On the explanatory adequacy of the Hindutva-as-Brahmanical model

GARIMA RAGHUVANSHY*

Abstract

One of the most significant and confounding anomalies facing experts and commentators is the Hindutva movement's popularity amongst Dalit and OBC voters. If the Hindutva movement is Brahmanical, how can it be the choice of those it seeks to oppress? This article examines this conundrum. It addresses three central arguments in claims that the movement is Brahmanical, showing how these are based on arbitrary, incomplete data (such as the claim that the Sangh Parivar is against caste-based reservations), or hide conceptual contradictions (such as the argument that the Sangh's opposition to proselytization is casteist). Furthermore, taken to their logical end, explanations for the movement's success amongst Dalit and OBC groups raise fundamental questions for/contradictions to the received view on the caste system. This article concludes that describing the Hindutva movement as Brahmanical raises many questions for the received view on the caste system without furthering our understanding of the movement in any way.

Key words

Caste; Hindutva; India; casteism; Brahmanism; politics; elections; Sangh Parivar; Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP)

Resumen

Una de las anomalías más significativas y confusas a la que se enfrentan expertos y comentaristas es la popularidad del movimiento hindutva entre los intocables y los votantes de OBC (otras clases atrasadas). Si el movimiento hindutva es brahmánico, ¿cómo puede ser el elegido por aquellos a quienes busca oprimir? Este artículo analiza

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* Garima Raghuvanshy is an independent academic, her work is focused on the Hindutva movement, Indian traditions, and intercommunity dynamics. She holds a Research Master in Religion and Culture from the University of Groningen and was awarded an Erasmus Mundus Svaagata Scholarship by the EU. Garima is involved in documentary filmmaking and writes on society, culture, and climate. Email address: garima.raghuvanshy@gmail.com.

ese misterio. Se ocupa de tres argumentos centrales de las afirmaciones de que el movimiento es brahmánico, mostrando que esos argumentos se basan en datos arbitrarios e incompletos (como la afirmación de que el Sangh Parivar está en contra de las reservas basadas en la casta) u ocultan contradicciones conceptuales (como el argumento de que la oposición del Sangh al proselitismo es castaísta). Además, llevadas a su extremo lógico, las explicaciones del éxito de ese movimiento entre intocables y grupos de OBC suscita preguntas y contradicciones a la visión que se recibe del sistema de castas. Este artículo concluye que describir el movimiento hindutva como brahmánico levanta muchos interrogantes sobre la visión del sistema de castas sin ahondar de ninguna manera en nuestra comprensión del movimiento.

Palabras clave

Casta; hindutva; India; castaísmo; brahmanismo; política; elecciones; Sangh Parivar; Partido Popular Indio (BJP)

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1. Introduction

The Hindutva movement is at an unprecedented position in India today. Led by the charismatic Narendra Modi, the movement's political wing, the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) won the 2014 and 2019 general elections with an absolute majority. In the patchwork-coalition politics of India, this was a feat unseen since 1984.

In many quarters the movement's steady rise and current political clout is causing significant concern. The Hindutva movement is seen as a hyper-nationalist, autocratic, Hindu-supremacist, Brahmanical force in a country that is supposed to be a diverse, secular, democratic republic, and the fact that it seems to be enjoying a significant edge in what commentators have dubbed "a struggle for the soul of India" is not lost on its critics (for such an example, see: Tharoor 2021).[1] Alarm bells have been ringing the world over and articles, op-eds, reports, and academic work criticising the movement has gained a new urgency in the last seven years (for examples see: Subramanian 2020, Jaffrelot 2021).

Judging by the growing heft of the Hindutva movement, however, such denunciations, expressions of concern, and annual reports on India's lack of religious or journalistic (or other kinds of) freedom have not achieved much. The BJP led government in India seems unfazed – over the last seven years it has pushed through several long-term promises of the Sangh Parivar (for instance, the revocation of Kashmir's special status) despite stringent criticism (for examples of such criticism, see: Ayyub 2019, Jha and Jha 2019, Press Trust of India 2019). The government's popularity does not seem to diminishing either, indicating that the BJP's electoral base remains largely unaffected by these criticisms. Simply put, critical responses to the Hindutva movement don't seem to be working.

