speakers living in a city without a dominant local language (Nair 2005: chpt. 6). But even within the Kannada community itself a disregard for cultural practices beyond one’s in-group prevents social interaction across cultural chasms. Caste (in the extended-*Jati* interpretation) would naturally be a factor, amongst others such as religious beliefs, education and profession, that defines the in-group. But since interlinking connections are weak, these various sub-groups enjoy a free-floating, quasi-autarkic existence in the cultural bubble that is Bangalore.

8.4. Gender relations

Even though IT representatives officially boast about the gender inclusivity of IT, the overwhelming majority of IT employees are male (see chpt. 4.1.3.3 and 4.2). This gender imbalance appears even more pronounced in public places, with traditional gender roles still obvious in BTM. In general, women appear to be confined to the household, with the people out on the streets being preponderantly male. It is thus relatively unusual to bump into a female IT professional in BTM, and even more so to see them on their own without either a male or female companion. For social reasons and through sheer chance (see 6.2.1), my own research was mostly restricted to male IT employees. This could, at times, make it appear as if the whole IT sector is exclusively male. The reasons for these observed gender issues are both traditional and informed by current affairs. Women are traditionally much more restricted to the household than men, and this is reflected in the exclusively female PGs. Advertisements for these establishments, often designed to reassure parents as much as actual guests, emphasise the high security standards and homely atmosphere, as well as the self-contained nature of the accommodation, which makes it unnecessary to leave the premises too often. And since incidents of violent and sexual assaults on women working in IT are well published,²²⁸ avoiding potential danger leaves women further

²²⁸ One very public case was the rape and murder of Jyoti Kumari Choudhari in 2007. Compare her case in: Shehzad Nadeem, ‘The Uses and Abuses of Time: Globalization and Time Arbitrage in India’s Outsourcing Industries’, *Global Networks*, 9/1

isolated in small monitored islands of perceived security. As confirmed in an interview with a security manager of a large MNC, IT companies are obsessed with the safety of their employees, especially so if they are women (minutes 20.05.2009).

According to Indian labour laws, women are not to be employed in situations that could infringe their personal and moral autonomy, including a prohibition on work hours that would entail return home after dark (n.a. 2006).²²⁹ The IT and ITES industry, however, whose working hours are often scheduled not to the Indian time zone but to that of their customers, has reached concessions with the state government of Karnataka to break this rule and thus employs women at night.²³⁰ To accommodate this, the companies (at least the major ones) provide shuttle services to and from the workplace for the safety of their female workforce, a side effect of which is to keep them out of the public eye altogether. In this way, the IT industry is pioneering work relations that are more gender-neutral, less patronising and more flexible than those otherwise prevailing in India. Yet, however liberating this might be for the women in question, the whole legal situation indicates a strong sense of insecurity, however justified this is in practice. The relative absence of unaccompanied women in public, therefore, is in itself a sign of the stalemate between the push of liberalisation and the pull of moral constraints and security concerns – and of the overall conservative power of family traditions, whereby women are primarily confined to the home.

Consequently, the IT employees in my observation group (that is, the ones I spent my time with) had little or no contact with the opposite sex, and even if they had, this would mostly be restricted to rare or sporadic encounters. During the time I spent with male IT employees, there was never any woman in the group and even though some claimed to have girlfriends, it could never be verified by me or even their close friends. If such friendships or relationships exist between young IT guys and girls, they do not seem to be lived in public where only married couples seem to enjoy the privilege of openly displayed bonds. While some openly stated that they were still virgins (in their mid- to late-20s), others boasted of experiences that were hard to confirm. However, for my Indian friends it would be completely unnatural and forced to befriend women casually. Any contact between the sexes is still highly awkward, especially for the younger ones amongst them, and would be disapproved of by both their own families and the wider public. Consequently, Western-style gender co-existence is still inconceivable in the near future, even if increased economic independence would technically allow for greater freedom of women from their families, less traditional personal relationships and a generally more relaxed attitude towards sexual relations. However, vertical family bonds do not appear to be weakening nor does India seem on the brink of a sexual revolution – while technically possible, such a cultural change appears unlikely any time soon.

Most of the obvious consequences for caste are quite severe – in regard to the modern interpretation of (2009b), 20-40.

²²⁹ Compare the situation in the manufacturing sector: Jayati Ghosh, 'Globalization, Export-Oriented Employment for Women and Social Policy: A Case Study of India', *Social Scientist*, 30/11/12 (2002), 17-60.

²³⁰ Special Correspondent, 'Government Warns It, Bpo Firms', *The Hindu*, 29 Dec 2005 2005, sec. Karnataka / Bangalore News.

caste in general, and the essential biological element in particular (chpt. 1.2.2). As apparent from the observations, sexuality and reproduction are strictly controlled and very few changes seem to be imaginable in the near future. Pre-marital or extra-marital relationships are considered some of the worst social offences; if such were to occur, they would have to be kept strictly secret as the consequences of disclosure would be severe. Bearing a child outside of marriage is still considered one of the greatest social taboos, and this, in turn, has consequences for caste endogamy. When sexual relations are restricted to wedlock, with this controlled by the parents (cf. chpt. 6.5.4.2), then the parental generation essentially holds the key to the biological survival of caste. While, according to my observations, there seems to be considerable change in attitudes with the modern generation – some of the respondents told of almost complete freedom to choose a partner²³¹ – this should not to be confused with autonomy. The control mechanisms for upholding caste endogamy are still in place, even though the potential pool of marriage candidates has widened in individual cases. If this trend continues, it would mean that caste as *Jati* is replaced by broader social groups that only vaguely resemble former *Varna* categories. However, this conclusion could also prove premature, especially as most of my respondents had no actual experience of marriage arrangements. Compared to the 94 per cent of intra-caste marriages that are the norm for the Indian population as a whole (Desai et al. 2007), more scope exists for the crossing of caste boundaries in the most modern, educated and prestigious segment of this population. However, gender relations as they are now apparent do not support any radical departures from the pre-modern (anti-individualistic) practices of the past.

8.5. Vegetarian / Non-Vegetarian schism

8.5.1. Observations on food practices

One of the most salient indicators of cultural divide within the IT workforce, as well as in the general population of Bangalore, is the distinction between vegetarian and non-vegetarian eateries and restaurants. While those PGs who offer food as part of their service are clearly segregated in their clientele, the question of vegetarian or non-vegetarian diet, an issue that is not caste-neutral, goes much further than accommodation alone. As restaurants advertise according to their fare, this allows for a graded distinction; between “pure veg” (no meat or eggs, and often offering specific “Jain food” for those who do not eat onions, tomatoes or garlic), at one end, to “non-veg” (providing poultry and mutton, but not pork or beef²³²), at the other. In effect, then, these restaurants are ultimately catering to the caste traditions of their individual customers. For those who observe caste rules, it is easily possible to comply with dietary requirements by staying in an appropriate PG and by eating in restaurants that

²³¹ Even in this case, it was limited to Hindus and the tacit agreement that his choice would be Indian.

²³² Beef and pork are considered the most impure forms of meat and I never saw any restaurant serving them. Notwithstanding social conventions, however, both are available in BTM – although the beef stall especially is well hidden as the slaughtering and consumption of cows is an obvious insult to orthodox Hindus.

offer the required food. In the case of BTM layout, the prevalence of North Indian High Caste members is visible in the many restaurants that provide vegetarian food with North Indian characteristics. This is not surprising, given the high representation of Upper Castes in IT itself, and can be locally explained by the sheer dominance of North Indians in this area (cf. chpt. 4.4).

