

Call for papers

From Caste Patriotism to Caste Activism: Caste Associations as Political Intermediaries in India

Workshop organized by
the Centre de Sciences Humaines (CSH) and Jawaharlal Nehru University (JNU)

Venue: Centre de Sciences Humaines (CSH)

Date: 3-4 October 2019

Coordinators: Surinder S. Jodhka, Julien Levesque, and Jean-Thomas Martelli

The intersection of caste with electoral politics is often popularly viewed as a case of politicization of caste, almost always attributed to the wily and unscrupulous entrepreneurs of India's messy democracy on the ground. However, the scholarly literature on the subject points to varied and complex ways in which caste groups have been actors in the civic and political life of urban and modern-day India. For example, scholars examining the relation of caste and politics in India over the course of the twentieth century have noted the weakening of the vertical interdependence between caste groups, concomitant with "a process of horizontal consolidation of caste" (Srinivas 1962; Rudolph and Rudolph 1967; Jodhka 2010, 2017, 71).

One of the key ways in which this process took place was the establishment of "caste associations". In the first phase of their development in the late 19th century, caste associations were formed in urban areas to run co-operative housing societies, hospitals, and hostels for students who pursued a modern education. At the same time, the introduction of the decennial census incited caste groups to organize themselves formally and control the way their members would declare their caste. Apart from uniting scattered and fragmented groups under a single umbrella, this was sometimes associated with the use of a certain caste name and with claims to a certain social status—in a process of social mobility later called Sanskritization (Srinivas 1962), or Ashrafization (Vreede-de Stuers 1968) in the case of Muslim groups. This engendered a new form of collective solidarity termed "caste patriotism" by G. S. Ghurye (1932).

The second phase of caste associations was sparked by the growth of representative politics from the 1930s onwards. In this new political context, castes emerged as political actors as they begun to act as pressure groups. In the 1950s and 1960s, higher and middle-ranking but locally "dominant castes" (Srinivas), empowered by land reforms, entered the political fray. Scholars such as Rajni Kothari noted how "caste [got] politicized" (Kothari 1991, 20–21) and saw this phenomenon as an Indian form of civil society. However, this scholarship tended to focus largely on upper and upwardly mobile agrarian castes, thus relegating power relations and issues of domination to the background.

From the 1970s, the dynamics of caste associations were transformed by the emergence of caste groups ranking lower in the hierarchy. Dalits formed their own organizations, the most visible of which may be BAMCEF, founded by Kanshi Ram in 1978. This paved the way for the establishment of the Bahujan Samaj Party, which, in the wake of the Mandal Commission report (1980), became a catalyst for the emergence of OBCs as a significant political force, particularly in northern India (Jaffrelot 2003). Caste politics was now led by cross-caste platforms and political parties that used a language of assertion and resistance to argue for greater inclusion of oppressed groups in institutions of power. Unlike previous

caste associations, these now asked for structural change in order to put an end to entrenched discrimination.

Over almost a century and a half, caste mobilization in the form of associations saw its repertoire evolve from horizontal solidarity for collective welfare to political activism seeking to enact structural change. The novelty of caste associations, as pointed out by Lloyd and Susan Rudolph, was the combination of the ascriptive dimension of caste with voluntary association: “birth in the caste is a necessary but not a sufficient condition for membership” (Rudolph and Rudolph 1967, 33). Moreover, the evolution of caste associations and their form is not only linked to changes in caste practices but to broader socio-economic transformations and state policy, pertaining in particular to economic development. Caste networks indeed play an important role at the regional and local levels in the distribution of public expenditure. Thus, castes also serve as associational platforms by providing networks for organizations not necessarily acting in the name of caste groups.

Finally, we may note that such transformations in caste associations as an organizational form also concerns religious minorities. For instance, an organization (the Anjuman Wazifa-e Sadat) was established in the “first phase” to provide scholarships for Shia Muslims and particularly *sayyids*. Later, groups like the Qureshi-Qasai and Ansari-Julaha formed their own caste association in their attempt at collective social mobility. More recently, *Pasmanda* movements in Bihar and Maharashtra have questioned the leadership of the higher Muslim castes, or *Ashraf*.

This workshop hopes to examine the role of caste associations as intermediaries in the political process and in broader socio-economic transformations in India. We are particularly interested in offering insights into the way caste associations or caste-driven political entrepreneurs have emerged as effective electoral and social intermediaries in contemporary India. We invite scholars of all disciplines of the social sciences to contribute proposals on (but not limited to) the following themes:

- Caste associations as political platforms for electoral politics;
- Caste associations as solidarity networks;
- Changes in the forms of caste associations;
- Case study of specific caste associations;
- Caste associations and internal caste dynamics;
- Caste associations and caste boundaries, from ascriptive characteristics to voluntary association;
- Caste associations and development policy;
- Caste associations and minority representation;
- Caste association and spatial dynamics/housing in urban India;
- Caste associations and corporate economy/ corporate hiring.

Proposals should include a title and an abstract of no more than 250 words and be sent to ssjodhka@yahoo.com, julien.levesque@csh-delhi.com and jt.martelli@csh-delhi.com before 1st June 2019.

References

- Ghurye, Govind Sadashiv. 1932. *Caste and Race in India*. London: Kegan Paul.
- Jaffrelot, Christophe. 2003. *India's Silent Revolution: The Rise of the Lower Castes in North India*. C. Hurst & Co. Publishers.
- Jodhka, Surinder S. 2017. *Caste in Contemporary India*. New Delhi: Routledge.
- . 2010. 'Caste and Politics'. In *Oxford Companion to Politics in India*, edited by Niraja Gopal Jayal and Pratap Bhanu Mehta, 154–67. Delhi: Oxford University Press.
- Kothari, Rajni ed. 1991. *Caste in Indian Politics*. Empirical Studies in Modernization. New Delhi: Orient Longman.
- Rudolph, Lloyd I., and Susanne Hoeber Rudolph. 1967. *The Modernity of Tradition: Political Development in India*. University of Chicago Press.
- Srinivas, Mysore Narasimhaiah. 1962. 'Caste in Modern India and Other Essays.' *Caste in Modern India and Other Essays*.
- Vreede-de Stuers, Cora. 1968. *Parda: A Study of Muslim Women's Life in Northern India*. Assen: Van Gorcum.