Perhaps for good reason. Apart from raising alarm bells, the steady rise of the Hindutva movement in India also raises some pressing questions for its critics. While the BJP's sweeping electoral victories in the 2014 and 2019 elections for the Lok Sabha (the Indian parliament's lower house) show definitively that it has successfully built a national following, these victories also underscore one of the most significant and confounding anomalies facing experts and commentators on the Hindutva movement, namely, its popularity amongst Dalit and OBC voters. If the Hindutva movement is Brahmanical, how can it be the choice of those it seeks to oppress?

This article will examine this conundrum and what its existence indicates. It will begin by addressing three central arguments made in claims that the movement is Brahmanical; i) That the movement's leaders and ideologues have been and are Brahmins; ii) that the movement's opposition to caste-based reservation is proof of its Brahmanism; and iii) that the movement's opposition to proselytisation is proof of its Brahmanism. The article will then discuss responses to the anomaly raised by the Hindutva movement's success amongst Dalit and OBC communities. It will discuss three central explanations provided by scholars to account for this anomalous popularity of the allegedly Brahmanical Hindutva movement: i) That there is a crisis in Dalit

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[1] In contemporary scholarship the term "Brahmanical" is used interchangeably with "casteist" to denote a person / organization / institution which believes in and/or practices caste-based hierarchy, discrimination, and oppression.

politics; ii) that economic upliftment has created a Dalit middle class amenable to the Hindutva movement; and iii) that the movement's aggressive wooing of Dalits and OBCs is the cause for its popularity amongst these communities.

2. Background and Key Terms

Before diving into the aforementioned foci, for readers unfamiliar with India, its history and politics, an introduction to the background and a few key terms will be essential in situating the arguments of this article. The following is a brief overview of: (i) The received view on the caste system – one of the most dominant prisms through which India and the Hindutva movement is studied and critiqued today; (ii) India's caste-based reservation policy, which is an important element in this critique of the movement; and, (iii) the Hindutva movement and its most widely recognised instance today – the Sangh Parivar.

2.1. The received view on the caste system

According to the received view, India has a caste system which creates and perpetuates inequality and oppression. This caste system is believed to be a Hindu institution which draws its legitimacy from a range of Hindu scriptures. However, it is believed to be so entrenched in Indian culture that it has also seeped into religions present in India but which do not have any affinity to Hinduism. Thus, Indian Christianity and Indian Islam are also believed to have caste discrimination, though the roots of the "system" are identified as Hindu (for the Hindu roots of the caste system and its Christian and Muslim forms see Ansari 1960, Bauman and Young 2014, and Forrester 2018).

The received view argues that India's caste system functions as a *system* of oppression by placing different castes on different levels of a hierarchical order. By seeing some castes as higher than others it is believed to have created "upper" and "lower" castes. According to the received view, upper-castes systemically oppress lower-castes. Brahmins, Kshatriyas and Vaishyas (caste groups) are believed to constitute upper-castes and Shudras are believed to comprise the lower-castes, though which position (relative to one another) different castes occupy within these castes groups is intensely debated. According to the received view on the caste system, there is a fifth category in Indian society; a set of castes considered so low as to not be part of the caste hierarchy at all, but rather, outside it. These "out castes" have come to be referred to as Dalits (a term that became popular from the 1970s onwards, see: Mitul 2018). These castes are/have also been referred to as depressed classes, backward classes, untouchables, ex-untouchables, scheduled castes, and Harijans, and are also included in the relatively fluid term lower-castes.

According to the received view, the explanation for the caste system is that it is in the interest of upper-castes to oppress lower-castes, thus guaranteeing themselves exclusive access to material, social and political opportunities while denying these to others. For examples of the received view on the caste system see: Flood (2008, pp. 495–505), Jodhka (2012), and BBC News (2019).