In this locality, the choice of eatery varies widely, with a slight bias towards the “purer” side of the spectrum. The popular chain restaurant A2B – Adyar Ananda Bhavan – at the North-Western fringe of BTM represents an example of the ‘purest’ vegetarian category, considered suitable for orthodox vegetarians and with items of “Jain food” on the menu. At the other end of the spectrum are places with a “veg & non-veg” sign, which seem to cater for all, even though strict vegetarians would never enter such a place. And while most differences are obvious to all – such as the signs advertising the region and the pure veg / veg / veg & non-veg distinction – actual personal preferences seem to go further. For example, a rather orthodox *Brahmin* friend, who was obviously pure vegetarian, appeared able to instantly recognise if a place (in this case, a corner bakery shop we were walking past) would be suitable or not. For me, it was unclear why he would not drink a milkshake from this particular shop until I found out that they also served pastry that included eggs, which is not vegetarian according to Indian notions. It appears that a subtle and fine-grained distinction with regard to the suitability of food mirrors the traditional pure / impure hierarchy, which has its base, not surprisingly, in conventional caste hierarchy.

On the other hand, the overwhelming choices on offer in the food market can blur traditional preferences somewhat, although the rough distinctions remain. According to my observations, a number of young IT employees, who would by family and caste tradition be vegetarians, are at least experimenting with occasional meat consumption. Although they would still consider themselves vegetarian, and would not mix with those for whom meat-eating is part of a family and caste tradition, the ideal of a pure vegetarian – for whom meat is a strict no-go – is increasingly being abandoned. This does not imply that the prestigious appeal of a pure, vegetarian lifestyle is diminishing, but rather that pragmatic and situational behaviour is undermining the strictness of traditional restrictions. One of my co-residents, for instance, told me that he and his brothers used to fry omelettes on the rooftop of the family house, something that would have certainly infuriated his rather orthodox (*Brahmin*) parents. Likewise, the fact that he told me this story over a beer in a central Bangalorean bar would not have met with their approval either. However, what is telling is the manner in which strict rules, mandatory at home, are twisted and bent once direct parental control is absent.

The same goes for the Western culinary influence. Several outlets, such as Domino's pizza, the now-ubiquitous McDonald's and other Western fast-food chains, cater to both vegetarians and non-vegetarians, while at the same time undermining the strictest version of separation. Whereas the restaurants for “pure vegetarians” would keep their kitchen clean of anything thought of as impure (such as meat or eggs), here non-vegetarian options are served alongside the vegetarian fare. All items on the menu are marked as “veg” or “non-veg”, and sometimes different counters serve the respective queues,

yet the food is prepared in one kitchen and under one roof, even if the dishes are meticulously separated. That these Western fast-food outlets simultaneously form and represent their own cultural niche has wider social consequences, not just for their customers. As they represent Western culture and generally draw a customer base that is both relatively affluent and regarded as trend-setting, these fast-food outlets further undermine the notion that only vegetarian food is respectable or acceptable for status-conscious Indians. The high prestige granted to selected aspects of Western culture amongst young Indians not only increases the social acceptability of meat and egg products, it also changes their attitudes towards alcohol. Thus, although alcohol is traditionally seen as impure, and liquor shops usually small, seedy places with trellised counters, the new upmarket pubs and clubs are anything but cheap and rundown. Social drinking in Bangalore is seen as an accepted and even prestigious activity, with the posh upmarket United Breweries mall owned by Vijay Mallya only underlining alcohol's new-found position in society.

8.5.2. The social significance of the Vegetarian / Non-Vegetarian divide

For a sociological analysis, food customs and habits are particularly valuable, especially as they are situated exactly at the interface of private and public cultural practices. In terms of caste, traditional rules about purity and commensality come into play and require reworking in the modern environment. At least two main findings are immediately obvious to the observer: Commensality no longer seems of concern in restaurants; in the eateries and restaurants I visited, there was, with one salient exception,²³³ no attempt to regulate or prohibit the intermix of people. Thus, even if price levels and separation according to regional tastes and dietary restrictions pre-selects the customer base in a way that is not caste-neutral, transgressions of these subtle barriers are neither recognised nor sanctioned in any way. And while it might still be unusual, and would perhaps cause a considerable stir, if, for example, an obvious Muslim ate in a pure vegetarian restaurant, this would most likely have no real-life consequences other than consternation.

This is strongly related to the other immediate observation; that food consumption in public reveals a great deal about the customs that are followed in private. Notwithstanding the fact that customs are interpreted more strictly in the family home than elsewhere, food consumption in public mirrors the preferences that are acquired and practised at home. As practically all tastes and requirements are catered for in the market, the veg / non-veg divide does not amount to discrimination because it is based on voluntary choices, even if these choices are influenced by family and caste traditions. Additionally, the veg / non-veg divide is weakened by young urban professionals who tend to loosen their family's dietary restriction considerably. However, and in spite of all the convergence in metropolitan life, this dietary divide is still a manifestation of a fundamental cultural cleavage between parts of the Indian population. The more differentiated the market is in providing for varied needs of

²³³ In a “pure vegetarian” “Home Food” restaurant in Hyderabad, I was met with obvious dislike; I was reminded several times that this was a “pure veg” place, that the cooking followed traditional customs and that each item had a significant place in a traditional dinner. Admittedly, the feeling of inappropriateness of an (impure) foreigner in this place of strict purity was displayed by the owner of the place, not by other guests, who mainly belonged to the IT workforce.

different caste groups, the less overlap there needs to be in any of their dealings with each other. In fact, the observations reveal a parallel existence of people from different regional origin and caste background who had nothing in common but spatial proximity and an IT job qualification.

To summarise the observations, an apparent fading of caste rules is evident both in the disappearance of public enforcement and the gradual loosening of the strict dietary requirements that are ultimately based on caste and religious affiliation. At the same time, however, the remaining differences, increasingly more by choice than by force of tradition, are widespread, very visible and catered for by a diverse and sophisticated market. Even the strictest dietary limitations are catered for – meaning that basically all castes rules can be and are being followed when home-cooked options are not available. The non-enforceability of commensality – one of the main caste rules according to the classic interpretation in chapter one – corresponds with a widespread (if loosened) adherence to dietary rules that are based on *private* caste traditions. This confirms the general trend that caste is increasingly absent in public, but still practised in private. One apparent contradiction only confirms this trend: Since rules of commensality are especially applicable when it comes to the family home, the eating preferences of potential tenants in a private house are even more important than in a PG. Thus, whereas PGs are relatively liberal, the sub-tenancy of rooms in private houses is much more subject to caste considerations. Hence, in a large number of advertisements for rooms in family homes the preference is openly advertised, with statements such as “veg only” or “*Brahmins preferred*” seen regularly.

