

TWO CHEERS FOR RESERVATION: THE SATNAMIS AND THE STEEL PLANT.ⁱ

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Introduction: The institution on which this paper focuses is a large public sector steel plant located in the Chhattisgarh region of Madhya Pradesh, central India. The inequality it deals with is that experienced by the Satnamis, the largest of the ex-Untouchable castes of the region; and the issue I explore concerns the way in which this experience has been altered by steel plant employment.ⁱⁱ

As ex-Untouchables, the Satnamis are the beneficiaries of the Government policy of "compensatory" or "protective discrimination" which is intended to promote the equalization of life chances for the so-called Backward Classes. These are subdivided into three main categories: the Scheduled Tribes who are the representatives of India's supposedly aboriginal populations; the Scheduled Castes which are those castes traditionally regarded as untouchable; and the Other Backward Classes, a heterogeneous collection of castes which were low in the traditional social order but above the line of untouchability. Today, however, not a few of the latter are politically sufficiently powerful and economically sufficiently well-placed that their inclusion has more to do with the clout they can deploy in order to claim the privileges of "backwardness" than to do with the disadvantages they presently suffer. For the Backward Classes in general, these privileges include the reservation of a fixed quota of vacancies and promotions in Government employment, of seats in Parliament and the State Assemblies, of places in state-run educational institutions and scholarships for Backward Class students, and of preferential loans for starting businesses. Of these, it is the reservation of jobs in public sector employment that is of most direct relevance to this paper. The Scheduled Castes have had a quota of reserved posts since 1943, and the Scheduled Tribes since 1950 (Galanter 1984:86) - these being set in proportion to their share of the total population. But it was not until

after 1990 - when the V. P. Singh government took the decision to implement the recommendations of the Mandal Commission - that a quota of central government jobs was ear-marked for the Other Backward Classes. Though Madhya Pradesh was not amongst them, a number of states had much earlier reserved a (sometimes significant) share of posts in their own bureaucracies for members of these castes.ⁱⁱⁱ

The Backward Classes legislation in general, and job reservations in particular, arouse strong passions and are the subject of acrimonious public debate. On the wider issues involved, Andre Beteille has for long been India's most thoughtful and incisive academic commentator, and has brought to the debate an undogmatic even-handedness which it has often lacked. In writing this essay in his honour, I hope to contribute to the on-going discussion of a theme which has been one of his enduring intellectual preoccupations, and to pay tribute to his open-mindedness by presenting a case history which does not - as I see it - unequivocally support his foreboding pessimism about the likely impact of the reservation policy. "[M]y initial scepticism about the social benefits of reservation," he records (1992:vii), "has grown stronger over the years."

Beteille's scepticism has a number of strands, of which I pick out three. In broad terms, however, it is clear that he would like to distinguish the case of the Scheduled Castes and Tribes from that of the Other Backward Classes; and the case of reserved seats in Parliament and the Assemblies from that of educational and job reservations. In both instances, he is plainly more sympathetic to the first than the second. But though - on the principle of redress - the Scheduled Castes and Tribes have a much stronger moral argument, Beteille is not very sanguine about the capacity of job reservations to make much dent on the overall pattern of inequality, and even suggests that they may be counter-productive in so far as they divert attention away from measures which might alleviate the plight of "the masses of Harijans and Adivasis who are too poor and too lowly even to be candidates for the jobs that are

reserved in their names" (Ibid p. 77). As for the latter distinction, while a Member of Parliament of an Assembly has a representative function, the bureaucrat's job is impartial administration.

This brings us to the first strand in Beteille's pessimism, which has to do with the compatibility between job reservation and institutional well-being (1991a). Public institutions are not just there to provide employment but more importantly to serve the commonweal. The threat is that reservation will compromise this central purpose, and this is especially likely when quotas are seen as a right and exist on a significant scale. The issue of scale is crucial, and at various points Beteille makes it plain that he is not implacably opposed to limited reservations (1991a; 1992d:208-9). At others, however, his position comes across as rather less nuanced (as when he flatly declares his belief that "reservations in education and employment are on the whole harmful" [1992:vii]; and at no point does he specify what an innocuous scale would be. But whatever that is, the danger beyond it is that the use of ascriptive criteria rather than "merit" as the basis of recruitment to institutions that are founded on performance and achievement is likely to subvert their functioning - a theme taken up by Shah who invokes the notion of "efficiency", to which reservations are held to be "a major barrier" (Shah 1996a:201). Beteille similarly sees a contradiction between quotas and economic liberalization: "An economy cannot be made competitive by persons who owe their positions to birth rather than achievement" (1992: 110). But for him a great deal more is at stake than "efficiency"; and this has to do with the norms and purposes of modern institutions - of, for example, an impartial civil service or a university committed to academic excellence. Reservations are based on caste, and the culture of caste and the sub-culture of modern institutions are of radically opposed types. If caste quotas are applied to a large proportion of jobs, the first is likely to swamp the second, turning public institutions into hot-beds of caste sentiment and contributing to their decline. From this it is of course the poor who will suffer most. It is not they who can patronise private hospitals and schools.

Reservations are also - the second strand - a threat to the principle of equality of individual opportunity. As Beteille clearly acknowledges, the sharp inequalities of Indian society render the jural right to equality of opportunity meaningless for many, and any realistic attempt to equalise life chances must make some significant space for policies based on a compensatory principle of need. But once need is defined as an attribute of castes and quotas routinely over-ride the claims of individuals, the danger is that "instead of moving forward into the new social order promised by the makers of the Indian constitution, we might move backward into the Middle Ages" (1983:103). Paradoxically, caste is in danger of being given a new lease of life by policies intended to extirpate its influence. Instead of citizenship being an unmediated relationship between the individual and the state, reservation runs the risk of once again making caste the basis of rights. The realistic alternative to individualism, then, is not socialism "but a moral order in which the individual is once again displaced by clan, caste and community" (1983:115). "How", he asks elsewhere, "can we exorcise caste from the public mind by deepening the sense in society that castes are entitled to their separate shares as a matter of right?" (1991a:593; emphasis added).

The best defence of reservations is not in terms of rights, but in terms of policy and utility. Following Dworkin (1984, 1985), the key question is whether reservation is an effective way of addressing a national problem; and in order to answer it we require something like a cost-benefit analysis, and need to keep in mind the differentiated nature of institutions. The balance sheet for a steel plant and a space agency may be different. Beteille has not himself attempted to draw up such a balance sheet (and nor - apart from Galanter's [1984: 81-2; 989:187f] very generalized tabulation of alleged losses and gains - do I know of any other attempt to do so). But the tenor of his general remarks leaves little doubt - the third strand - that in the main he believes the benefits to be pretty paltry. Job reservation is not in fact a particularly effective way of addressing the problem of backwardness for the simple reason that jobs are "too

few in number to materially alter the conditions of any caste as a whole; and there is little reason to believe that the personal advancement of an individual and the social betterment of the caste in which he was born have very much to do with each other" (1983:113-4). Rather, as is now widely recognized, the principal effect of the policy is to advantage those already least disadvantaged - the least backward within the Backward Classes, and the higher sections within each caste (see, for example, Shah 1996b). A "creamy layer" creams the benefits, inviting us to "view with caution a policy which sets out to decrease the inequalities between castes and communities but ends up by increasing the inequalities between individual members of each caste and community" (Beteille 1983:100).

In line with Beteille's preference for a sociology based on the "field-view" over the "book-view" of Indian society (1991b:6), and with his plea for the differentiated nature of institutions to be clearly recognized, this paper aims to shift the focus away from the rather abstract and disembodied level to which much of the debate has remained confined by beginning to explore some of the costs and benefits of reservation for the case of a single caste in a single public sector enterprise. It does not pretend to provide anything like a full balance sheet, but I do hope to flag up what would be some significant entries on it. And what these suggest, I believe, is that in this particular instance the "bottom line" may be less clearly in deficit than Beteille's pessimism might lead us to suppose. More specifically, I want to suggest that there is little evidence that reservation does impair the productive purpose of the steel plant, or seriously undermine its institutional culture; that in this context there are other more serious threats to the principle of equality of opportunity, and that here the direct and indirect benefits of job reservation are in fact quite widely diffused.

The steel plant: The Bhilai Steel Plant (BSP^{iv}) - a public sector undertaking run by the Steel Authority of India - was built with Soviet co-operation and technology, and began production in 1959. It was deliberately located in what was then regarded as a

remote and "backward" rural area, profits being secondary to employment in the planning priorities of the time. BSP currently has nearly 55, 000 permanent workers on its direct pay-roll, of whom approximately three-fifths work inside the 17 square kilometer plant and the remainder for its associated mines and quarries, and for the purpose-built BSP township. This compares with a regular workforce of 63,400 in 1987. In addition, on any one day there are at present something in the region of 8,000 contract workers employed by the plant and the township, and a further 3,500 - 4,000 employed by the mines. Though a handful of managers, and a significant proportion of the contract labour force, are women, all of the regular BSP workers assigned to duties inside the plant are men.

Despite a workforce which is far larger than that of plants of comparable capacity in other steel producing countries with which it must increasingly compete, BSP has for some years shown a profit, and is widely regarded as the most successful of those in the Indian public sector. It runs at its four million ton capacity; produces cheaper steel, and has a record of considerably more harmonious industrial relations than any of the other state-run steel plants, and also than the vast majority of private sector factories which now surround it, and for which it served as a magnet. Initially these were small-scale ancilliary industries directly dependent on BSP. Some prospered and grew into fairly large-scale enterprises, while other industrialists from elsewhere were offered incentives to locate on the new industrial estate which now houses around 200 factories.^v Aside from this development, the 40 kilometer belt between the district headquarters in Durg to the east and Raipur to the west is today a more or less continuous ribbon development of factories and housing colonies.

In order to make way for the plant, the mines, the BSP township and the private sector industrial estate, land from 96 villages was compulsorily purchased by Government. Though local job creation was one of its main objectives, and though the principle was soon established that one member from every family which had

relinquished land should have an automatic right to BSP employment, the local Chhattisgarhis were initially reluctant recruits. Two reasons are invariably cited. The first is that their consumption needs were extremely limited, and that they saw no reason to work more than was required to meet them. Those who still had some land preferred to farm it, while many of those who now only had BSP compensation money preferred to eat and drink and let tomorrow take care of itself. The second is that many believed that in order to put such a massive plant into production thousands, - if not tens of thousands - of human sacrifices (*balis*) were going to be necessary. New recruits were being set to work for a few days and then surreptitiously thrown into the foundations to make them bear the weight of such massive buildings, or into the furnaces to make them function.^{vi}

Partly because of the reluctance of local labour to accept the jobs on offer, and partly because the plant required industrial experience and skills that they did not anyway possess, large numbers of outsiders began to flock into the area from all corners of the country. Many settled in Bhilai and have raised families there, giving the surrounding urban area a remarkably cosmopolitan character. By now, however, the Chhattisgarhis have long since learned new wants and overcome their fear of the plant. Today the competition for jobs is pitiless, and is largely responsible for the development of potentially explosive tensions between the "sons-of-the-soil" and those they continue to regard as immigrant outsiders.

These tensions focus on public sector employment, and particularly on permanent jobs with the steel plant. As in the rest of India, all government jobs are highly sought after, but in Bhilai a BSP job is the acme of most ambitions. The plant's workforce is the local "aristocracy of labour". Employment is secure, the wages are high, the bonuses good and the fringe benefits excellent: company quarters at highly subsidised rates which are sometimes sublet at considerable profit; easy credit for house-building and consumer expenditure, free health care for the family and schools for the

children; travel concessions of surpassing generosity for the worker and all his dependants, as well as a host of other allowances and facilities. Moreover, a few managers and workers are widely reputed to make a considerable "income on top" from innumerable scams and rackets associated with plant property, purchasing requirements and sub-contracting arrangements; and some certainly make a not insignificant supplementary income from their moonlighting activities, which are sometimes capitalised by BSP loans, and to which they may devote as much time as they do to their jobs in the plant - to a shop, a taxi or a buffalo herd, perhaps, or to property dealing, a business installing TV satellite dishes or providing computer training. In terms of consumption patterns, life-style and aspirations, a visible minority of workers merge seamlessly into the middle class.