Postcolonial scholarship has challenged this received view on the caste system, perhaps most famously and seminally in Nicholas Dirks's *Castes of Mind: Colonialism and the Making of Modern India.* Dirks argues:

> … caste, as we know it today, is not in fact some unchanged survival of ancient India, not some single system that reflects a core civilizational value, not a basic expression of Indian tradition. Rather, I will argue that caste (again, as we know it today) is a modern phenomenon, that it is, specifically, the product of an historical encounter between India and Western colonial rule. By this I do not mean to imply that it was simply invented by the too clever British…But I am suggesting that it was under the British that 'caste' became a single term capable of expressing, organizing, and above all 'systematizing' India's diverse forms of social identity, community, and organization. (Dirks 2001, 5)

It is worth noting that while such an understanding of caste breaks away from the received view in significant ways, it also remains stuck within the same view in terms of its conclusions about India, Indian society, caste, and the caste system. Moving beyond the confines of the received view, and with far-reaching implications, the work of S.N. Balagangadhara is bringing about a paradigm shift in the study of caste and India. Rooted in his scholarship, a new understanding of these subjects is emerging in what is referred to as the Ghent School (De Roover 2019). This article too draws from this body of work.

While the implications of these new perspectives – post-colonial as well as those of the Ghent School – are immense for the study of India, and indeed for Indian politics and policy making, dominant discussion and understanding of caste remain confined within the received view on the caste system which I have outlined in the initial paragraphs of this subsection. Thus, it is accurate and appropriate to take the received view on the caste system as our point of reference for this article.

2.2. Caste-based reservation

While agitation for caste-based reservations began as early as the 1870s in what was then Madras Presidency in British India, arguably, the 1918 policy of Mysore, a princely state, to recruit non-Brahmins in government jobs is the first instance of caste-based reservation in India (Berg 2020, p. 7). Thus, the history of caste-based reservation goes back at least three decades before India's independence from British rule in 1947. As De Roover writes in his exploration of the origins of the legal distinction between caste and out caste Hindus, the colonial government believed that Indian society was divided into "caste" and "out caste" Hindus, and that the central factor upholding this division was "untouchability" – a practice which remains remarkably nebulous and ill-defined even today (De Roover 2017). Despite finding little and often contradictory evidence of any such distinction on the ground, the British officially "recognised" this social structure through legal enactments in the British Parliament in 1935 and 1936 (Dushkin 1967, pp. 629–630, De Roover 2017). These enactments, namely, the Government of India Act 1935 and the Government of India (Scheduled Castes) Order 1936, created a distinct category of Indians – the "depressed classes". This category consisted of castes that colonial officials believed were "out caste", i.e., victims of "untouchability". Lists or schedules of communities believed to be subject to untouchability were attached to the Indian constitution and the communities included in these schedules came to be known as Scheduled Castes (SCs).

Since independence (though there was a system of separate electorates and other instances of caste-based reservation before independence as well) the Indian reservation

system sets aside a quota of seats or vacancies in public education and government jobs for SCs. In 1990 another category was deemed eligible for similar provisions – the Other Backward Classes (OBCs). OBC communities were and are believed to be victims not of untouchability, but of other disadvantages believed to stem from the caste system. Some tribes considered similarly disadvantaged as SCs and OBCs are also included in a separate list and have come to be known as Scheduled Tribes.

Under the reservation system a proportion of seats in educational institutions and vacancies in government jobs are reserved for SC, ST, and OBC communities (though they can be filled by candidates from non-SC, ST, and OBC communities, i.e., the "general category" or "unreserved category", if they are not filled by SC, ST, or OBC candidates as applicable). Admission or eligibility criteria are also relaxed for these reserved seats with the rationale that this allows SC, ST, and OBC candidates access to education and opportunity which they would not otherwise have due to historical disadvantages perpetuated by the caste system. The reservation system also demarcates reserved constituencies, where local, state level, and national elections can be contested only by members of SC, ST, and OBC communities as applicable (for an overview of India's reservation system see Sitapati 2017).

In the 7 decades since India's independence various communities have agitated for SC, ST, and OBC status, with some agitations continuing for decades and a few turning violent. The constitutional lists of SCs, STs and OBCs have been updated occasionally, but increasing demand for and promises of reservation through SC, ST, and OBC status has become a defining feature of Indian politics, particularly since the 1990s – for instance, consider the Maratha agitations in Maharashtra and Patel agitations in Gujarat (for an overview of these communities' reservation agitations and for a general critique of reservation-based politics in India, see: Tharoor 2015, Khapre 2021, Sibal 2021).