8.6. Anonymity and Segregation

8.6.1. Living conditions for IT employees in BTM

What is most striking about the living conditions in BTM layout (and more generally in Bangalore) is the remarkable anonymity amongst people who live in close proximity to each other. In the PG that I lived in, there was hardly any social contact between residents, apart from actual roommates (the PG operated on shared twin-room basis). Even people who had lived in the PG for more than half a year hardly knew any of their co-residents, except for three or four casual acquaintances they may have made. The lack of a common area (like a mess or dining area) and the constant fluctuation of guests made it almost impossible to develop anything like a sense of community. Contact was neither sought nor much appreciated, and during occasional encounters in the staircase or the hallway a polite but reserved greeting was the most one could expect from fellow guests. In the six months that I lived in this PG, and with considerable effort, I got to know seven out of the 40 people who lived there – indeed, I never even saw the majority of residents. Social interaction originating from acquaintance in the PG itself was unheard of, and each person I had contact with only knew perhaps two or three other residents.

This anonymity, which was sometimes critically acknowledged by the tenants, can be seen as a result of

both the working conditions in IT and the throwing together of disparate people from various parts of India. After working up to twelve hours, and often spending an additional one-and-a-half hours in traffic, the desire for social interaction is understandably muted. The PG is seen as a place of rest and not of social engagement, hence the fact that all the doors to the rooms were shut most of the time. Furthermore, since the tenants in the rooms came from linguistically diverse parts of India, where cultural orientations might differ, there is little common ground that could form the basis for social interaction. I would also suspect that due to a strong in-family socialisation, most people living there were simply not looking for much social contact outside their comfort zone of long-time friends and extended family.²³⁴ Only in circumstances when no family options existed did friendships seem to be appreciated or needed. Needless to say, these friendships rarely crossed cultural boundaries, such as the Veg / Non-Veg divide, and included mainly people from a comparatively similar caste background (see below).

Altogether, it seems that a lack of trust, or a more generalised watchfulness, informs and guides social interactions between people who are not related to each other, or whose contact is not reinforced by a network of trustworthiness and shared references. A person needs to be already known or introduced by someone who is trustworthy in order to be accepted socially – otherwise he or she would not be seen as a potential subject for social interaction. I was faced with this phenomenon almost every time I met someone new. Background checks or practicable equivalents are the norm, and one of the first questions is always about where your family is from and what your parents do professionally. As pointless as it may be in the case of a foreign visitor, the very fact that this reassurance about someone's social background is deemed necessary before any further social interaction ensues is revealing both of the vacuum of trust and the muted role of the individual:²³⁵ If someone can be judged solely by the profession of his or her parents, plus the place of origin, he or she could obviously be expected to conform to any expectations that arise from this background information. In addition, the need for background checks demonstrates a general lack of trust amongst new acquaintances.

8.6.2. Empirical test of Socio-cultural Segregation

As all these observations indicate, it is very possible that socio-economic groups, formed on cultural lines, co-exist side by side without much contact or conflict. However, empirical confirmation of this is still needed, even though anecdotal evidence consistently points towards this general scheme. In order to trial an approach that could possibly be developed into a more broad-based, statistically reliable research project, I developed a little test²³⁶ amongst those I had befriended and who would therefore accept rather personal questions. I first asked them to list the names of their best friends in order of closeness and then, once the names had been written down, to specify the caste background (or religion

²³⁴ One of the most ubiquitous activities on the weekend seemed to be paying a visit to members of the extended family.

²³⁵ When I was flat-hunting before I settled in my PG, one of the first questions I was asked was one about my “god name”. By signing the contract, I was openly asked about my food habits under the guise of finding the appropriate caterer who could bring me lunch or dinner.

²³⁶ The idea was originally developed by Skrikant Patibandla, a friend who was at this time PhD candidate at ISEC Bangalore.

in case of Non-Hindus) as well as the region their friends came from. Unfortunately, because this would only work on the basis of mutual trust, the participant size could not be extended beyond the circle of friends I had made during my time in Bangalore. However, this ethnographic approach highlights some of observations that I had made independently beforehand, and which were therefore anecdotally confirmed. The results are as follows:

Table 8.6.2.: Caste and Local origin of the 10 closest friends of the respondents

| Caste and local origin of respondent | | Caste of his friends | Local origin of his friends |
|--------------------------------------|---------------------------------------|--|--|
| 1 | Brahmin / Rajasthan | 3 Vaishya, 2 Brahmin, 2 Jain, 1 Jat (DAC), 1 Christian | 5 Rajasthan, 2 Madhya Pradesh, 1 Chhattisgarh, 1 Andhra Pradesh, 1 unknown |
| 2 | Jain / Madhya Pradesh | 4 Brahmin, 3 Jain, 2 Marathi, 1 Vaishya | 8 Madhya Pradesh, 1 Rajasthan |
| 3 | Vaishya / Chhattisgarh | 3 Brahmin, 2 Rajput, 1 Jain, 1 Vaishya, 1 Christian, 1 OBC, 1 Sindhi | 4 Madhya Pradesh, 3 Chhattisgarh, 2 Rajasthan, 1 Andhra Pradesh |
| 4 | Christian / Madhya Pradesh | 2 Brahmin, 2 Jain, 2 SC, 2 Vaishya, 1 OBC, 1 Rajput | 6 Madhya Pradesh, 1 Rajasthan, 1 Bihar, 1 Chhattisgarh, 1 Maharashtra |
| 5 | Kshatriya / Maharashtra | 2 Vaishya, 2 Brahmin, 2 Punjabi, 1 Kayasth, 1 Christian, 1 Jain, 1 unknown | 6 Madhya Pradesh, 1 Delhi, 1 Madhya Pradesh, 1 Rajasthan, 1 unknown |
| 6 | Jat / Rajasthan | 4 Vaishya, 2 Brahmin, 2 Kshatriya, 1 Christian, 1 Jain | 5 Rajasthan, 3 Madhya Pradesh, 1 Chhattisgarh, 1 Bihar |
| 7 | SC / Karnataka | 3 SC, 3 ST, 1 OBC, 1 Christian, 1 Gowda (DAC), 1 Lingayat | 8 Karnataka, 1 West Bengal, 1 Kerala |
| 8 | Brahmin / Madhya Pradesh | 4 Brahmin, 2 Vaishya, 1 Punjabi, 1 Sikh, 1 Bengali, 1 Kshatriya | 7 Madhya Pradesh, 2 Uttar Pradesh, 1 West Bengal |
| 9 | Brahmin / Tamil Nadu | 5 Hindus (excl. Brahmin) 3 Christian, 1 Brahmin, 1 Muslim | 3 Tamil Nadu, 2 Andhra Pradesh, 2 Karnataka, 1 France, 1 UK, 1 Rajasthan |
| 10 | Kamma ²³⁷ / Andhra Pradesh | 7 Kamma, 2 Kshatriya, 1 Vaishya | 10 Andhra Pradesh |

Overall, the underlying assumptions about caste-based segregation are clearly confirmed, albeit with different nuances. While the overall picture is clear, discrepancies in the answering patterns need to be discussed. Respondents No. 1 to No. 6 are friends and there is a considerable overlap in their friendship network. For these six respondents, it is notable that all friends are from a part of India that could be considered Hindi-speaking, even though not all speak Hindi as a first language. It is remarkable, however,

²³⁷ A Dominant Agricultural caste from Andhra Pradesh – nominally of *Shudra* rank but today considered as “Neo-Kshatriya”.

that their friendship network does not include a single person from Karnataka, the state in which they all have lived for several years. Furthermore, there are only two Southerners in the circle of 60 friends (from Andhra Pradesh), a fact that only underlines the gap between the Hindi-speaking states in the North and the culturally divergent South of India, which is much more advanced both economically and in human development terms.