It is perhaps not surprising, then, that foul as well as fair means are supposedly employed in attempting to conquer the citadel walls.^{vii} High caste aspirants acquire Scheduled Tribe, or even Scheduled Caste, certificates to try to get in on the reserved quota^{viii}; everybody is searching for some "source" who has influence in the employment exchange to advance their papers in the queue of applicants, and "brother-nephew-ism" (*bhai-bhatijavad*) is assumed to be rampant in the selection process. But it is also assumed to be less effective than blunt bribery channelled through some *dalal*, or middle man, who can pull the right strings. I have no means of knowing how often any of this money ever reaches anybody who could actually influence recruitment - a good deal less often, I strongly suspect, than is popularly supposed. It is certainly the case that in this respect BSP's reputation is no worse than most other public sector employers throughout the country (and is probably a good deal better than many). Nevertheless, every third or fourth house in the neighbourhoods I studied has a story about how they paid this or that man a substantial sum to fix up their son in the plant. And of course the almost invariable sequel is that there was no job and that the money was never returned. During my first phase of fieldwork in 1993-4, those who had recently given, and in almost all

cases lost their money, claim to have paid anything between Rs 5,000 - 15,000. But rates have rocketed in the last couple of years, and now I am told of demands in the range of Rs 35,000 - 50, 000 for a post as a Plant Attendant. That would represent around one year's take-home pay for a young BSP worker near the bottom of the ladder, but the equivalent of three or four years' income for a middle-aged contract worker in a small private sector factory.

Many of the villages from which land was compulsorily purchased disappeared without trace under coke oven batteries and blast furnaces, or under the BSP township which is laid out in sectors along broad tree-lined avenues with different qualities of housing for different grades of employee. Other villages on the periphery of the BSP township lost some or all of their agricultural land, but the residential site was left intact. Most of the villagers remained and many eventually took jobs in the plant. Large numbers of outsiders moved in, and gradually most of these villages were swallowed up by urban sprawl. My fieldwork has focused on three of these ex-villages-cum-labour colonies^{ix}, and in two of them my most intimate contacts were with residents of the Satnami Para - the quarter to which Satnamis and Mehars were traditionally confined. I shall call these two villages Girvi and Patripar, though these are not their real names.

The Satnamis before the steel plant:^x : At the time when BSP was still under construction in the late 1950s, Girvi had a population of around 1,000; Patripar of around 500. Both were multicasite villages, and in both the Satnami share of the total population was between 15 - 20%. Each had a single household of Mehars (not to be confused with Mahars who figure later). The last census (that of 1931) which enumerated the entire population by caste had shown that in District Durg (to which Bhilai belongs) the Satnami population was second only to that of the Telis (Oil-pressers). In the pre-1931 censuses, Satnami identity had yet to achieve bureaucratic recognition, though it certainly already had a social and religious existence as the

largely Chamar sectarian following of a saint called Ghasi Das, who had been born into a Chamar family in Bilaspur district in the second half of the eighteenth century. In 1961, nearly 84% of the Scheduled Caste population of the district belonged to the "Chamar" caste cluster (which includes several other small castes but in which the Satnamis constitute an overwhelming majority). Currently the Scheduled Castes as a whole account for approximately 12% of the total population in Durg and 14% in neighbouring Raipur.

What Ghasi Das taught was the equality of all regardless of caste, and the oneness of God whose "true name" (*Satnam*) is the proper object of worship. Satnamis should therefore abjure the worship of Hindu deities, whose images he is said to have consigned to the rubbish dump (Dube 1998:1). In Chattisgarh leather-work and tanning are the traditional occupations of Mehars rather than Chamars, the crucial index of whose defilement was rather their consumption of carrion beef. Ghasi Das's followers were enjoined to renounce the consumption of all meat, alcohol and tobacco, observe certain other dietary restrictions and wear the sacred thread of the Twice-born. By the time of his death, around 1850, a large proportion of Chhattisgarhi Chamars had apparently begun to regard themselves as Satnamis (Babb 1972), and the Chamar "caste" was in the process of reconstituting itself as the Satnami "sect".

By 1866 it was reported that they "have raised themselves in the social scale by the Sutnamee tenet; they are gradually getting rid of the name Chamar" (quoted in Verma 1972:89). But "gradually" proved disappointingly gradual. In a petition to Sir Montagu Butler in 1926, the Satnami Mahasabha demanded their classification as a separate group and disclaimed any association with the Chamars; and government agreed that they should have their own entry in the next census and should not be referred to as Chamars in official documents (Dube1998:151-2). But even today the Madhya Pradesh list of Scheduled Castes shows Satnamis as a sub-category of

"Chamar", and the census statistics provide aggregate figures for a "Chamar" cluster which subsumes the Satnamis - the 1981 District Census Handbook for Raipur rubbing salt in the wound by tactlessly explaining that Satnami is a "synonym" for Chamar. In their everyday interactions, however, few non-Satnamis are now prepared to be so publicly provocative. The word "Chamar" is carefully avoided, or mumbled only when no Satnami is in earshot, and then - as likely as not - with wrists held out for invisible handcuffs in a pantomime of arrest, or with some wry comment about how today such talk is to court a report to the "Harijan *thana* " - as the special police unit charged with investigating cases under the anti-discrimination laws is popularly known. But in pre-BSP days, the Satnamis complain, their co-villagers were less delicate, referring to their quarter as the "*Chamra para* " and to them as "Bastard-Chamar who cut across my path", "Bastard-Chamar who touched me".

The impact that Ghasi Das's teachings actually had on Satnami practice is difficult to gauge, though it seems probable that many Chamars began to call themselves Satnamis without significantly reforming their life-style. Or perhaps in some cases there were real changes, followed by a period of backsliding. But what is clear is that by the mid-1950s, only a handful of Satnamis from Girvi and Patripar were very fastidious about the dietary and ritual abstinences required of them by the guru's teachings, the reminiscences of my most confidential Satnami informants persuading me that within their lifetimes there had been more to the charge of carrion beef-eater than simply high caste calumny.

These communities had had their own ritual specialists for several generations - the *bhandari* whose role is that of the Brahman priest (but who also doubles as *primus inter pares* in the "secular" sphere of the *para*'s *panchayat*), and the *sathidar* who replaces the Hindu Barber as a general factotum for social events (though it is another member of the community who cuts Satnami hair). These separate specialists permit the posture that the Satnamis reject the Hindu order, though in reality they make a

virtue of necessity. No Brahman or Barber would serve them; and nor would the Washerman. By the same token, Satnami non-participation in various village festivals was (and is) motivated more by their exclusion than by any unyielding commitment to sectarian purity.

To be sure, many Satnami communities have long had their own distinctive symbols of a separate sectarian identity, like the *jait khamb* (or *jayasthamb*) - the "victory pillar" surmounted by a white flag, symbolic of Ghasi Das's truth, that now flutters over the roofs of every Satnami *para*. But distinctively Satnami rituals are a supplement to, rather than a replacement for, the rituals of the "Hindu" castes; and the most conspicuous of these is a recently invented tradition. The *Jayanti* of Guru Ghasi Das, held in honour of his birthday on the 18th December, and now the major festival of the Satnami ritual calendar, was I am told celebrated for the first time at the sectarian centre of Girodpuri in 1932^{xi}, and not until after the steel plant started in Girvi, at which time the *jait khamb* was also first raised. Again, the foundations of Girvi's Ghasi Das temple were laid in 1965 - at the initiative and expense of a BSP worker. It was only at around that time, I was told, that they came to know much about Ghasi Das from outsiders who moved to the village. In the area around the plant, a significant acceleration of the "Satnami-ization" of the Satnamis seems to have accompanied its foundation. In spite of this process, however, the ritual life of the community remains in many respects barely distinguishable from that of the "Hindu" castes above them.

Why, then, are they not "Hindus" ? In answer I tended to be told that they are Hindu "by religion" but not "by caste". "Hindu", as this suggests, is above all a caste category defined in opposition to "Satnami". As Russell observed at the beginning of this century: "While over most of India the term Hindu is contrasted with Muhammadan in Chattisgarh to call a man Hindu conveys primarily that he is not a Chamar" (quoted in *Ibid* p. 57). More precisely, "Hindu" generally includes all

castes of the village except for Satnamis and Mehars. It covers, that is, an extremely broad spectrum of the ritual hierarchy from the Brahmans at the top to more or less untouchable castes like Dhobis (Washermen) and Mahars^{xii} at the bottom^{xiii}. The ambiguity of my phrasing here reflects the ambiguity of my informants' statements. On the one hand they "observed untouchability", or the "norms of pollution" (*chhua mante the*), and would not accept food or water from the house of a Dhobi or Mahar. But on the other hand these castes were not literally untouchable in the way that Satnamis and Mehars undoubtedly were. On profane occasions at least, physical contact with them was not considered to be defiling, and to require a bath and change of clothes. They lived in the Hindu *para*^{xiv} and drew water from the same sources; and the Mahars used the same *ghat* (or bathing place) at the village tank - though in Patripar the Dhobis had their own *ghat* for washing clothes.^{xv} The Satnamis and Mehars lived in a separate *para*, had separate water sources, and shared a separate *ghat*. Particularly revealing is that in villages which had a Muslim population, the latter bathed at the Hindu *ghat* and drew water from the same sources as the Hindu castes. "By caste", it would seem, the Muslims were "Hindus"! What this at any rate confirms is that the category "Hindu" continued to be defined primarily in opposition to "Satnami" rather than "Muslim", and that its ideological salience is not simply an epiphenomenon of modern communal politics.

In the second half of the nineteenth century, the Satnamis had been subject to a whole range of sumptuary regulations which prohibited them from carrying umbrellas, wearing shoes or certain kinds of apparel in the presence of their caste superiors, or making music as their marriage parties passed through the village. Though the force of these restrictions must have been considerably eroded by the time of India's independence, their spirit certainly lingered on, the Satnamis still did not enter village temples or Hindu houses, and - for all the festival's supposed dissolution of hierarchy and reversal of roles - Hindus and Satnamis did not "play *Holi*" together, or attend each others' mortuary rites. In Chhattisgarh, this last had a special resonance. The key

symbol of outcasting is that "nobody will pick up the corpse". Even in BSP's early years, vendors selling *channa* (chick-peas) and *mahi* (buttermilk) around the newly urbanised villages where immigrant workers had settled would not enter the Satnami *para* ; and in some places Satnamis still dared not enter the tea-shops.

What the non-Chhattisgarhi outsiders who settled in these villages during the early days of the plant continually hark back to today is the rigour with which caste restrictions were at that time applied by the locals. I nevertheless found investigation of the old village hierarchy through oral history frustrating, partly because people had sometimes genuinely forgotten the details, but more often I think because the hierarchical aspects of caste have lost much of their legitimacy and there is real reluctance to dwell on them (cf. Beteille 1996). But a broad-brush sketch against which subsequent developments can be set is all that is needed here.