2.3. The Hindutva movement, the Sangh Parivar, and the BJP

The Hindutva movement, also referred to as the Hindu Nationalist movement is one of the most popular and influential politico-socio-cultural phenomenon in India today (for examples of how the terms "Hindutva" and "Hindu Nationalism" are used interchangeably, see: Bhatt and Mukta 2000, Therwath 2012, Anderson and Longkumer 2018, Chako 2019). By its critics the Hindutva movement and its supporters are considered the conservative, nationalist, majoritarian, chauvinist, and bigoted section of Indian society and politics, locked in a cultural, social and political war with the avowedly secular, progressive, tolerant, diverse, socialist sections of the country. The British colonisation of India, Hindu reform movements of the 19th and early 20th century, public figures such as Vinayak Damodar Savarkar, Swami Vivekanand, Bal Gangadhar Tilak, Annie Besant and the Theosophical Society, and Hindu ascetic orders as ancient as the country itself – all of these have been identified as precursors or founts of the Hindutva movement (Bhatt 2001, Van Der Veer 2003, Jaffrelot 2007, Andersen and Damle 2019).

In the present day perhaps the most identifiable and popular instance of the Hindutva movement is a network or "family" of organisations known as the Sangh Parivar. The Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS), a volunteer organisation established in 1925 with

the stated objective of character building, is the nucleus of this network. In their latest book on the organization, Andersen and Damle introduce the RSS as follows:

> The RSS was founded in 1925 by Dr Keshav Baliram Hedgewar—a Telugu Brahmin medical doctor from the central Indian city of Nagpur—who believed that the deep social divisions among the Hindus of India were responsible for what he considered a thousand years of foreign domination on the subcontinent. What a truly independent India required, he felt, was a system of training (referred to by the RSS as 'character-building' or 'chaaritya nirman', to use the Sanskrit term favoured by the organization) that would create a cadre of men who would unify a highly pluralistic country, using their own perfected behaviour as a model for other Indians. (Andersen and Damle 2019a, xii)

Further:

> The RSS since the early 1990s has grown into one of the world's largest non-government associations, with an estimated 1.5–2 million regular participants in its nearly 57,000 local daily meetings (referred to as shakhas), 14,000 weekly shakhas and 7000 monthly shakhas, taking place across 36,293 different locations nationwide as of 2016. In addition, there are some 6 million alumni and affiliate volunteers. (Andersen and Damle 2019a, xi)[2]

This gives us an idea of the objectives and scale of the RSS and its reach in Indian society. Like the RSS, its Sangh Parivar, the extended network of affiliate organisations linked to the RSS and working towards similar goals, has also grown substantially in the last few decades. It is now an increasingly heterogenous network of more than 100 organisations with a rapidly deepening pan-India presence (for an in-depth study of the RSS as an organisation, see: Andersen and Damle 2019b, 2019a).

In this vast parivar or family, two organisations are relevant for this article – the RSS itself, and the political wing of the Hindutva movement, the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP). The RSS is credited with building the Hindutva movement into a pan-Indian phenomenon with salience at the grassroots in rural and urban India, while the BJP, its political arm, is the single largest political party in the country today and has had a fundamental impact on Indian politics. There are more than 100 affiliate organisations of the Sangh Parivar working in various domains but given the influence of BJP and RSS, it is appropriate and sufficient to focus on them as representatives of the Hindutva movement.

2.3.1. The BJP

The BJP is one of India's eight national political parties, though it is by far the nation's largest party by number of members of parliament and state assemblies and is currently a dominant force in Indian politics. The BJP emerged out of earlier forms of the political arm of the Sangh Parivar – first as the Bharatiya Jana Sangh between 1951–77, and then between 1977–79 as part of the Janata Party, an amalgamation of political parties opposed to the ruling Congress government and then Prime Minister Indira Gandhi's leadership. Formed in 1980, after the dissolution of the Janata Party but counting many of its members as founding leaders, the BJP began achieving stable political success in the 1990s and since then it has won two consecutive national elections (2014 and 2019)

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[2] The Hindi word "shakha" means branch.

and multiple state elections, including in states where it had little to no presence less than two decades ago. Many of the party's leaders come from the RSS, where they will have often served for several years at senior positions. As part of the Sangh Parivar the BJP remains closely tied to the RSS though the two organisations have differing views on multiple issues (this is hardly surprising though, given that homogeneity of opinion on any number of issues is hard to find even within the RSS itself).