This network of friends, which is greater than the six people who agreed to give their personal data, reveals interesting details with regard to caste. Clearly, their network crosses caste and religious lines with great regularity. Christians as well as Jains are found alongside Hindus, although upper Hindu castes clearly predominate amongst the overall friends. Whereas some caste designations are unclear and hard to classify, such as Punjabi or Bengali – which are not really castes but regional denominations – the majority is clearly Higher Caste (or Dominant Agricultural Caste). As the overlap in the answers would jeopardise any real statistical analysis, it would be futile to compare the actual number; nevertheless, the overall picture is clear: With the notable exception of one Christian (who is among the six respondents themselves), none has any friend from SC or ST background, and only one would count a person from OBC among his friends. All in all, while the regional origin comprises a considerably broad spectrum of Central, Northern and Western India, with a number of castes (and religious minorities) included in the circle of trust, all share a vague origin in states in the Hindi belt, and a shared social position of privileged status and education.

The picture becomes clearer and more nuanced when one compares the first six respondents with No. 7 and 8, both of whom are in the same age but from different states and very different social backgrounds. Here the impermeable nature of social status groups is manifested, with a clear division according to the respondents' own social origins. The *Brahmin* respondent is deeply rooted in his own region, with seven out of ten friends from his home state. The same applies to the respondent from SC background, who is even more tied to his original locality, with eight out of ten friends from his own home state. Already, because of their different origins, and therefore also language, the two are very unlikely to become friends. What is more, both are also largely confined to their own socio-cultural background and caste, so there is even less chance of social interaction. Whereas respondent No. 7 has at least two close friends from Upper Caste background (in this case *Lingayat*²³⁸), respondent No. 8, a *Brahmin*, is exclusively settled in a network of High Castes or Dominant Agricultural Castes (with a certain ambiguity about the locally named classifications). From a traditional caste perspective, there is already considerable caste admixture in both examples and closely defined *Jati*-boundaries are clearly blurred in those cases. But a marked preference for a cultural similarity to one's own cultural values is, as natural and self-explanatory as this might be, the starker finding in this example.

That these cultural patterns of in-group preferences can be overcome is indicated in the comparison between respondents nine and ten who, apart from working in IT, are quite opposite in their friendship

²³⁸ *Lingayats* constitute something like a special case in South India: Originally founded as reform movement with an anti-caste stance, they claim to be more tolerant and egalitarian than the majority; at the same time, they command a very high position in the status hierarchy and are often indistinguishable from Brahmins or other vegetarian Upper Castes.

choices. Respondent No. 10, a graduate in his early 20s from Andhra Pradesh, who came to live with his cousin in Bangalore to work in the IT industry, is simply at the start of his career and has not yet made any contacts outside of his home circle. Not surprisingly, he cites only friends from Andhra Pradesh, with most of them from his own caste, a Dominant Agricultural one. Respondent No. 9, in contrast, aged in his early 40s and with 17 years work experience in the United States, has a far wider recruitment base for friendships and is the only one who includes Muslims and foreigners in his list. Also telling is the fact that he could not name the exact caste of his friends and only stated “Hindu”. Since he was one of my best contacts during my research period, it is unlikely that he wanted to hide their background; the likely explanation being that he classified people in much looser terms, whereas those without exposure to foreign cultures could exactly name the caste of their friends. It is often said that Indians only become Indians once they have left their country and can thereby see India's internal divisions from further afar. If this is the case, there could be some accidental as well as anecdotal confirmation here. If age and greater experience was enough to allow people to transcend caste-based cultural barriers, then caste itself would find less meaning in the future.

8.6.3. Interpretation: Segregation and its Consequences for Caste

Most generally, and with only few exceptions, friendship networks seem to follow rough socio-cultural patterns, in which caste as interpreted as *Jati* is largely overridden in favour of cultural similarities, such as local origin, language and dietary preferences. If these findings are generalisable, friendships are unlikely between those of very different cultural background, even if exact *Jati* membership is seemingly irrelevant. It implies a pattern of socialisation that is informed and limited by fault lines, such as Hindi/Non-Hindi speaker, North/South Indian origin, vegetarian or non-vegetarian family tradition, recipient or non-recipient of caste-quota benefits. Overall, the little test reveals a striking persistence of cultural barriers, even if exact *Jati* lines no longer channel social interaction. In most cases, this might not even be a conscious consideration by participants, even though the preference for friends from similar or at least comparable background is consistent – and, after all, this seems to be a human commonality (Blum 2008; Tajfel and Turner 1986). Whereas the youngest of the respondents are mainly influenced by their families and the environment where they grew up, professional contacts and a generally broader horizon seem to make contacts across a wider range more likely, potentially pointing towards future trends. For the moment at least, segregation along broad cultural lines, with an indirect impact on traditional caste divisions, is all that can be clearly identified.

8.7. Conclusion – what role for Caste in everyday life?

From the quasi-ethnographic perspective that has been employed here, caste seems to merge into a phenomenon that is less visible and restrictive in public life, but still carries weight in private decisions, although in a more remote and indirect way. In public, there is a seemingly conflict-free co-existence between people of different caste heritage, enabled by an obvious tolerance-cum-ignorance about the caste practices of others. Closer to the individuals themselves, the remnants of caste still tend to sustain a variance in trust that, in turn, determines the formation of friendship networks. At the most individual level, in the interpretation of caste as an ingredient of one's personal identity, it is rarely invoked in a direct way. However, caste membership in the wider sense shapes perceptions about social and political issues, as discussed earlier (chpt. 6) in the case of reservation quotas. Thus, while the institution of caste has certainly lost much of its sting, it continues to wield influence, in often implicit and surprising ways. Even if caste-based discrimination is increasingly uncommon in public affairs, caste practices are directly or indirectly observable when it comes to a private engagement with caste-based ideas.

This has clear consequences for the society in question. As long as vaguely caste-based networks of trust are not interconnected, people who live side-by-side may inhabit parallel universes, and remain oblivious of others' lives. This would explain both the remarkable tolerance for beliefs and practices that contrast to one's own ethics, and the (relative) peaceful co-existence of mutually exclusive religious affiliations and social groups in India. It is, in consequence, perhaps the main reason why religions such as Islam are readily integrated, relatively speaking, into the Indian cultural environment, even though some Muslim practices (such as eating beef or prohibiting idol-worship) are repellent vis-à-vis the Hindu majority. On the other hand, this pre-empts the development of a social ethic that transcends actual social groups and particularistic belief systems. Any society that is based on this form of 'tolerant ignorance' is perhaps able to accommodate various potentially conflicting sub-groups with their respective ethics and belief systems. Nevertheless, it is hardly conceivable as the social basis for a unified nation.

All in all, caste is a receding factor in public affairs, one that is clearly losing its importance against the backdrop of weakening or disappearing purity rules, a widespread confusion about caste practices apart from one's own, the prevailing anonymity and resultant absence of mutual caste-relations, and the rise of alternative interpretations of individual identities. However orthodox or liberal the caste rules may be when practised in private, only a fraction of them can ever be translated into metropolitan life, let alone be forced on others. Notwithstanding this visible decline of the institution of caste, the surviving remnants of the purity rules can be observed in the dietary differentiation that matches the requirements of literally all parts of society with a wide range of food options. Especially amongst young males who are unmarried and live apart from their families, specific dietary rules are being bent or broken in relation to the increasing freedom from their families; at the same time, however, the whole

belief system, the preconceived notion that certain people have to eat certain food, is not challenged on a broader level. As long as economic class is correlated with caste status, and this connection is still apparent, especially at the bottom and top of the traditional caste spectrum, caste differences will remain visible in public. But since this correlation is increasingly submerged by capitalistic developments, with no opposing developments yet evident, caste in public is undoubtedly in decline, however slow, uneven and even contradictory this process is and will be.