It has long been an anthropological commonplace that in village India the pattern of commensality provides a privileged window on caste ranking (e.g. Marriott 1968; Dumont 1970: chap 6). Table 1, which lists in rough order of hierarchical precedence the 15 principal castes which were represented in Girvi in the mid-1950s, is offered only as an illustrative example, and with two additional caveats. The first is that there was some variation between villages; the second that in my attempts to reconstruct a picture of the old commensal hierarchy it repeatedly struck me how little commensality there actually seems to have been. Quite a high proportion of castes would not in principle accept food or water from each others' hands; quite a few others would not in practice have occasion to do so, and it was generally the case that only members of one's own caste were invited to eat at a marriage feast. This must be seen not only in the context of regular scarcity, but also more importantly of a diet which was heavily based on boiled rice, which is classified as *kachcha* food and is everywhere acceptable only within much narrower limits than *pakka* food fried in ghee.

The Girvi hierarchy seems to have consisted of five broad ranks, though each had distinctions of status within it. All castes accepted food and water from the Brahmans, and the Brahmans - who as domestic priests served only the castes of category 2 - accepted from none but the Ravats. In Girvi (though not in Patripar) the Kurmis and Tamers ate together though it was only the latter who accepted food from the Kasers. All four castes of category 2 also took food prepared by the Ravats but not from any of the other castes in category 3. Of the latter, the Gonds refused food from the castes of category 2, but within their own category interdined with Ravats, who interdined with Thethvars. None of these three castes accepted food or water from Telis; and nor would the castes of category 4. The Kostas even refused food from the Gonds. Within category 4, there were no exchanges of food. And of course none of these "Hindu" castes had commensal relations with the Satnamis or Mehars who were given separate utensils when they were fed by households which employed them, and who did not eat with each other.

The most striking anomaly is the place of the Ravats. Though not amongst the highest castes, all would accept their food. But the context within which they did so appears to have been crucial. The higher castes employed Ravats as cooks and water-carriers at weddings and other functions; and it was when they prepared food in the houses of their patrons that anybody might accept it. It would have been quite another matter for a Kurmi or Brahman to eat in a Ravat's home. Moreover, the water in which the rice was boiled was unsalted, and the food was therefore not

Table 1

The caste hierarchy in pre-BSP Girvi *

1.	Brahman

2. **Kurmi** (Cultivator. Deshmukh) **Sonar** (Goldsmith)
Tamer (Coppersmith. Tamrakar)

Kaser (Bronzesmith)

.....

3. **Thethvar** (Buffalo-Herdsman) **Ravat** (Herdsman)

Gond (Tribal)

Teli (Oil-presser. Sahu)

.....

4. **Nai** (Barber)

Kosta (Weaver. Devangan)

Lohar (Blacksmith) **Mahar** (Watchman. Maithil Chatri)

.....

5. **Satnami**

Mehar (Leather-worker)

* The alternative names within brackets are those by which the caste is now generally known.

considered to be perfectly *kachcha*. There does nevertheless appear in this instance to be a certain tempering of the hierarchical rules. Why should this be so? As graziers and milkmen, the Ravats tend live cattle, while the Mehars and Satnamis flayed and consumed the carcasses of dead ones. If it is their relationship to cows which explains the strict exclusion of the latter, it also perhaps explains the general admissibility of the former.

This strict exclusion had, of course, limits. The issue of endogamy is complex, and I return to it later in the context of the extremely high rates of marital separation that now characterise the industrial belt. Even in the past, however, marriage seems to have been considerably less stable in this region than elsewhere. The first, or

"primary", marriage was strictly endogamous; and so generally too was the "secondary" union which was likely to follow its breakdown^{xvi}. When it was not, the couple were boycotted. But in cases where the woman belonged to a caste which was superior or only slightly inferior to that of her new husband, it was not uncommon for them to be eventually readmitted to his caste on payment of a fine to the caste panchayat. Under no circumstances would a union between a man of Hindu caste and a Satnami woman be so regularised, and in the rare instances in which they insisted on maintaining a public relationship, the couple and their children would be formally accepted as Satnamis. Casual sexual liaisons between Hindu caste men and Satnami women were, however, reportedly frequent. And though such stories are likely to be apochryphal, a condensed symbol of the sexual exploitation of their womenfolk, the Satnamis tell of a time when the all-powerful *malguzar* of the village claimed from their women the *ius primae noctis*. This kind of asymmetrical sexual predation was, of course, by no means confined to Chhattisgarh - though it is spoken of here with a candour for which previous fieldwork in northern India had not prepared me, and though in "Hindu" discourse high caste male predation tends to get ideologically transformed into Satnami female enticement, or even into a kind of sectarian proselytization by sexual entrapment in which Satnami menfolk also conspired.

The most important qualification to Satnami separation was, however, economic. Though the Brahman, Barber and Washerman did not serve them, the Ravat grazed and milked their cattle, the blacksmith and bronzesmith repaired their ploughs and cooking vessels, and the shamanic *baiga* protected the whole village from witches and evil spirits. And the Satnamis were of course integral to the system of agrarian class relations, the pivotal role in which was occupied by the *malguzar* - the landlord of the village, who - until the office was abolished at the beginning of the 1950s - was responsible for returning its revenue, and who exercised a truly autocratic power within it. Some are reputed to have retained a retinue of *sandha* ("bulls") or *lathait* ("wielders of staves") to collect their debts and discipline their subjects. It was their

authority which underwrote the system of sumptuary regulations, and it was on their command that witches or thieves were expelled from the village.

There were *malguzars* of most castes; many held shares in several villages, and the shareholders in one were often of different castes. A few were Satnamis, as was the *malguzar* of Patripar at around the turn of this century, though the family subsequently fell heavily into debt and were bought out by their Tamer creditors. In Girvi, debt was also responsible for the transfer of a ten (out of sixteen) anna stake to a Goldsmith family from Durg whose business selling cooking utensils extended all over the region, and who had shares in the *malguzari* of at least a dozen other villages. The 1954-5 records show that - despite the new land ceilings - this family between them still held legal title to around one-third of the total cultivated area of the village. In 1929-30, the Tamer *malguzars* of Patripar had owned 71.3% of its cultivated area (and the Satnamis a further 14%).^{xvii} These enormous concentrations appear to have been the consequence of rights which the *malguzars* had acquired during the British period over formerly unbroken common land, of rights of pre-emption, and of foreclosure on the land of those who could not pay the revenue.

Though a handful of Satnamis had been *malguzars*, the vast majority were smallholders, tenants and landless labourers. In 1954-5 there were 44 holdings, accounting for around 8% of the cultivated area of the village, which I can trace to Satnamis domiciled in Girvi (though in several cases the household was actually resident in Bengal). Of these, 18 were under 2 acres; 15 were between 2-4 acres, and 11 were more than four acres with the largest being just over 10. Six Satnami households I know of were at that time landless, though perhaps there were more. What must also be kept in mind is that the land was very much less productive than, thanks to new inputs, it is today - by a factor of perhaps three or four times. This was, moreover, a region regularly prone to crop failure, dearth and famine. But even in years of abundance, few - if any - of these households could meet their subsistence

requirements from their own land. Many made good the deficit by working as agricultural labourers for the *malguzar*, or as *saundiyas* who cultivated his land for a quarter share of the crop; others left for migrant labour, a few were carters for a substantial Teli grain-merchant and one traded bullocks from Maharashtra. Like everybody else in the village, all had to perform unpaid *begari* at the behest of the *malguzar* - labour supposedly contributed to government or public purposes though in practice often diverted to his own private land.

In both villages, it is true, there must have been a significant proportion of Hindu households which were scarcely less impoverished. What everybody remembers today, however, is that in pre-BSP days the Satnami *para* was visibly poorer than the Hindu part of the village; and middle-aged Satnamis recall times in their youth when the hearth was not lit in the evening and the children went hungry to bed unless they could beg *mad (pasiya)* from a neighbour - the water in which rice had been boiled.

It was during the famine years in the last decade of the nineteenth century that labour migration from these villages began to the tea-gardens of Assam. Later the jute mills around Calcutta, the rail centre at Kharakpur, the collieries of southern Bihar and the new Tata steel town of Jamshedpur would become the most favoured destinations. Dube (1998: 87-8) cites the late 1920's report of a Maharashtrian Brahman social activist who listed thirty disabilities from which the Satnamis were suffering. Number 29 is that they were not being given the factory jobs which they had paid large sums to obtain. Despite that, labour migration from Girvi was almost exclusively Satnami, and from Patripar predominantly so. Of the 49 Satnami households from Girvi who currently live in the *para* and who have ancestral roots in it, around 20 had one or more members working in Bengal or Bihar at the time that BSP started. Several whole families were living there then, but rapidly returned when new employment opportunities became available.

The essential point is that unlike the rest of the village, quite a few Satnamis already had knowledge of industry. To them the rumours of sacrifice which were circulating at great velocity round the villages must have seemed less compelling, and the huge monster-like earth-moving machinery which other folk would go to watch from afar with fascinated awe but would never approach must have held less terror. And then there was the brutal fact that they needed the money more than most. When BSP's foundations began to be laid, an agricultural labourer in Girvi was, I am told, receiving one *paili* of paddy per day - roughly one kilo of husked rice. Those who went to work on the construction site were paid Rs 1.75 with which they could buy perhaps three times that quantity. It is hardly surprising that Satnamis provided a significant proportion of the earliest local recruits to the plant.

The Satnamis in the steel plant: Today the Satnamis are certainly a significant component of BSP's labour force - and this is in large measure due to job reservation. The plant recruits personnel through two principal channels. Managerial and technical posts may be filled by open advertisement inviting applications from qualified candidates from any part of the country. Based on their share of India's total population, 15% of such posts are reserved for the Scheduled Castes (SCs) and 7.5% for the Scheduled Tribes (STs). Almost all recruitment to non-executive posts is, however, mediated by the local employment exchanges. Quotas for these are set in accordance with the Madhya Pradesh population figures - 14% of posts for SCs and 23% for STs.

The system privileges potential workers from Durg over those from other districts, and from Chhattisgarh's ex-Untouchable population over immigrants of Scheduled Caste background. Vacancies are filled in batches, and for every available post BSP considers applications from 20 candidates. Of the 1,000 applications it receives for a batch of 50 posts, half will be forwarded to them by the Durg employment exchange and half from Chhattisgarh's other district exchanges. The quotas for such posts are

based on the Madhya Pradesh list of Scheduled Castes and Tribes which includes only those indigenous to the state. The son of an immigrant Paraiyar worker from Tamlinadu would not therefore qualify for a reserved job^{xviii} (though he would if recruitment were to be through open advertisement since in that case the relevant list is the composite one for all states compiled by the central government). Though educated Satnamis sometimes complain that outsiders cream off the benefits, this is more the reflection of a generalised suspicion of outsiders than of any objective reality.

BSP does not record the number of workers it recruits from any individual Scheduled Caste. But with these ground rules in mind, it is I think possible to arrive at a crude estimate of the number of Satnamis employed by the plant. It seems plausible to suppose that around three-quarters of the Scheduled Caste workforce are Satnamis^{xix}; that at present BSP therefore has something like 5,500 - 6,000 Satnamis on its direct pay-roll, and that this figure would have exceeded 6,500 in the late 1980s when manning levels were higher. Assuming that at least half of these are from District Durg, and assuming (which is reasonable in the light of my surveys of three Satnami *paras*) an average household size of 5-6 members, we can infer from the district census returns that somewhere between 6 - 12% of all Satnami households in Durg are currently in receipt of a BSP income^{xx}. But there must by now be almost as many former BSP employees as current ones^{xxi}, and their household economies are in general heavily reliant on the substantial lump sums which are paid out on retirement by the Provident Fund and on other forms of saving made possible by a BSP job. When these are included, we would probably have a figure of somewhere between 10 - 15% of Satnami households in the district who directly benefit from past or present BSP employment.^{xxii} And in addition to these, there are also significant numbers of Satnamis amongst the contract labour force. What also needs to be kept in mind is that the benefits are spread by the large number of Satnami workers (approaching half the total) who come from neighbouring districts; while within Durg

they are concentrated heavily on the area immediately surrounding the plant. Of the 79 Satnami households now resident in the Girvi Satnami *para* , for example, 33 have one BSP worker and 1 has two. 15 other men have now retired from BSP jobs,^{xxiii} only three of whom live in households which include a current employee. In other words, 46 out of these 79 households are, or were, in receipt of a BSP pay-packet. Of these four have benefitted from more than one.