However, and this is the strongest point to be made here, the mainstay of caste in modern circumstances – the biological element incorporated in endogamy (chpt. 1.2.2) – is changing considerably without disappearing entirely. In my observations, the incipient stages of a shift towards a relaxed interpretation of *Jati*-boundaries in marriage considerations is becoming visible, and this is firmly to be expected since the research focused on the most modern segment of Indian society. Yet even here, no real revolution is taking place, and personal autonomy in partner choice, let alone sexual freedom, is still inconceivable. Even if there is a considerable loosening of strict caste endogamy, the social origin of a potential spouse is still of utmost importance, with caste remaining one of the first considerations, despite a larger group of culturally similar castes gaining acceptance. Thus, if this trend holds and inter-caste marriages become increasingly accepted, it would only blur the boundaries, not break them completely. An intra-caste marriage would then become a choice where it was once the norm, although this does not mean that caste considerations would necessarily lose importance. The seemingly rational argument that it is better for offspring to grow up in a culturally homogeneous environment serves as a powerful substitute for older arguments that are more focused on the relationship between different castes. Should caste boundaries be broken, it would still be unlikely that great social and cultural divides suddenly become meaningless; rather it is likely that castes (as *Jatis*) that are already close in social and cultural terms would merge to become supra-castes (perhaps, but not necessarily, oriented on *Varna*). As long as caste and socio-economic status are connected – and this is widely the case in India today – old social inequality would simply be replaced with new social inequality, albeit now based on more rational terms.

Conclusion

This thesis has covered a great deal of ground and this fact alone prohibits an all-too simplistic conclusion. It would, therefore, be advisable to come to a separate conclusion for each of the specific areas that have been researched and discussed.

First and foremost, this thesis proposes a new and more comprehensive means to theorise about caste. Clearly, an approach that views caste as an institution that systematically interconnects three main elements is not in keeping with the conventional academic descriptions developed so far. This will undoubtedly draw much criticism from the orthodox wardens of the discipline. Notwithstanding their objections, this way of analysing caste is not only more comprehensive than existing theories, it also takes into account the biological element that is intrinsic to caste endogamy – an issue central to caste that has been ignored for far too long. Moreover, this approach provides a systematic explanation for the underlying friction in caste practice. Because this social institution is based on three elements, three different rationales can be invoked for a rationalisation of caste, all with their own, sometimes competing principles. In the combination of these three elements, a complex picture of caste emerges; one that is vastly superior to any theory in which caste is based on a single fundamental principle. Finally, as it provides the framework for a meta-analysis of existing theoretical approaches to caste, this thesis constitutes a valuable tool for anyone interested in an epistemological examination of existing or future theories of caste. The approach offered here is not the final word on caste, and it will almost certainly be rejected by those social scientists for whom the mere mention of anything biological amounts to doctrinal heresy. Nevertheless, no one with a real interest in the social institution of caste can rightfully ignore this approach, no matter how he or she will ultimately assess its explanatory value.

Of course, once caste is analysed in relation to modernity, the topic of modernity also deserves consideration. As discussed in the second chapter, because modernity and modernisation are based on a number of inextricable conflicts, this does not allow for sweeping generalisations. Nonetheless, following the discussion of modernity and its underlying rationales, it is clear that caste (even in its modern reinterpretation) is still in fundamental conflict with modernity as, while modernity is based on an intrinsic notion of egalitarian individuality, caste has intrinsic anti-individualistic features. The biological element of caste, in particular – that is, the rule that one is born into a caste and must remain there for life – is in sharp contrast to the modern emphasis on life choices, of contingency and of the essential value of social change. Modernity and the institution of caste are therefore in systematic conflict, and any factual practice of caste can only be at variance with modernity. At the same time, however, modernity itself is accommodating such conflicts and contrasts, and the translation of both modernity and caste in real life is expected to allow for specific rearrangements.

In the most general terms, this conflict between modernity and caste, and the numerous arrangements to accommodate it, can be observed in the empirical chapters. At a first glance, there seems to be no

conflict at all. Caste does not appear to play any direct role in the IT workplace – or, at least, not in the elite companies that were at the centre of the research – and IT employees seem to have very low levels of awareness about caste, apart from knowledge about their own caste. The topic of caste rarely surfaces in everyday conversations and in more than one instance it seemed actively suppressed and discouraged – both by the companies that view caste as a potential dividing factor within its workforce and the employees who seem to feel embarrassed by the sheer mention of potential conflicts informed by caste status. For all these reasons, the topic is quite difficult to research and seems to slip from one's grasp whenever a new perspective opens up.

So, while the direct approach is often blocked or hindered by a veil of silence, more indirect methods offer insights that circumvent these restrictions and confirm the findings in the available literature. For instance, and in the face of all denials, this particular elite workforce has a marked and distinct bias towards *Brahmins* and other privileged castes. Even if caste discrimination is unheard of in these companies, the unequal recruitment of different castes into the IT workforce is a clear sign of the economic power of caste in India today. The very fact alone that the Special Training Programme has been conducted by one of the leading IT companies in India, tells of the situation and the awareness by a significant part of the industry. Although the climate at the workplace is largely informed by caste-anonymity, there are clear signs that the power difference of caste groups becomes reflected here and while most Higher Caste members are open about their caste background, the overwhelming majority of SC/ST members would never mention their caste status to anyone except very close friends. The old hierarchy, visible in the status differences between Higher and Lower Castes, is still apparent in the most modern section of Indian society.

It appears that, in order to blend into the socio-cultural elite, those from a Lower Caste or religious minority background prefer to abandon their caste (or religious) identity and adapt to a cultural frame that is distinctly intellectual and modern – and based on an unexpressed, but perceptible 'Brahmin-ness' (cf. Bairy 2010). In popular opinion, and notwithstanding the constant denials from the official side, the Indian IT industry is associated with Brahmins and the research qualifies the claim. There is indeed a certain Brahmin prominence in IT; not only in their numerical over-representation in the workforce but also in the way the industry presents itself (the emphasis on moral values, the ideal of education and merit, the aim to be more than a business but a service to society plus the general understanding of the work as being intellectual and non-polluting). Nevertheless, the workforce is far from uniform and if there is a cultural hegemony, then it is a contested one, not least because powerful competitors such as Dominant Agricultural Castes play an increasingly prominent role. While this could imply change in the future, for those in a minority position – and IT engineers from SC and ST backgrounds represent a tiny minority – cultural assimilation is still the clear strategy of choice.