Though the decision to implement the recommendations of the Mandal Commission was taken in 1990, it was not until 1995 that BSP began to operate the policy in earnest. Mandal had recommended that 27% of posts in Central Government and public sector undertakings should be reserved for the Other Backward Classes, a figure determined by the Supreme Court ruling that "the national interest in the full utilization of talent" requires that not more than 50% of posts should be subject to reservation.^{xxiv} Given a 22.5% all-India quota for the Scheduled Castes and Tribes, 27% was the limit of what could be allocated to the Other Backward Classes (Srinivas 1996; Radhakrishnan 1996). By exactly the same logic, BSP's quota is 13% for jobs recruited through the local employment exchanges - the maximum allowable given the 37% of posts already earmarked for the Scheduled Castes and Tribes. Mandal had also recommended that candidates from the "creamy layer" should be excluded from the benefits, and the delicate task of defining this layer was devolved on the states. All BSP does is require from each candidate a certificate issued by the Madhya Pradesh government which confirms their eligibility. Even senior management in the "recruitment cell" is vague about the criteria employed, though they do have a clear idea of their generously inclusive spirit - the children of MPs and MLAs being specifically excluded from the cream.

The extension of job reservations to the Other Backward Classes has had little impact on BSP recruitment for the simple reason that almost everybody in the local population who is not a member of a Scheduled Caste or Tribe belongs to this

category - even castes, like the Kurmis, who are amongst the wealthiest and most powerful in the region. Leaving the (Scheduled Tribe) Gonds and the Satnamis aside, in Girvi and Patripar at least 90% of the Chhattisgarhi population is included. If we restrict our focus to this local population, OBC reservation disadvantages very few, but equally of course advantages scarcely anybody. But once we expand our view to include the immigrant population, Mandal seems less of an irrelevance. As with the Scheduled Castes and Tribes, the only OBCs listed are those indigenous to Madhya Pradesh. The general effect, then, of quotas amounting to 50% is to guarantee that the Chhattisgarhis achieve at least parity with outsiders in recruitment to the public sector jobs since it is - by and large^{xxv} - only they who qualify for them. Paradoxically, perhaps one of the most important - if unintended - consequences of a policy designed to redress old inequities between castes is to put a brake on the development of new ones between locals and outsiders. Given the potentially explosive tensions between them, this surreptitious form of reservation may have something to recommend it.

In order to avoid invidious comparison, SC and ST candidates for BSP posts are interviewed by a separately constituted board. When BSP needs to make up its quotas, a whole batch of reserved posts is sometimes filled at one go, and the cohort of new recruits who are then sent for training in the Bhilai Technical Institute (BTI) might therefore consist entirely of young men of either Scheduled Caste or Scheduled Tribe origin. BTI management, I found, had few qualms about this "ghetto-ization", and I was several times told that it has positive advantages since such recruits are of lower intelligence, are less well-educated, and feel more comfortable in a group with which they are able to keep up. It is perhaps worth recording, then, that none of the evidence I could glean from the personnel files of 441 new recruits passing through the BTI in early 1998 suggested that those now being appointed to reserved posts were less well qualified than others; and there is certainly no question of BSP relaxing its normal minimum standards for SC or ST applicants.^{xxvi} In a "blind" selection, I infer, most would have had as good a chance as any of being appointed on

"merit" - which is to say that the number of more "meritorious" non-Scheduled Caste candidates excluded by reservation must only be a fraction of the number of reserved posts, and that the degree of positiveness in "positive discrimination" is probably pretty small. Nor, I should hasten to add, did I ever hear views of the kind I have just quoted expressed by shopfloor managers inside the plant, where work groups are almost invariably extremely heterogeneous in terms of both caste and regional ethnicity (Parry n.d.).

Much of my experience of the BSP shopfloor has been in the Coke Oven Department in which conditions are amongst the toughest in the plant, and where many jobs on the batteries (which convert the coal in coke) are physically very demanding. The number of Satnamis performing such tasks is disproportionate to their share of the workforce. The batteries are manned by various teams - the Heating Group who regulate the supply of gas to the ovens and who maintain the pipes and supply lines; the refractory group who repair the brickwork; mechanical maintenance, electrical maintenance and, of course, the "Operations" workers who charge the ovens with coal and push out the coke some 18 hours later. Quite a few of the hardest jobs are in Battery Operations. For each pair of batteries there are around 50 Operations workers in each of three shifts - a total of 151 for batteries 3 and 4. Of these, 47 (31%) are Satnamis. But even here it is highly unlikely that the group with whom any worker cooperates closely will be exclusively Satnami. Moreover, their unusual concentration in Operations is partly a function of the equally unusual proportion of Chhattisgarhis (118 - or 78% - of the 151 workers on batteries 3 and 4). And this in turn, I believe, is more a function of the lower educational standards of - especially older - Chhattisgarhi workers than of management prejudice. The tasks of the Heating Group demand higher levels of literacy and numeracy, and here there is rough parity between Chhattisgarhis and outsiders.

Not that management is devoid of prejudice. But it does not explain the pattern. Prejudice ought to result in less, rather than more, Chhattisgarhi Operations workers since it is this group who are seen as the key to fulfilling management's much fetishized daily production targets, while Chhattisgarhi workers are - without distinction of caste - seen as feckless, indolent, and prone to regular bouts of heavy drinking and absenteeism. Most officers, it will come as no surprise to learn, are outsiders, and Chhattisgarhis indignantly reject the stereotype. What is, however, striking is that the Hindu castes often perfectly reproduce it in relation to the Satnamis.

Though I blush to even ask, could it conceivably be the case that Satnamis are indeed poor workers? I certainly knew several who would go on long binges and not report to the plant for weeks on end; but I also knew an equal number of Hindu workers prone to the same pattern, and in fact the most spectacular cases of alcohol-related absenteeism which I know about in detail do not involve locals at all. Though all the figures are skewed by a relatively small proportion of workers who are away without authorization with truly dedicated persistence, in Battery Operations absenteeism is particularly high. While just under one third (31%) of operations workers on batteries 3 and 4 are Satnamis, just over one third (34%) were amongst those who had the best attendance records in 1997 (which I have somewhat arbitrarily defined as absence of 10 or less days in the year), and the number of man-days lost to Satnami absenteeism again almost perfectly matches the average for the group as a whole. More impressionistic data gathered during several weeks spent following small groups of workers around for their shifts would point to the same conclusion, as would my various informal discussions with management about the impact of reservations on the efficiency of the workforce. With one fairly minor qualification, which I will return to shortly, this was held to be negligible.

As the system currently works, promotion at the non-executive level is time-based and quasi-automatic. Peer groups tend to progress in step up the ladder of formal grades. But given an ageing workforce, there are by now more workers in senior grades than there are senior jobs to do. The result is that a promotion in grade is not necessarily accompanied by a promotion in function; and when a worker still finds himself doing the same menial tasks as before he is apt to resent it - particularly, in my experience, if he is a Satnami. Though nobody said so explicitly, I sensed that caste was at least partly behind their specially strident complaints. It was as if they felt that, despite the new dignity their promotion should lend them, their superiors simply assume that fetching and carrying is all a Satnami is good for.

The principle of peer group promotion is qualified by reservations. At the non-executive level, a proportion of all promotions are reserved for Scheduled Caste and Tribe workers with the result that they are often able to leap-frog over longer-serving and more experienced colleagues.^{xxvii} The qualification about efficiency to which I just referred is that the fast-track Backward Class promotee may be a less expert operator than others passed over. The managers who drew my attention to this problem, however, invariably represented it as temporary, a mere matter of days or weeks before the relevant skill was mastered. The more serious problem with such reservations is rather the deep resentment they arouse in the rest of the work group. When passions cool, however, a man is pretty much judged on his merits. During my most recent visit, one of the new Heating Group Chargemen on batteries 3 and 4 was a Maharashtrian of Scheduled Caste who commanded the respect and obedience of the workers under him in a way that his charming but lackadaisical clean-caste predecessor never had.

If the round of promotions is one occasion when caste sentiments are likely to break surface on the shopfloor, elections are another. Though in union elections the lines of allegiance are more likely to follow the split between sons-of-the-soil and

immigrants, the 1998 General Elections produced on the batteries a discernible groundswell of anti-Satnami sentiment which was largely provoked by, and directed at, a handful of Satnami activists for the (largely Satnami supported) Bahujan Samaj Party. Bahujan Samaj Party rhetoric, it must be said, is not best calculated to assuage caste consciousness.^{xxviii} The most voluble grumbling was that of Brahman workers from UP and Bihar. Not only are Brahmans the principal target of Bahujan propaganda, but those from this region have a particular reputation for the atavism of their caste attitudes.

Despite all this, it is the absence - or rather suppression - of such consciousness on the BSP shopfloor that I find more striking than its presence or open expression. It was only quite by chance that I learnt that a south Indian middle manager in charge of a group of workers with whom I have spent a good deal of time is of Scheduled Caste origin. No worker has ever mentioned the fact, and I doubt that most are aware of it. As for this officer's superior, a liberal-minded Bengali Brahman, I was surprised to discover that - after a long and distinguished BSP career, and despite his unusually cordial relations with the workers under him - he had only the vaguest idea about Satnamis and their status in local society.

In considerable measure this almost deliberate ignorance is due, I believe, to the institutional culture of the plant. Recall the context in which it was built. Initiated just a few years after Independence and built with the fraternal aid of the "anti-imperialist" Soviet Union, it epitomised the Nehruvian dream. A trail-blazer for the rapid industrial development of the country, it served as an icon of modern (or at least modernising) India. No less than Stalin's Magnitogorsk (Kotkin 1994), Nehru's Bhilai was not only about forging steel but about forging a new kind of man in a new kind of society. "A symbol and portent of the India of the future", as Nehru himself described it, it was to be a catalyst for a rejuvenated civilization which would blow away the nastier cobwebs of the past. Of these caste was, of course, one.

And then there were the Russians themselves. However much the heroic spirit of Ivan Stakhanov may by that time have been diluted in the Soviet Union itself, what the early pioneers remember today is how even a senior Russian engineer would snatch a wrench from the hand of a Satnami *kalasi* , demonstrate how the job should be properly done, and - with an arm covered in grease and a brow pouring with sweat - clap him on the back when it was. Though the Russians have long since departed, it is possible even today to see a Coke Oven manager operating the controls of the pushing car when the shift is undermanned and the operator needs a tea-break, or a Senior Manager in the Steel Melting Shop seize the controls of the fettling machine when the work is not going to his satisfaction. When they meet for the first time at the start of their shift all shake hands - however senior the officer, however junior the man. And after some major maintenance task is completed, the officer in charge may go back to the workers' rest room for tea, after which he will wash his own glass. Not even a Tamil Brahman Deputy Manager would expect the rawest Satnami recruit to remove his *jutha* (his saliva-polluted left-overs).

It should be obvious that no institutional ideology enjoys a complete hegemony, and there are certainly limits to this one. It is also obvious that no institutional ethos emerges fully formed like Athena from Zeus's brow. It takes time to instil. In the early years of the plant, many Chhattisgarhi Hindu workers would eat before going on duty and only again after getting back home. Then they began to bring their own "tiffin" but would go off in a different direction from their Satnami colleagues to consume it. Today all sit together to eat, these very same workers included; and vegetable preparations brought from home are shovelled on to the plates of one's neighbours - by Satnamis as well. It is true that I sometimes sensed an edge - of which some high caste workers spontaneously complained - to this forced Satnami feeding, as though it were a defiant dare to be seen to refuse. But the significant thing is that nobody does.

Because the same men work together over long periods of time, because the work itself and its often quite hazardous nature require cooperation and trust between colleagues, and because there are long fallow periods in which to socialise between bouts of productive activity, individual work groups tend to have a strong sense of solidarity and fast friendships form between their members. And this sociability is not bounded by the perimeter fence. Entire work groups are almost invariably invited, and it is *de rigueur* for at least some of its members to attend, any major life-cycle ritual celebrated in the household of one of their number. A delegation arrives at a daughter's wedding bearing a present to which all have subscribed equal amounts. Though they would not do so if the marriage were held in the countryside, in the BSP township, and in ex-villages like Girvi and Patripar, Satnami workers attend the weddings of their Hindu colleagues, and the Hindus attend theirs. If a worker is ill or injured and needs a blood transfusion, a donor - often in fact an embarrassment of donors - will be found from amongst his workmates, and every worker knows that when it comes to life and death it is blood group not caste that counts.

The Heating Group, Battery Operations, Mechanical Maintenance - all have their own rotating credit societies to which only members of that group belong; their own "tour groups" which go off together by motor-bike or Maruti van for a few days at some scenic spot ; and their own "dining clubs" which convene regularly for an evening of conviviality, drinking and eating meat. All include Hindus and Satnamis, locals and outsiders. Take the "dining club", made up of Heating Group workers, of which Kurrey^{xxix} is the animating spirit. He is a Satnami, and also incidentally one of the Bahujan Samaj party activists. When they are going to eat in the park, it is he who does all the marketing and cooking with the help of a Lohar (Blacksmith) and Thethvar (Herdsman) colleague. The rest of the group consists of another Thethvar, a Barber, two Oil-pressers, two Gond "tribals", a Tamil Untouchable (Leather-worker) and a Maharashtra neo-Buddhist (also Scheduled Caste). Kurrey is also the

organiser of one of the Heating Group's rotating credit societies which has a much wider and more inclusive membership than this, and which holds annual family picnics.

But if the Heating Group do their best to disregard caste, they are careful to maintain their distance from the contract workers who are sometimes assigned to work alongside them, but are never invited to bring their food to the "Gas Man Room" where they eat. Though for them what is at stake here is the dignity of a regular BSP job, for many of the contract workers caste is still crucial to commensality. Amongst the mixed-sex but almost exclusively Chhattisgarhi gangs employed to shift coal dust and spilled coke from around the batteries, the conventions are clear. No Hindu accepts water from the hand of a Satnami, and - though the gang sits together during their lunch-break to eat food they have brought from home - no Satnami would offer a Hindu a share of their vegetables. The gang I knew best - there were just eight of them - had all been working together at the same back-breaking task for the past 15 years and were on terms of cordial familiarity with each other. The commensal distance which the others maintained from the two Satnamis cannot therefore be explained as merely a temporary persistence of old village ways in a new industrial setting, or by the impersonal and transitory nature of the work group. More relevant, I believe, is that such groups are homogeneously Chhattisgarhi, and are effectively insulated from the distinctive sub-culture of the permanent workforce.

Equally striking is the contrast with a large private sector engineering company in which I have spent some time. Its institutional ethos is entirely different: none of BSP's somewhat paternalistic social reformism; no vision of the engineer of structural girders as also the engineer of human souls, and no ritualistic hand-shaking between managers and workers at the start of each shift. Nor, of course, is there any question of reservations to - depending on how one views it - resurrect the primordial loyalties of the past or redress their iniquitous legacy to the present. But even without their

succour, caste seems to have a vigour and vitality that it has long since lost on BSP batteries. The principal reason for this - as I argue elsewhere (Parry n.d.) - has been the widespread private sector practice of recruiting labour through contractors in order to evade labour laws which provide the permanent workforce with considerable security of employment, and entitle them to a whole range of benefits and bonuses which do not need to be paid to "temporary" workers. The contractor (often previously a skilled operative in the same factory) is given charge of a certain part of the production process, and would - until very recently - recruit his own men to run it. And who, of course, did the contractor employ but his own kinsmen, caste fellows and co-villagers? By contrast with the BSP "melting pot", the result is that work groups based on caste and kinship are a conspicuous feature of shopfloor organization in the private sector. But now less conspicuous than they were. A prolonged period of industrial strife in the early 1990s made management realize the large contractors' power. Backed by a solidary block of kinsmen they could hold the factory to ransom. They have therefore gone out of their way to break these groups up and scatter their members under the supervision of unrelated contractors. As yet, however, this has not made much impact on the old spirit of exclusiveness and the "primordial loyalties" of the workers continue to enjoy a comparatively high profile.

Consider the photograph. It was taken during the lunchbreak in the Fabrication Shop of the engineering company just mentioned, and the workers in it are all members of one of these newly constituted contractor groups. The man in the foreground, sitting apart from the others, is a Satnami. In the background, at a table by himself and eating *pakka* food which is relatively impermeable to pollution, is a Brahman from U.P. The group of five workers in the centre of the picture, all eating boiled rice and some of them sharing their vegetables, are middle-ranking Chhattisgarhi Hindus - three Ravats and two Kurmis. Out of picture, at some distance behind the Satnami and with his back to him, was another member of the same contractor's team, a worker from Orissa whose caste I do not know. What I do know is that such a striking

visual representation of the caste order is unsurprising in this context. In BSP it would be both unexpected and shocking.

In BSP - but outside? What happens when the Satnami steel-worker goes home at the end of his shift to places like Girvi and Patripar?

Caste and the Satnamis today: Across the main railway line from the BSP township, Patripar really is "on the wrong side of the tracks" and Sector folk regard it as a slum. So imperceptibly does the old village now merge into the surrounding sea of similar neighbourhoods that without expert local guidance it is no longer possible to tell where it began and ended. A village of 410 inhabitants in 1951, ten times that number are now crammed into the same space - a significant proportion of them immigrant workers from other states. Girvi has a rather more rural air, and when I went there first in 1993 one side of the village was still open fields, though by now these have nearly all been sold off to property speculators for "plotting", so that soon the whole settlement will be completely encircled by middle class housing colonies. Again, there are many outsiders, though the vast majority of these are Chhattisgarhis. But despite their differences, Girvi and Patripar share similar problems: alcoholism is a positive blight and *satta* (a numbers racket run from Bombay) a real epidemic. The neighbourhood schools are poor, and their pupils cannot compete with Sector kids on a job market increasingly preoccupied with paper qualifications. Groups of unemployed youths mooch around the streets, and - while we are not talking about Washington D.C., Belfast or Jehanabad - violence is a threat which is real. In this much at least the Hindus and Satnamis who live there are equals.

Apart from the white flag at its centre, nor now could the outsider tell which part of the village he was in. Gone are the days when the Satnami *para* was visibly poorer. As in the Hindu neighbourhoods, the old mud-brick houses with tiled roofs are interspersed with the new flat-roofed concrete houses of BSP workers. On closer

acquaintance, however, what clearly remains is a Satnami *para* , of whose borders any insider has a very precise idea. Actually, in Girvi there had even before been a few households of Kurmis living geographically within though socially outside it. That remains the case today. It was only when he accompanied me when I was making a census of the village that Somvaru - a Satnami in his early 60s - first entered one of these houses, a comfortable stone's throw from his own. Outsiders from other villages have now moved in, mainly Satnamis but also a handful of Hindus - though the latter live mainly on rent and are plainly transient. But while there are a few Hindus living in the Satnami *para* , there is only one Satnami household in the rest of the old part of the village.^{xxx} Non-Satnamis do not rent to Satnamis, and Satnamis do not buy in a neighbourhood in which they would be so unwelcome.

Today, of course, there is no *malguzar* to dispatch the *kotvar* to summon them to carry his loads, and no Satnami now depends on the Daus (the larger landowners) to provide them with daily wages for a few weeks in the year. In Girvi, there are no Satnamis beggars;^{xxx} but a couple come regularly from the Hindu *para* to Somvaru's door. The power to coerce and dominate is no longer located within the old village boundaries, and the Satnamis jump for none. Their numbers persuade politicians to approach them as supplicants at election time, and the threat of being complained of to the "Harijan *thana* " discourages Hindus from crossing them unnecessarily.^{xxxii} In the routine skirmishing of neighbourhood politics the law is there to be used, and in both the cases I followed in detail in which a complaint of discrimination was lodged under the civil rights legislation, the real issues (land and leadership) were really quite other, and the charges were recognised to be bogus by nearly all the Satnamis as well.

Not that untouchability is really abolished, though it is these days relatively rare for it to take a form in which it must be acknowledged as such - as when a Tamrakar woman in Girvi publicly bawled at a Satnami girl to keep her distance while she was

filling a pitcher from the municipal tap located outside the latter's house. But most of the time eyes are politely averted, and the separation which persists is emollently glossed as the product of Satnami choice. The Hindu Barber still does not serve them - not, of course, that he refuses to do so. It is just that the old-timers prefer the man they are used to, and the youngsters the Sector saloons. Now everybody bathes wherever they like at the village tank, I was always assured; and it took me an embarrassingly long time to realise that the places they "like" are the places they have always had. But when I confronted my Hindu informants with this, I was reminded that appearances deceive. They certainly wouldn't object if the Satnamis bathed at the Hindu *ghat*, and if they don't want to that's their business.

The Hindu *para* organizes a marathon recitation of the *Bhagvat Puran* ; the Satnami *para* holds its own with a Satnami pandit, and neither attend the other. In Girvi, a group of young Hindus gather daily to play chess or cards or carrom at a spot on the street which is just by the boundary between the two parts of the village. Though many pass that way, and some have gone through school in the same class, no Satnami is ever invited to join them. Though on the death of a BSP worker, representatives from his department who belong to the other community are likely to be present, within Girvi and Patripur the rule that Hindus and Satnamis do not attend each other's cremations and burials remains almost inviolable. But weddings are somehow less sensitive, and if they are on good terms Hindus may put in an appearance at a Satnami one to offer the gift of *tikavan* , though they do not stay to eat.

Between Hindu castes the pattern of commensality has changed quite dramatically. Before it was generally only one's own caste fellows who attended a wedding feast. Now people of all Hindu castes are invited, and all sit together in a single unbroken line (*pangat*) - though there was a transitional period during which the lines were separate. The food served always includes boiled rice. This new liberalism cannot

therefore be explained as the consequence of a casuistically-inspired shift from *kachcha* to *pakka* cuisine; of the higher castes paying lip-service to the more egalitarian spirit of the age, but only condition that the food served is now of a type acceptable from inferiors - as Mayer (1996) reports for Ramkheri. Outside such formal contexts, the vast majority of men of Hindu caste are now prepared to interdine, though their womenfolk often remain more exclusive. The most striking contrast with the past, then, is that formerly the pattern of commensality at marriages, the most public occasions of all, overtly stressed the separation between castes and covertly implied their hierarchical arrangement; while in the least formal and most private contexts the rules were often given a more liberal interpretation. Today it is almost the opposite. The most public occasions proclaim the absence of hierarchy and separation between Hindu castes, while in private a conservative Kurmi might still avoid eating at the house of his (or more likely her) Mahar neighbour.