This situation markedly contrasts with the private situation of IT employees in Bangalore. In this fast-growing metropolis, there is caste-anonymity for those who prefer it, but no group that could lay claim

to dominance, culturally or economically. Consequentially, a new order of coexistence is being practised that could well be a model for India's future. Whereas the consequences of caste practice are clearly apparent, conflicts between castes or caste groups are a rare exception. A city like Bangalore easily accommodates a variety of caste-informed lifestyles side-by-side that, in other circumstances, would lead to cultural clashes. Moreover, a deep market, which caters to fine-tuned cultural differences, and a distinct social segregation reduces the potential for caste-based conflicts, while at the same time providing the basis for a parallel co-existence of otherwise irreconcilable social and cultural differences. This admixture of people from mutually incomprehensible cultural backgrounds could potentially precede a new model for the reinterpretation of caste; not in terms of small jati anymore, but in terms of larger caste alliances along cultural lines. At least in the small sample used in this study, caste differences based on *Jati* are apparently giving way to broader distinctions, such as native language, middle class background or vegetarian or non-vegetarian lifestyle.

At present, these tentative empirical findings cannot adequately support further speculation about the future of caste, although some scenarios have more plausibility than others. If the trends currently apparent were to continue, caste in its *Jati* version would be incrementally replaced by broader classifications that, while not totally caste-neutral, would have only a very vague resemblance to the old *Varna* categories. In the public sphere, caste (or its remnants) would become even less important with caste considerations increasingly restricted to the private sphere. Any resulting society, therefore, would no longer be determined by caste, but would still not be totally free from caste remnants, such as the distinction between vegetarian and non-vegetarian lifestyles. For the time being, general caste considerations and, in particular, the underlying biological rationale – in the guise of an obligation to preserve a specific family culture – constitute an important factor in Indian social life, especially once marriages are considered.

Here, however, lies the greatest challenge to any conclusion and a great potential for further research. The biological rationale that is intrinsically connected to the very idea of caste (see chpt. 1) does feature in some narratives and underpins others, but it is rarely expressed as a biological assumption. Although it is central to caste in a theoretical sense, it is also the most controversial aspect since it ultimately essentialises every individual captured under the label of a certain caste. Therefore it stands to reason that caste is hardly expressed in the terms of "blood" or "genes" (Bairy 2010: 277, 81). On the other hand, however, caste endogamy rests on exactly this biological assumption and cannot be justified on cultural terms alone. As this research project has only scratched the surface in this regard, one that is exclusively focused on this aspect is needed to explore it in more detail. For the moment, the topic stands as a contradiction that can be rationalised in theoretical terms, but lacks almost all empirical clarification.

While this surely remains a weak spot, there are some more general implications that can be drawn from the research at hand. At the moment, only the incipient stages of a loosening of caste boundaries are

visible in a very small, elite section of society. This thesis' underlying assumption that the social changes observable here have implications for the rest of society is both plausible and audacious. Arguably, the new middle classes, with the New Economy of IT as their iconic centre, have tremendous influence – symbolically as well as factually – to shape the future direction of social change in India. On the other hand, however, the very elite status that IT enjoys today makes it nearly impossible to extrapolate these social changes to the wider society. The *life world* reality of the overwhelming majority of the population not working in IT remains fundamentally different, with these separate lived realities unlikely to converge in the near future. Thus, as much as the IT industry claims to act – and, indeed, does act – as a beacon for the capitalist modernisation of India, it is unclear how successful this undertaking will be. If, and only if, the Indian IT industry maintains its position at the forefront of socio-economic change will the broad conclusions below be relevant to wider Indian society.

If the emphasis on the use of English and on education becomes further entrenched, a meritocratic elite would slowly but steadily replace the old hierarchy based on ascribed status and the birthright – at least in the corporate world, if not necessarily in politics. The social composition of this new elite would, in turn, widen its social base and include more Low Caste members alongside the existing old High Castes. And as education becomes more accessible, the Lower Castes would acquire greater social status and economic influence. At the same time, however, two other social groups – not necessarily caste related – would benefit unequally from the emphasis on education. As evident in the empirical findings, Christians already contribute more of their members to the IT workforce than their share of the overall population would suggest – and this would continue if no dramatic social change occurs. On the other hand, Muslims, who are already consistently under-represented in IT, could lose out further if a modern, English-medium education continues to grow in importance. While the reasons for the divergent social trajectories of Christians and Muslims have not been fully discussed in the thesis – in which religious background is not a focus – it seems clear that cultural openness towards Western education and attendance at an English-medium school plays a crucial role.

This brings the argument back to a much wider topic: the overall adaptability of Indian society in the context of capitalist globalisation. The seemingly straightforward manner in which a pre-modern institution such as caste has adapted to modernisation has implications elsewhere in Indian society. As surprising as it may be for many, India appears to have adopted the rationale of a market-based, capitalistic rationality relatively easily, without obvious large-scale social or political resistance. Why, then, did a clear social revolution not occur in India? Ironically, the very institution of caste (in its *Varna* manifestation) could provide an explanation for this, as the old, caste-based hierarchy is much more compatible with the ideals of modernity than was the case in, say, pre-revolutionary France. Those traits that are deemed essential and valuable under capitalism – notably the bourgeois emphasis on education and economic self-reliance – have always been represented in the Indian socio-cultural elite, in the ideal-typos of the *Brahmin* and the *Vaishya* respectively. In contrast to the pre-modern and pre-Revolutionary

situation in France, where an education-hungry and economically rational third estate had to forcefully confront a dominant aristocracy and clergy, a much smoother transition from the old to a new elite appears to be the case in India. The newer, more modern rationale is adapted without much evident social disruption or violent upheaval precisely because it does not conflict with the old cultural models. The belief in constant self-improvement through education and economic self-reliance based on rational considerations is already epitomised in the traditional *Varna* ideal; thus capitalism finds a symbolic foothold in India's cultural past.

Thus, while the institution of caste (in its *Jati* form) has always been seen as one of the main barriers preventing the modernisation of India on capitalist principles, this thesis clearly demonstrates that this view is obsolete. Caste in the modernised reinterpretation is not an insurmountable obstacle to capitalism; quite the opposite, caste readily adapts itself to a capitalistic mode of production. Even in capitalism, the individual could benefit immensely from membership of a caste-based network, even if this was at the expense of the wider society (that is, in much the same way as in pre-modern times, such networks can prevent open and fair access to resources). However, even at the individual level, immanent tensions between capitalist modernity and caste remain. Not only are the ideals of capitalism – that is, open and transparent competition – in conflict with the factual reality of pre-modern institutions retaining an influence in India's modern economy. Moreover, as the second chapter has demonstrated, the very idea of caste is openly hostile to the underlying ideals of modernity; notably the rights of the individual and the notion of social mobility independent of birth and descent. As evident in the empirical chapters, the frictions between caste and the expectations of life in modernity are clear; in the inter-generational disagreements about individual autonomy and obedience to the family, in the still-existing ritual considerations relating to food, and, most obviously, in the entrenched conflict concerning individual choice in marriage arrangements.

While these conflicts will remain disputed in the years to come, caste itself is not likely to vanish either. Just as this institution showed itself to be adaptable to the Nehruvian socialism of the post-independence period, so too is it remodelling itself within the new, post-liberalisation market economy. The intrinsic dissonance between pre-modern institutions and the modern rationale – visible in all modernising societies but clearly exemplified here – is shaping Indian society and will further influence it in the foreseeable future. Of course, capitalism and the market-based society are still developing in India and their influence is only likely to increase. Nevertheless, the evolving relationship between caste and modernity is already very visible in the IT sector today. Thus, while the fundamental direction of social change is clear, at least within this small, elite section of society, the extent to which this is generalisable to wider Indian society remains to be resolved.

Of course, this thesis has only begun to explore this complex relationship and it provides only the faintest outline of the social, political, economic and cultural future of India. While, obviously, it is an academic truism that more research is necessary, any future analysis of caste that ignores the conceptual

issues addressed here is likely to be severely compromised. As so many past investigations have been hindered by theoretical shortcomings and ideological blindness, the need for a fundamentally different approach is obvious. If nothing else, this thesis provides an alternative paradigm that may result in a more comprehensive understanding of the social institution that is caste.

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Appendix

In the following, the eight fictive CVs and the pre-test questionnaires from the socio-psychological experiment (chpt. 7) are attached.

| | |
|--|-----|
| CV Brahmin Hyderabad highly qualified | A1 |
| CV Brahmin Hyderabad ambiguously qualified | A2 |
| CV Brahmin North highly qualified | A3 |
| CV Brahmin North ambiguously qualified | A4 |
| CV ST North highly qualified | A5 |
| CV ST North ambiguously qualified | A6 |
| CV ST Hyderabad highly qualified | A7 |
| CV ST Hyderabad ambiguously qualified | A8 |
| Questionnaire pre-test I | A9 |
| Questionnaire pre-test II | A10 |

SUNIL L. SHASTRI

| Objective | | | |
|---|--|------------------------|--|
| Seeking a challenging position in a well-established IT Company that offers professional growth and ample opportunity to learn and enrich my competencies in my profession. | | | |
| Technical Skills | | | |
| Languages | C, C++, Visual C++, HTML, ActionScript, UML, XML, Java | | |
| O/S | Windows9x/NT/2000/XP, DOS, MAC OSX, Linux/UNIX | | |
| Software | 3d Studio Max 6.0, Flash (+actionscripting), Adobe Photoshop, Adobe Illustrator, CorelDraw, AutoCAD, PageMaker, Dream weaver MX, Adobe Premier, Director, Sound Forge | | |
| Areas of interest | Human Computer Interaction, User Centered Design, Usability, Information Studies | | |
| Work Experience | | | |
| 10/2008 - present | User Interface Designer at Communication Design Group, Wipro Technologies, Hyderabad <ul style="list-style-type: none">Developed the first Web 2.0 based generic User Interface framework and design guidelines for a transport support system for BNSF Railways.Designed the interface for a transport management system for Meridian IQ, a leading American logistics service provider.Was part of the usability evaluation team, and conducted usability analysis and reviews for several in-house and external applications | | |
| 07/2007 - 08/2008 | Junior Program Manager for APCO Systems, USA at Lemuir IT Corporation PVT LTD, Hyderabad <ul style="list-style-type: none">Training: 2 Months / Duration: 10 Months 2 WeeksPlatform: MS SQL Server 2000 with Warehouse Management Systems (WMS).Job Role: SQL Server Database Designing and Database Handling. | | |
| Educational Qualifications | | | |
| Qualification | Year | Aggregate Marks Scored | Institution Name |
| B.E (Computer Science and Design) | 2007 | 77.54% | Sreenidhi Institute of Science and Technology (SNIST) -affiliated to JNTU-Hyderabad |
| Intermediate | 2003 | 68.12% | Sapthagiri Junior College (M.P.C.) Vijayawada |
| C.B.S.E | 2001 | 83.28% | Sree Vidya Peeth (K.E.S.) Narketpally |
| Personal Details | | | |
| Date of Birth | 7th February 1986 | | |
| Languages | Telugu, English, Hindi, Sanskrit | | |
| Hobbies | Music, Net Surfing, F1, Cricket | | |

SUNIL L. SHASTRI

| Objective | | | |
|---|--|------------------------|--|
| Seeking a challenging position in a well-established IT Company that offers professional growth and ample opportunity to learn and enrich my competencies in my profession. | | | |
| Technical Skills | | | |
| Languages | C#, C, HTML, ActionScript, UML, XML | | |
| O/S | Windows9x/NT/2000/XP, DOS, MAC OSX, Linux/UNIX | | |
| Software | 3d Studio Max 6.0, Flash (+actionscripting), Adobe Photoshop, Adobe Illustrator, CorelDraw, AutoCAD, PageMaker, Dream weaver MX, Adobe Premier, Director, Sound Forge | | |
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| Personal Details | | | |
| Date of Birth | 7th February 1986 | | |
| Languages | Telugu, English, Hindi, Sanskrit | | |
| Hobbies | Music, Net Surfing, F1, Cricket | | |

GOURAV S. SHARMA

| Objective | | | |
|---|--|------------------------|--|
| Seeking a challenging position in a well-established IT Company that offers professional growth and ample opportunity to learn and enrich my competencies in my profession. | | | |
| Technical Skills | | | |
| Languages | C, C++, Visual C++, HTML, ActionScript, UML, XML, Java | | |
| O/S | Windows9x/NT/2000/XP, DOS, MAC OSX, Linux/UNIX | | |
| Software | 3d Studio Max 6.0, Flash (+actionscripting), Adobe Photoshop, Adobe Illustrator, CorelDraw, AutoCAD, PageMaker, Dream weaver MX, Adobe Premier, Director, Sound Forge | | |
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| Educational Qualifications | | | |
| Qualification | Year | Aggregate Marks Scored | Institution Name |
| B.E (Computer Science and Design) | 2007 | 77.54% | Maharishi Markdeshwar Engineering College, Ambala, Haryana |
| Intermediate | 2003 | 68.12% | Government High School, Chandigarh, Punjab |
| ICSE | 2001 | 83.28% | Government High School, Chandigarh, Punjab |
| Personal Details | | | |
| Date of Birth | 7th February 1986 | | |
| Languages | Punjabi, English, Hindi, Sanskrit | | |
| Hobbies | Music, Net Surfing, F1, Cricket | | |

GOURAV S. SHARMA

| Objective | | | |
|---|--|------------------------|--|
| Seeking a challenging position in a well-established IT Company that offers professional growth and ample opportunity to learn and enrich my competencies in my profession. | | | |
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| Personal Details | | | |
| Date of Birth | 7th February 1986 | | |
| Languages | Punjabi, English, Hindi, Sanskrit | | |
| Hobbies | Music, Net Surfing, F1, Cricket | | |

SANTOSH V. BANGDIKAR

| Objective | | | |
|---|--|------------------------|--|
| Seeking a challenging position in a well-established IT Company that offers professional growth and ample opportunity to learn and enrich my competencies in my profession. | | | |
| Technical Skills | | | |
| Languages | C, C++, Visual C++, HTML, ActionScript, UML, XML, Java | | |
| O/S | Windows9x/NT/2000/XP, DOS, MAC OSX, Linux/UNIX | | |
| Software | 3d Studio Max 6.0, Flash (+actionscripting), Adobe Photoshop, Adobe Illustrator, CorelDraw, AutoCAD, PageMaker, Dream weaver MX, Adobe Premier, Director, Sound Forge | | |
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| Intermediate | 2003 | 68.12% | Government High School, Chandigarh, Punjab |
| ICSE | 2001 | 83.28% | Government High School, Chandigarh, Punjab |
| Personal Details | | | |
| Date of Birth | 7th February 1986 | | |
| Languages | Lambadi, Punjabi, English, Hindi, | | |
| Hobbies | Music, Net Surfing, F1, Cricket | | |