But the new dispensation does not, on the whole, extend to Satnamis. Hindus do not eat at Satnami life-cycle rituals, and - though there is a certain amount of individual variation - most do not accept food or water from a Satnami household on other occasions either. Take Milautin, a Mahar by caste, and the daughter-in-law of Patripar's old *kotvar*. The line she draws is at eating with Dhobis. For both her and her husband Satnamis are out of the question. Her husband's younger brother's wife eats with Dhobis, but not Satnamis, though her husband is prepared to accept tea in their houses. As for Milautin's husband's elder brother, it is a matter of some family scandal that he has even been seen to share a plate with Kanhaiya Satnami. The latter is a man of conspicuous piety who is regularly called on by Hindu households as an authority on matters of ritual, and who is almost an honorary Hindu. Several of them eat with him and he is the only Satnami I know who has attended a Hindu cremation within his own village. Kanhaiya's bosom friend is Ram Bhagat, another Mahar and a near neighbour. The two of them worked together for years in the BSP Foundry Shop, and now that both are retired they meet daily to read sacred texts aloud to each other.

Kanhaiya and Ram Bhagat eat in each other's houses, but no other member of their households has ever done so, and Ram Bhagat has never taken food in any of the other Satnami households in Patripur (who regard Kanhaiya with some ambivalence and refer to him mockingly as "Mahatma Gandhi"). But even if most Hindus continue to refuse the food of most Satnamis, it is no longer possible to do so openly on grounds of caste. Instead, one is fasting today, has an upset stomach or has just eaten elsewhere.

The marriage system has undergone a rather similar structural realignment. Rates of marital separation are today very high, and this is so throughout the hierarchy. Unless the couple elope, the primary marriage arranged by the parents is invariably caste endogamous; but the chances are that it will end and that both partners will contract secondary unions of their own choice to which caste is now largely irrelevant - save only that people of Hindu caste do not tolerate remarriage with a Satnami or Mehar. The old caste panchayats have lost their authority to exclude, or admit, a couple whose union is irregular, and the woman and the children she bears to her new man are *de facto* assimilated into his caste.

As for more casual sexual liaisons across the Hindu-Satnami divide, I judge from the gossip that they may not be that much less common than they were in the past, but that the inequalities of power which mark them have changed their character. Male predation has become more symmetrical. Fights between rival groups of Hindu and Satnami (and between immigrant and Chhattisgarhi) youths characteristically revolve around real or imagined intrigues that cross the divide. But with regard to the first of these cleavages (though not the second), my sense is that the hunters are more evenly distributed across it - that young Satnami men can now more easily imagine young women of Hindu caste as the object of desire into whose hands a letter of adoration, and assignation, might somehow be pressed. On the Hindu side at least, that is certainly perceived as a threat. Until a couple of years back, Girvi still had its village

fair (*mandai*) which was organized by the youths of the Hindu *para* , but to which young Satnamis were also drawn. The *mandai* of 1993 was brought to an abrupt close around midnight by a couple of unpleasant (and unrelated) incidents - a gang rape and a stabbing. Satnamis were involved in neither. But in the following year, the organizers held a preparatory meeting with the young men who count in the Satnami community to warn them that this time they wanted no trouble. Though in the event, it was the ribald comments of Hindu youths about the "*mal*" - the female "goods" - from Satnami *para* that were most audible, what the organizers privately complained of beforehand was how the Satnami lads come to ogle their sisters.

In more general terms the trend, as I see it, has been for the boundaries between Hindu castes to become more permeable and to lose a good deal of their former salience, while that between Hindus and Satnamis has remained - with due qualification - largely intact and has therefore been thrown into sharper relief. There are parallels here with Beteille's (1965) discussion of the way in which the Brahman/non-Brahman divide was being re-defined in rural Tamilnadu at the time of his fieldwork. But the complexity of this process is not, I think, adequately captured by the literature on the "substantialization" of caste and the ideological shift from a stress on hierarchy to a stress on separation (e.g. Dumont 1970: chap 11; Fuller 1996; Mayer 1996). In the case of the Satnamis, substantialization seems hardly new. It began with Guru Ghasi Das. With their own ritual specialists, and with their refusal to participate in village rituals on Hindu terms, they have long sought to repudiate the principle of hierarchical interdependence. But more importantly, in the situation I am describing, a decline in the spirit of hierarchy does not seem to make way for a new preoccupation with the separation between castes (and nor - contrary to his conclusions - does Mayer's own data on the emergent pattern of commensality point unequivocally in this direction). Amongst those of the Hindu category the sense of separation also seems to be waning. While it is true that this perhaps leaves a heightened subjective awareness of their collective differentiation from Satnamis, this

is qualified by a new embarrassment about the legitimacy of caste as an institution (cf. Beteille 1996), and by the objective fact that in terms of life-styles, standards of living, and economic and political leverage, differentiation has patently declined.

If - as far as Hindu-Satnami relations are concerned - the cobwebs of the past seem rather more intractable in Girvi and Patripar than Nehruvian modernist optimism had foreseen, it is perhaps worth noting that there is one important new kind of voluntary association in these villages which does transcend the divide. These are the rotating credit societies to which many villagers now belong, and which generally have members in both *paras* . What seems to me particularly significant about these associations is that they were all started by BSP workers and that the institution itself is a direct export from the BSP shopfloor to the local community. Pointing in the same general direction, and perhaps even more significant, is that when there is a direct conflict between the culture of the "village" and the culture of the shopfloor, it is usually the former which seems to give way. Though it is relatively rare for a Hindu and a Satnami from Girvi or Patripar to belong to the same immediate BSP work group, in the few instances in which they do, the interactions between them outside the plant are conspicuously liable to flout village norms. It is generally the solidarity of the work group which takes precedence over village concerns with the separation of caste.

The aristocracy of Satnami labour: What remains to be discussed is the issue of differentiation within the Satnami community. Do BSP jobs do anything more than create a small Satnami elite - than advantage the already advantaged few?

That such an elite now exists is undeniable. Distinction is manifest within the caste not only in terms of income, but also increasingly in terms of education, consumption patterns and styles of life. With a BSP job, and with aspirations very different from those of his *angutha-chhap* ("thumb-impression") elders, the young Satnami steel-

worker from Patripar or Girvi may well decide to apply for a company quarter in the township. Though social life in the Sectors is said to lack the same sense of mutual concern and neighbourliness, it is also less suffocating. And if the neighbours do not really care about you, they probably do not much care about your caste either. Though there one has standards to maintain, and the cost of living is higher, that is not without its compensations. Who would not prefer to spend their wages on a satellite dish than have them slip remorselessly through their fingers in response to a stream of importunate demands from less fortunate village kin? But above all, life in the Sectors is a future for the children who will go to a BSP school, and who will be free from the influence of the unemployed youth of the village with their quarrels and "eve-teasing", drinking and *satta* .

Some eventually return to re-build their old village house in concrete - as Sant Lal did when his eldest boy was well-established in engineering college, the younger was about to enter university and his daughter had joined the police. But others will never move back - like Sant Lal's younger brother whose BSP income is significantly supplemented by property-dealing and a shop for ready-made clothing, and who has now built himself a substantial house in one of the numerous middle class housing colonies which has sprouted in Girvi's fields.

I was at first surprised by the stridency with which this rather comfortable elite, who seem to have benefitted so spectacularly from reservations but for whom Bahujan Samaj Party rhetoric seems to have a particular appeal, tend to talk about the discrimination to which Satnamis are subject, and by the contrast between their tone embittered outrage and the calm dignity with which their elders discuss both past and present. I was once sitting with Somvaru in the house of his daughter when a young Satnami from the Coke Ovens, one of the party activists, arrived for a visit. Burning with indignation he wanted to make me understand the terrible humiliations to which their caste remains subject. Somvaru sat silent throughout. What, I asked him when

the visitor had gone, had he made of his eloquence? "When a man talks too much", he quietly observed, "it gets very boring". But my initial surprise was of course naive; and now seems especially so in the light of what I have just said about the attenuation of hierarchy and separation between the Hindu castes resulting in an increasingly dichotomised opposition between them and the Satnamis. Though the wall which now separates the two blocks may be objectively less formidable than it was, the "homogenization" of Hindu castes makes it appear in sharper focus. And it is this which the young educated upwardly mobile Satnami perceives with a clarity that neither Somvaru or the outside observer can easily appreciate.

"Education" is more or less synonymous with "civilization"; the lack of it with rustic dim-wittedness. Back in the village, the educated upwardly mobile Satnami is liable to assume airs and graces that others sometimes resent. When Sant Lal's third brother celebrated the simultaneous marriage of his two sons, a buffet-supper reception laid on by caterers was held for the more "civilised" guests on the roof of his house. Somvaru was not the only one to stomp off home in disgust when he learned that separate arrangements had been made for the *basti-wallahs* (the people of the *para*). Nor, at the level of the immediate family, is it difficult to imagine the tensions which develop when one brother has a BSP job, moves up in the world and gets his daughter married to the son of a police inspector, while the other works for a few days in the month as a contract labourer, and relies on the daily wages of his wife to keep him drunk for the rest of it. On one side resentment at the lottery of life and a sense of abandonment; on the other a sense of being compromised by so close and disreputable a connection.

It would be misleading, however, to imply that the majority of Satnami steel-workers are overly concerned with the symbols of middle class standing. Many do not in fact live in a way which is conspicuously different from that of their non-BSP neighbours. Some seem scarcely better off, usually because they are drinkers and have run up

substantial debts; sometimes because of the number of dependents they support, and occasionally because of gambling. By comparison with the immigrants, however, the expense of marriage is not such a major drain on the Satnami (or, more generally, on the Chhattisgarhi) domestic economy. The wider obligations of kinship are, however, one major reason why many BSP households are not more visibly affluent.

The absolute number of Satnamis employed by the plant is, as we have seen, quite large; and the proportion of Satnami households in the district who have directly benefitted from BSP employment is not insignificant. But what also needs to be established is that the indirect benefits - both material and immaterial - spread even more widely. Money, practical help, knowledge of a bewildering bureaucratic world and advice on how to cope with it, are channeled by kinship obligation from those in public sector employment to those without it.

Take money first. Though we may not be able to talk about redistribution, we are certainly dealing with considerable amounts of material aid. During my fieldwork I have come to know in some detail about Somvaru's more recent transactions, but for the sake of brevity I shall confine myself here to a series of loans he made during the ten year period 1983-92. Somvaru is illiterate and these were recorded for him in a highly unsystematic way by one or other of his children in a couple of battered exercise books. As a young man he had been a bullock-trader, but subsequently worked as a fork-lift truck driver in the plant, from which he took early retirement in 1987. His memory is phenomenal, and I think it unlikely that the exercise books are a complete record of his dealings.

What they record are 81 different loans - ranging from Rs 20 to Rs 10,000 - made to 46 different individuals. In a handful of cases the amount of the loan is not recorded or impossible to decipher. Excluding these, the total amount which Somvaru had given out on credit during this period was Rs 96,690 plus 18.5 *khandis* of paddy

(roughly equivalent to 1,500 kgs of husked rice). Remember that this is a minimum figure. Some perspective on it is provided by his BSP monthly pay-slips for the four years between 1983-6, the cumulative totals for which were:

	<u>Gross pay</u>	<u>Net pay</u>
1983	Rs 16, 903.99	Rs 13,200
1984	Rs 19, 188.01	Rs 14,072
1985	Rs 22, 854.45	Rs 16,013
1986	Rs 20,315.39	Rs 14,756

If we assume that the loans were distributed equally over the ten years (many in fact did not have dates against them in the record), we find that out of a net BSP income of Rs 58,041 between 1983-6 , he had made loans amounting to Rs 36, 676.