SANTOSH V. BANGDIKAR

| Objective | | | |
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SANDEEP G. NAIK

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|---|--|------------------------|---|
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| C.B.S.E | 2001 | 83.28% | Sree Vidya Peeth (K.E.S) Narketpally |
| Personal Details | | | |
| Date of Birth | 7th February 1986 | | |
| Languages | Sugali, Telugu, English, Hindi | | |
| Hobbies | Music, Net Surfing, F1, Cricket | | |

SANDEEP G. NAIK

| Objective | | | |
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| Seeking a challenging position in a well-established IT Company that offers professional growth and ample opportunity to learn and enrich my competencies in my profession. | | | |
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| Personal Details | | | |
| Date of Birth | 7th February 1986 | | |
| Languages | Sugali, Telugu, English, Hindi | | |
| Hobbies | Music, Net Surfing, F1, Cricket | | |

After reading the resume above, please answer the following questions:

How would you rate the design of the resume?

| | | | | | | | | | | | |
|-----------|--------------------------|--------------------------|--------------------------|--------------------------|--------------------------|--------------------------|--------------------------|--------------------------|--------------------------|--------------------------|-----------------|
| very good | <input type="checkbox"/> | not good at all |
| | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 | 6 | 7 | 8 | 9 | 10 | |

If this person is your new teammate – would you like to work with him?

| | | | | | | | | | | | |
|-----------|--------------------------|--------------------------|--------------------------|--------------------------|--------------------------|--------------------------|--------------------------|--------------------------|--------------------------|--------------------------|------------|
| very much | <input type="checkbox"/> | not at all |
| | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 | 6 | 7 | 8 | 9 | 10 | |

How qualified is the candidate for an entry level position (less than 2 years experience)?

| | | | | | | | | | | | |
|---------------------|--------------------------|--------------------------|--------------------------|--------------------------|--------------------------|--------------------------|--------------------------|--------------------------|--------------------------|--------------------------|----------------------|
| extremely qualified | <input type="checkbox"/> | not at all qualified |
| | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 | 6 | 7 | 8 | 9 | 10 | |

Would you recommend this person for a position in your company?

YES NO

How strongly would you recommend this person?

| | | | | | | | | | | | |
|---------------|--------------------------|--------------------------|--------------------------|--------------------------|--------------------------|--------------------------|--------------------------|--------------------------|--------------------------|--------------------------|------------|
| very strongly | <input type="checkbox"/> | not at all |
| | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 | 6 | 7 | 8 | 9 | 10 | |

How are the applicant's chances in the labour market in the present situation?

| | | | | | | | | | | | |
|-----------|--------------------------|--------------------------|--------------------------|--------------------------|--------------------------|--------------------------|--------------------------|--------------------------|--------------------------|--------------------------|-----------------|
| very good | <input type="checkbox"/> | not good at all |
| | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 | 6 | 7 | 8 | 9 | 10 | |

Has there been anything missing in the resume? If so, please state what should be included:

After filling the questionnaire, would you please share some personal details for statistical purposes? (it is 100 percent anonymous)

Age: (in years) _____

Sex female male

state of origin _____

religion _____

caste (if applicable) _____

caste category _____

highest qualification _____

job experience _____ (years)

Thank you very much, your involvement in this study is highly appreciated! Benjamin Lindt

After carefully reading the resume above, please answer the following questions:

1. How informative is this resume for you?

| | | | | | | | | | | | |
|----------------------------|----------------------------|----------------------------|----------------------------|----------------------------|----------------------------|----------------------------|----------------------------|----------------------------|-----------------------------|--|------------------------|
| very informative | | | | | | | | | | | not informative at all |
| <input type="checkbox"/> 1 | <input type="checkbox"/> 2 | <input type="checkbox"/> 3 | <input type="checkbox"/> 4 | <input type="checkbox"/> 5 | <input type="checkbox"/> 6 | <input type="checkbox"/> 7 | <input type="checkbox"/> 8 | <input type="checkbox"/> 9 | <input type="checkbox"/> 10 | | |

2. If this person is your new teammate – would you like to work with him?

| | | | | | | | | | | | |
|----------------------------|----------------------------|----------------------------|----------------------------|----------------------------|----------------------------|----------------------------|----------------------------|----------------------------|-----------------------------|--|------------|
| very much | | | | | | | | | | | not at all |
| <input type="checkbox"/> 1 | <input type="checkbox"/> 2 | <input type="checkbox"/> 3 | <input type="checkbox"/> 4 | <input type="checkbox"/> 5 | <input type="checkbox"/> 6 | <input type="checkbox"/> 7 | <input type="checkbox"/> 8 | <input type="checkbox"/> 9 | <input type="checkbox"/> 10 | | |

3. How qualified is the candidate for a position that requires less than 2 years experience?

| | | | | | | | | | | | |
|----------------------------|----------------------------|----------------------------|----------------------------|----------------------------|----------------------------|----------------------------|----------------------------|----------------------------|-----------------------------|--|----------------------|
| extremely qualified | | | | | | | | | | | not at all qualified |
| <input type="checkbox"/> 1 | <input type="checkbox"/> 2 | <input type="checkbox"/> 3 | <input type="checkbox"/> 4 | <input type="checkbox"/> 5 | <input type="checkbox"/> 6 | <input type="checkbox"/> 7 | <input type="checkbox"/> 8 | <input type="checkbox"/> 9 | <input type="checkbox"/> 10 | | |

4. Would you recommend this person for a position in your company?

YES NO → please go directly to question 6!

5. IF YES → How strongly would you recommend this person?

| | | | | | | | | | | | |
|----------------------------|----------------------------|----------------------------|----------------------------|----------------------------|----------------------------|----------------------------|----------------------------|----------------------------|-----------------------------|--|------------|
| very strongly | | | | | | | | | | | not at all |
| <input type="checkbox"/> 1 | <input type="checkbox"/> 2 | <input type="checkbox"/> 3 | <input type="checkbox"/> 4 | <input type="checkbox"/> 5 | <input type="checkbox"/> 6 | <input type="checkbox"/> 7 | <input type="checkbox"/> 8 | <input type="checkbox"/> 9 | <input type="checkbox"/> 10 | | |

6. How are the applicant's chances in the present job market?

| | | | | | | | | | | | |
|----------------------------|----------------------------|----------------------------|----------------------------|----------------------------|----------------------------|----------------------------|----------------------------|----------------------------|-----------------------------|--|-----------------|
| very good | | | | | | | | | | | not good at all |
| <input type="checkbox"/> 1 | <input type="checkbox"/> 2 | <input type="checkbox"/> 3 | <input type="checkbox"/> 4 | <input type="checkbox"/> 5 | <input type="checkbox"/> 6 | <input type="checkbox"/> 7 | <input type="checkbox"/> 8 | <input type="checkbox"/> 9 | <input type="checkbox"/> 10 | | |

7. How much do you know about the person's social background? (if you don't know just guess!)

home state: _____ religion: _____ caste: _____

After filling the questionnaire, please share your personal details for statistical purposes. It is 100 percent anonymous so please answer all the questions!

Age: (in years) _____

Sex female male

state of origin _____

religion _____

if Hindu → caste _____

caste category _____

highest qualification _____

job experience _____ (years)

Thank you very much, your involvement in this study is highly appreciated! Benjamin Lindt