Of course he had money coming back to him all the time, and of course this was not charity. He was charging 5% simple interest per month, and in these neighbourhoods even close kin expect to pay interest if they can afford to. But many people charge 10% on their money, Somvaru regularly waives interest for a relative who is really hard-pressed, the rate of default on his loans is not insignificant, and the principal is often repaid only in dribs and drabs long after it is due. Though he may not have been depriving himself, it seems reasonable to assume that he was benefiting those who needed his help.

Who were they? Of the 46 borrowers, 40 were Satnamis - 14 from Girvi's Satnami *para* , two friends from elsewhere and two BSP workmates. By far the largest category, however, were 22 affinal households resident in other villages, none of which are as near to the plant as Girvi or have the same concentration of BSP employees. Well over half the amount loaned, moreover, went to these relatives (Rs. 53, 270 out of Rs 96,690). Judging from what I know of Somvaru's subsequent transactions, the reasons for borrowing are likely to have been extremely heterogeneous - the purchase of bullocks, repairing the roof, pursuing a court case, bribing the police to drop criminal charges, and so forth.

One of Somvaru's daughters, Janaki, has an MA from Raipur University and a job as a senior teacher in a BSP school. Her husband is the Vice-Principal of another, their children study in the BSP English-medium educational stream, and they live in the house they have built (on a plot of what was once Somvaru's land) in a middle class colony about fifteen minutes walk away from the Girvi Satnami *para* . It was partly through sheer determination, partly through Scheduled Caste scholarships and reservations, and partly through the help of educated Satnami relatives with whom she periodically lived during the course of her education, that Janaki got where she is today. But at her relatives, she now complains, she was more or less treated as a servant. History repeats itself. Janaki hates cooking, but has not for years had to do any since she and her husband have had living in the house a string of young rural relatives who have come to study in Bhilai, and who of course do their share of the chores (at the time of writing a HyBS, FWZDS and FWZDS). Lest this be interpreted as just another example of a new elite exploiting their poorer kin, I should say that in this trade-off the balance of advantage seems to me decisively in favour of the latter. All of them do get an education (and there can be little doubt that job reservations encourage them to want one); all the boys do get employed and one of them is now an engineer who earns more than either Janaki or her husband.

They live in two worlds - that of their middle class neighbours and professional colleagues, and that of the Girvi's Satnami *para* where Janaki grew up, and for which she and her husband now provide a kind of informal counselling service, advice on job and marriage prospects, on schools and court cases, and helpful contacts with Satnami police officers and clerks in the Collectorate. Though they could walk it in half the time, they have taken to arriving in the *para* by the old battered Fiat which they have just acquired, and which they park right under the *jait khamb* . It is now difficult to know which of the two is the more potent icon of the Satnamis' ability to overcome their past. As this example suggests, it is simply not my experience that

reservations deprive the caste of its educationally best qualified leadership (Lynch 1969:107-8) - government rules prohibiting its employees from active political engagement being honoured principally in the breach, and nearly all the leadership of the Satnami caste association in the Bhilai area being BSP workers.

Somvaru's loans, the youngsters Janaki and her husband have put through school, the know-how of the modern world they share with less advantaged caste fellows, and the demonstration effect which they and their Fiat provide - all surely suggest that the reservation of public sector jobs has an impact which reaches considerably beyond the circle of those who actually occupy them? The Satnami *para* is not the north American ghetto, the problems of which have been greatly exacerbated - on Wilson's (1987) argument - by the post-1960 exodus from it of stable working and middle class Black families who had "by their very presence provided stability to inner city neighbourhoods and reinforced and perpetuated mainstream norms and behaviours" (p. 7). In their absence what is left is a socially isolated underclass without mainstream role models or the capacity to sustain local institutions. Affirmative action advantages only the least disadvantaged Blacks, and in so far as it helps them to move out of the ghetto it actually exacerbates the plight of the truly disadvantaged. The big difference, of course, is that Wilson's analysis is premised on the absence of significant kinship links between the General Motors worker and the unemployed kid on the street, and between the ghetto and the suburb. Though the Satnami steel-worker may have joined the aristocracy of labour, he is bound by a web of kinship obligation to those who have not, and though he may move out of the Satnami *para* he does not leave it behind.

Not yet, at least. The incipient trend, however, is for the BSP labour force to become increasingly self-reproducing - for only the sons of existing BSP employees to have a realistic chance of replacing their fathers. And as that happens, the danger is that the

public sector Satnami elite will harden its boundaries, and be less willing to recognize its bonds with those outside the citadel walls.

For two recent batches of recruits (consisting of 223 new workers), I was able to establish that at least 35% of them are the sons of current or former BSP employees, and that another 16% are the sons of other public sector workers - and these figures are almost certainly an under-estimate since the files were incomplete. It may be important to note, however, that the proportion is significantly lower in the case of a third batch made up exclusively of Scheduled Tribe recruits - a mere 14% (13 out of 89). The sample is small, but if this contrast is real, it could suggest that openly declared reservations in favour of the Backward Classes may subvert and run counter to hidden mechanisms which effectively reserve an even more significant proportion of posts for the sons of existing employees. But however this may, the hidden mechanisms which ensure this kind of reproduction certainly exist, and there are good reasons to suppose that this trend is likely to increase over the coming decade.

During the past five years, the largest category of recruits to the plant have been Technician-cum-operative trainees, for whom the now preferred qualification is a certificate from a recognised Industrial Training Institute (ITI).^{xxxiii} Until a few years ago, almost all of these Institutes were run by government and admission to them was on the strict basis of the number of marks obtained in the 10th class examinations. But over the past five years there has been a phenomenal mushrooming of accredited but privately-run ITIs to which admission is on the strict basis of the ability to pay a large "donation" (currently running at Rs 30-35,000). Now it needs to be emphasized that the technical training these institutes provide is rudimentary, and is anyway often completely irrelevant to the job which the new BSP worker is actually given, the young man who trained for two years as a turner winding up as a gas man in the Coke Ovens. But the real significance of the certificate is not that it certifies skill, but that it certifies a certain level of family financial standing - a level which no

working class household in the area, save one which already enjoys a BSP salary, is likely to attain.

Take the group of 16 lads who recently graduated as electricians from a new ITI set up by the Catholic Church. One of them is the quite exceptional case of a young Untouchable from an interior village who was sponsored by funds arranged through the Church. Of the remaining 15, only one did not have a father or elder brother already employed by the plant, and this student's father is a bank manager and a very substantial landlord. Of the other 14 with a BSP connection, 7 live in households in which there is already more than one current BSP wage. In one case, there are 5!

This general trend is compounded, I suspect, by the widespread conviction that now it is necessary to pay a large bribe to obtain a job in the plant. Whether this is actually the case or not is largely beside my point - that the belief is enough to discourage families without considerable resources from scrimping and saving to put their boy through an ITI training when they know that having done so they could not possibly afford this additional entrance fee.

In short, I am suggesting, current developments are conspiring to make it more and more difficult for the "parvenu" son of a peasant or private sector industrial worker to infiltrate the aristocracy of labour. The citadel walls surrounding public sector employment are being reinforced. The Satnamis already inside them have little reason to feel threatened; but for most of those stuck on the outside, reservations are increasingly likely to be of little avail. As this happens, "protective discrimination" will really become a matter of protecting the already privileged, and differentiation within the Satnami community will begin to harden into a real sense of separation.

Two cheers for reservation: But that stage has not yet been reached, and it is I think possible to take a rather more benign view of the impact which public sector job

reservations have so had in Bhilai than the one suggested by Beteille's salutary, if somewhat despondent, warnings. At the outset I indentified three strands to his pessimism, and by way of conclusion I will refer briefly to each of them in turn.

Though there are many threats to the efficiency and functioning of the Bhilai Steel Plant, I have found no evidence that job reservation is significant amongst them or constitutes a serious challenge to its productive purpose. Recent Backward Class recruits do not appear to be less well qualified than others; and qualifications anyway bear a dubious relationship to on the job competence. Most skills required of the workforce are relatively easily acquired, and performance at them is in large measure a matter of "effort" to which Scheduled Caste workers are not notably more averse than Brahmans or Banias. Nor, in spite of quotas, does my data suggest that the culture of caste threatens to overwhelm the rather robust sub-culture of the institution. Rather that sub-culture seems to promote a suppression of caste within the work group, and the values it upholds are - to some extent at least - exported outside the plant, not only in the form of the "tour groups" and "dining clubs" of work-mates, but also of the rotating credit associations to which both Hindus and Satnamis belong in the ex-villages and labour colonies that surround the plant. In my experience, it is in private sector factories - in which there is of course no question of quotas - that caste tends to enjoy a more vigorous life and to be a more overt and intrusive presence on the shopfloor. While it is perhaps surprising, in the light of Beteille's remarks about the inconsistency between the reservation policy and economic liberalization, to find that caste has a greater hold in the more market-oriented private sector, it would clearly be rask to infer that that sector is therefore less "efficient" or functions less well in terms of its capitalistic purpose. In short, and in this instance, I do not find the claim that reservation is a challenge to institutional well-being entirely compelling.

In theory, quotas do plainly compromise the principle of equality of individual opportunity, but in the context I have been considering it is by no means clear that

any significant number of aspirants of demonstrably superior "merit" are in practice excluded by them. Moreover, this principle seems to be much more seriously undermined by other kinds of barrier to open competition - amongst them, the preoccupation with irrelevant qualifications that are sometimes as spurious as they are expensive; the real or imagined corruption of the selection process, and the tendency for BSP jobs to go to BSP sons. The real significance of Other Backward Class reservation, I have suggested, may have more to do with promoting the interests of Chhattisgarhis in general than to do with promoting the interests of particular castes. Given the domination of outsiders in management, and the so far contained but potentially dangerous tensions based on regional ethnicity which exist within the area, a cost-benefit analysis might not unequivocally condemn such quotas. For the case of Scheduled Tribes, I have pointed to some suggestive evidence which may perhaps indicate that Backward Class reservation may actually widen - rather than restrict - the social field within which BSP recruits its labour. Scheduled Tribe workers, it seems, are less likely to be the sons of existing employees.

As for the effects of reservation on the caste order in the world outside the plant, it is certainly the case that Satnamis are still subject to much discrimination, but this is considerably less onerous than it was; and there is little reason to suppose that, but for reservation, the tenacity of the prejudices against them would be significantly weaker. For all their barbed jibes about "quota-wallahs", the higher castes must certainly find it less easy to dominate and discriminate against a population of ex-Untouchables in which many have secure modern jobs and a good income, than to dominate and discriminate against an impoverished one which largely pursues its traditional calling. Pessimism about the effects of reservation on caste consciousness sometimes seems to imply a somewhat unrealistic degree of optimism about how things might be if it was not there.^{xxxiv} It might also sometimes seem that modern electoral politics has needed little assistance from the policy of protective discrimination in keeping the consciousness of caste alive.

As to the proposition that job reservation is an ineffective way of addressing the problem of backwardness because the jobs are too few to make much difference to any caste as a whole; the proposition that there is no connection between individual betterment and the collective betterment of the caste, and that one of the main effects of the policy is likely to be an increase of inequalities within the caste, I believe my evidence suggests a number of qualifications. Though I am not quite sure how many "too few" or "enough" would be, it does seem that the absolute number of Satnamis employed by BSP is considerable, and that the proportion of Satnami households in the district (and certainly in the immediate hinterland of the plant) who have benefitted from BSP jobs is appreciable, and I have tried to show how the material and immaterial benefits of these jobs are distributed more widely than these figures suggest. A privileged elite has certainly begun to emerge, but it has not yet repudiated its links and obligations to those who fall outside it. There are, however, certain incipient trends which affect the labour force as a whole which make it increasingly likely that this may happen. And when it does, it will be necessary to begin the cost-benefit analysis which Andre Beteille has advocated all over again. In the meantime, however, I am tempted to conclude with two qualified cheers for reservation - even though I fear my teacher and friend, in whose honour this essay has been written, might not wish to join in.

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Notes

ⁱ The ethnographic data discussed in this paper were collected over a period of approximately 15 months fieldresearch, undertaken at various intervals between September 1993 and September 1998. I gratefully acknowledge the support of the Nuffield Foundation, the Economic and Social Research Council and the London School of Economics which made this fieldwork possible. Special thanks are also due to Ajay T.G. for research assistance which has made an invaluable contribution to this study. Saurabh Dube, Chris Fuller, Ramchandra Guha and Nandini Sundar made helpful comments on an earlier draft of the paper.

ⁱⁱ Within the limited compass of this paper, it is not possible to cover more than a few aspects. One important aspect that I do not attempt to cover concerns the way in which steel plant employment has affected gender inequalities within the caste as many households come to rely on the wages of a single male breadwinner, and female agricultural labour begins to lose much of its significance.

ⁱⁱⁱ Reservation has the longest history in south India (where it goes back to the beginning of the twentieth century); and it is in the southern states that the proportion of reserved posts has tended to be highest. For an account of the pre-history and development of the present system, see Galanter 1984, chaps 2 - 4; Mendelsohn and Vicziany 1998:129f. On the Mandal report and its implementation, see Radhakrishnan 1996; Sivaramayya 1996; Srinivas 1996.

^{iv} The plant is popularly known by its initials, which is potentially confusing for the many readers who will more immediately associate these with the Bahujan Samaj Party which also has a role in my story. I will employ the initials only for the plant, giving the party its full name.

^v Of these, 85 are BSP ancillaries, as are a further 77 factories located elsewhere in the area.

^{vi} I defer a detailed discussion of these rumours of sacrifice to a subsequent publication.

^{vii} The citadel image is, of course, borrowed from Holms trom (1976), though he applies it to all "organised" sector employment.

^{viii} Although such stories are legion, the ones I heard were without exception tales of failure. The applicant had either got cold feet about using the fraudulent certificate, or had done so and been unmasked by a tip-off to the plant's Vigilance Department. It is, of course, to be expected that success in such a ruse will remain a closely guarded secret since the price of discovery would be certain dismissal. I nevertheless doubt that a statistically significant proportion of reserved posts are actually filled by workers of clean caste.

^{ix} Supplementary to this neighbourhood focus, I have so far also spent about seven weeks on the shop-floor in BSP, and a somewhat shorter period in various private sector factories.

^x Useful modern sources on the Satnamis and their history include Babb (1972), Gnana Prakasam (1993) and Dube (1998). In drafting this section I have relied particularly on the last of these for background information on the earlier history.

^{xi} Dube (1998:204) documents the way in which the festival was popularised under Congress Party patronage in the post-Independence period; and - in a personal communication - has suggested that it may be a more recent invention than the date I was given.

^{xii} The Mahars in Chhattisgarh had a rather higher status than in neighbouring Maharashtra, perhaps because there were not associated with the removal of dead cattle (cf. Burra 1996:152-3). Most were involved in agriculture; some were weavers, and in many villages the *kotvar* (village watchman/constable) was a Mahar. Their inferiority is often attributed to their keeping of pigs and chickens. The Mahars are officially classified as a Scheduled Caste throughout Madhya Pradesh; the Dhobis only in certain districts (excluding Durg).

^{xiii} It might perhaps be noted, however, that in all three of the ex-villages I studied all castes (except Brahmans) who were significantly represented in the pre-BSP population are held to be Shudras and would be regarded as of middle-ranking or low status in the areas of northern India from which they are held to have migrated at some indeterminate time in the past.

^{xiv} Most villages actually consist of several *paras*, or neighbourhoods; but those in which the Hindu castes live are generally spoken of collectively as the "Hindu para" in opposition to "Satnami para".

^{xv} There were no Dhobis in Girvi.

^{xvi} On the distinction between primary and secondary marriage, see Dumont's (1964) classic discussion.

^{xvii} These figures are calculated from the Record of Rights (*Adhikar Abhlilekh Panji*) for each village for the years in question. The old records are lodged with the Durg Collectorate.

^{xviii} The legal situation is tangled. But see Galanter 1984:140f, from which 1) it is clear that the Tamil Paraiyar is not eligible for reservation in M.P. because Paraiyars are not Scheduled in that state. Conversely, 2) a worker of caste X from state A, where the X's are not Scheduled, is debarred from reserved posts in state B, where the X's are listed. The inference 3) is that even if the X's are Scheduled in both states, the worker from A still cannot claim the benefits of reservation in B. He must, in effect, both belong to a caste or tribe which is scheduled in the state in which he seeks a reserved job, and originate from that state. As Galanter (p. 142) observes, however, the suspicion must be that "administrative failure to give full effect to the logic of the cases, perhaps augmented by some dissimulation on the part of the migrants, has tempered the effect of these rules and accounts for the infrequency with which these issues have come to court".

^{xix} This figure is consistent with my enquiries into the caste composition of work groups in the Coke Department, but it is primarily based on what one would predict from their share of the Scheduled Caste population in the area. It also makes the (empirically valid) assumption that BSP has, over the past 25 years, consistently filled its Scheduled Caste quota in non-executive recruitment. Though at an all-India level there has been some disquiet about the failure to fill reserved places in the higher echelons of central government employment, the targets for Class IV employees have been regularly exceeded, and by 1987 had been all but met for Class III (Mendelsohn and Vicziany 1998:134-5).

Actually, my hunch would be that in relation to their share of the Scheduled Caste population, the Satnamis are - if anything - over-represented in the workforce. They tend to be better educated and more assertive than members of smaller ex-Untouchable castes like the Mehars; and unlike the Mahars they do not scruple to make use of the benefits of protective discrimination. These days the latter call themselves Maithil Chatris and claim a rank and respectability which was not formerly accorded them. They find themselves caught in the classic "dilemma of backwardness" (Beteille 1991c; Parry 1970) - the dilemma of whether to stick to their status claims and renounce the benefits of protective discrimination, or to claim the benefits and "prove" that they are "really" no more than an ex-Untouchable caste.

But if the Satnamis are probably over-represented in the worker grades, it is likely that they are under-represented at the managerial level (about 8.5% of the total workforce in 1992-3). At this level there is significant recruitment from outside the state.

^{xx} This admittedly premised on the crude assumption of not more than one BSP worker per household. In the vast majority of cases, however, this is empirically valid since households tend to split when more than one member is employed in the plant. Most of the exceptions are households in which a father and recently recruited son are both BSP employees, and their co-residence tends to be short-lived.

^{xxi} The rate of "separation" is currently running at around 3,000 per year.

^{xxii} My figures of course relate to a single public sector enterprise, and it must be stressed that within the immediate vicinity of Bhilai there are other significant government employers (including the big railway marshalling yards at Charoda, the Bhilai Refractory Plant, the state and central government bureaucracies, and public utilities like the electricity board). The total figure for Satnami representation in public sector employment must therefore be considerably higher. My BSP estimates might be compared with those suggested for all government services in the country as a whole. Commenting on a figure of 10% extrapolated from Isaacs (1965:111), Galanter (1989:193) suggests that 6% would be nearer the mark for employees of Classes I, II and III, but concedes that Isaac's figure is plausible if Class IV is included. Elsewhere, he cites a study from the early 1970s which found that around 12.5% of all Scheduled Caste households in Haryana had one or more members in a reserved job (1984:108). Mendelsohn and Vicziany (1998: 137) estimate that about 2% of the total Untouchable population are in public sector employment; though if we include the family members they support, the number of beneficiaries would of course be several times greater.

^{xxiii} The reason that this number is not larger is that several former residents with jobs in the plant have now retired back to the villages from which they originally came. At present, 30 of the *para*'s 79 Satnami households are from other villages

^{xxiv} The key case was *Balaji v. State of Mysore*, which Galanter discusses in detail (1984:chap 12), along with subsequent rulings which appear to qualify this limit. What the Balaji judges actually said was that, "speaking generally and in a broad way", the limit should be less than 50%, though the standard interpretation takes that figure as an allowable maximum. Though some state governments have found constitutional loopholes to exceed it, what is relevant here is that BSP continues to treat 50% as a ceiling.

^{xxv} I add this qualification because it seems likely that, notwithstanding the formal position outlined in f.n. 18 above, a Chamar who originates from Banaras does sometimes succeed in obtaining a BSP job under the SC quota, and a Yadav from Bihar under the OBC quota. Given that Chamars and Yadavs also appear on the relevant M.P. lists, and provided that these "outsider" applicants give a local address, it must be difficult for the local employment exchange to discover their formal ineligibility.

^{xxvi} There are three kinds of recruit at the non-executive level: Plant Attendants, for whom the minimum qualification is successful completion of the 10th class ("Matric"); Technician-cum-Operator Trainees for whom the minimum has recently been raised to Matric plus either a certificate from an Industrial Training Institute or a BSc with Maths; and Senior Operative Trainees who must have a Polytechnic Diploma, or a BSc with maths in at least the second division.

The one major concession which is made for reserved posts (as a matter of Government policy) is an extension of the age limit. In the case of appointments to the (lowest) grade of Plant Attendant, this is 30; but for OBC candidates the limit is 32, and for SC and ST recruits 35. This is important because of the long gap between first registering at the employment exchange and being called for a BSP interview. In 1994, BSP was still processing applications from candidates who had registered as soon as they became eligible after passing their tenth class exams in 1983. BSP will consider - up to a limit of three times - the names of candidates rejected in a previous round, provided they remain within the age limit. Those whose progress through the school system has been at all halting are likely to find themselves running out of time, and the extension of the age limit clearly provides some valuable flexibility. On the other hand, young men of Scheduled Caste who have progressed smoothly through the school system without ever had to repeat a year can expect to come up for consideration for a BSP job at a younger age than an applicant for an open post, and will - if selected - have a longer career in

the plant. While the latter might have to wait 10 - 11 years for a BSP "call", the SC candidate can expect his within four or five.

^{xxvii} In central government employment, reservations for promotion go back to 1957 (Galanter 1984:100). In BSP they used also to apply at the executive level, though these were abolished several years ago.

^{xxviii} For an account of the formation of the Bahujan Samaj Party, and of their abrasively anti- high caste propaganda, see Mendelsohn and Vicziany 1998: 218f.

^{xxix} I employ pseudonyms throughout.

^{xxx} On the Satnami *para* side, but a little removed from the old settlement, is a new hamlet which started as a squatter settlement, in which nearly everybody comes from elsewhere, and in which Hindus and Satnamis are mixed and interact much more freely than in the main part of the village.

^{xxxi} There are one or two in Patripar.

^{xxxii} Compare Galanter 1989: chap 9 on the ineffectiveness of the civil rights legislation. Though the number of successful prosecutions in the country as a whole may objectively be very small, my experience of the Bhilai area is that fear of the law (or at least of the police) is a genuine deterrent to overt public discrimination.

^{xxxiii} In the five years 1993-7, there were 5360 recruits to the labour force, of which 2482 fell into this category. As the work done by unskilled Plant Attendants is increasingly given to contract labour, the proportion of T.O.T recruits is likely to grow.

^{xxxiv} In one of his earliest essays on the subject, Beteille ([1965] 1991c:186) had struck a more hopeful note about this heightened consciousness. Commenting on N.K. Bose's observation that "special treatment" has "inordinately accentuated" communal consciousness, he observes that this is perhaps no bad thing, for it may be "a precondition to the integration of tribals (or Harijans) into the wider body politic. For the measure of integration lies not so much in a passive acceptance of the status quo as in the adoption of a body of common political rules through which divergent interests are organized and articulated".