The mammoth influence of the RSS on Indian society, the dominance of the BJP in Indian politics, and the popularity of the Hindutva movement they represent, make these some of the most important organisations / phenomenon to understand in India today.

How does extant scholarship serve us on that front? After decades of studying the Hindutva movement, does academic discourse give us incisive insights into this vitally important development in Indian society? Extant scholarship's characterisation of the Hindutva movement as Brahmanical is perhaps its most widespread and influential description of the movement today. The success of the movement amongst Dalit and OBC communities presents an anomaly to this description and also functions as a litmus test for the efficacy of the description itself.

3. Is the Hindutva movement Brahmanical? What can that tell us?

By its critics the Hindutva movement is described as many things – for instance as patriarchal, as religious, cultural, or ethnic nationalism, or as a continuation of orientalist notions about India (Basu 1993, Bacchetta 1993, Hasan 1993, Sarkar 1999, Hansen 1999, Zavos 1999, Bhatt 2001, Thapar 2003, Van Der Veer 2003, Jaffrelot 2007, Flood 2008, Menon 2010, Anand 2011, Kopf 2015). By far the most dominant description of the movement, however, is as a Brahmanical, upper-caste phenomenon that seeks to consolidate Hindus into one community while still maintaining prevalent caste discrimination between different groups (Graham 1990, Basu *et al*. 1993, Louis 2000, Bhatt 2001, Jaffrelot 2007, Nussbaum 2008, Narayan 2009, Doniger and Nussbaum 2015, Andersen and Damle 2019b, Chatterji *et al.* 2019, Teltumbde 2020b, Narayan 2021). This is considered to be a defining feature of the movement and guides a majority of scholarship and popular discourse on the movement. Three major arguments are put forward to make this claim, let us consider each.

3.1. Most of the movement's leaders / ideologues are Brahmin / upper-caste

Arguments that claim the Hindutva movement is Brahmanical cite its history, note that almost all its leaders and important ideologues have been and are upper-caste, and quote speeches by people considered important to the development of the Hindutva movement in general and the Sangh Parivar in particular (Graham 1990, Basu *et al.* 1993, Louis 2000, Bhatt 2001, Jaffrelot 2007, Nussbaum 2008, Doniger and Nussbaum 2015, Andersen and Damle 2019b). Apart from the caste of most leaders and ideologues of the Sangh Parivar, that they have not called for the total annihilation of caste itself is taken as further proof of their Brahmanism (Basu *et al.* 1993, Louis 2000, Bhatt 2001, Jaffrelot 2007, Nussbaum 2008, Salam 2018).

This argument rests primarily on the premise that a predominance of Brahmins within an organization / institution / group makes it Brahmanical. Let us begin by noting that the RSS does not maintain caste data of its members, making it very difficult to ascertain

caste representation within the organisation. Even so, and without going into the diversity within Brahmin castes themselves (which I will discuss briefly in section 4.1), let us take this link between presence of Brahmins and Brahmanism at face value. If the presence of Brahmins makes something Brahmanical, it must also follow that where Brahmins are absent or few in number, Brahmanism is absent. However, as discourse on the caste system argues, there also exists Dalit Brahmanism and OBC Brahmanism (for an example of alleged Dalit Brahmanism see: Rao 2018).

It is hardly surprising then that despite an alleged predominance of Brahmins, the Sangh Parivar is not unique for being criticised as Brahminical. In India today activists and commentators regularly "call out" a wide range of people and organisations for being Brahmanical. This includes upper-caste intellectuals condemning caste discrimination and upper-caste leaders of anti-caste movements and organisations. Recent examples are the controversy surrounding Arundhati Roy's introduction to the critical edition of Dr. B.R. Ambedkar's Annihilation of Caste, and criticism of Kanhaiya Kumar, a student leader now stepping into politics, for attempting to speak for Dalits while being upper-caste.

When seen within this larger context, where with the exception of Dalits and to a lesser extent OBCs, all others are actually / always suspect of being Brahmanical, the description of the Hindutva movement as Brahmanical only tells us that it is Brahmanical as are, for instance, Mahatma Gandhi (Shepherd 2019a) and the Congress Party (Naqvi 2019). Thus, we are compelled to conclude that at least when it comes to being Brahmanical, far from being an exception, the Hindutva movement lies alongside a majority of its staunchest ideological rivals and critics (Shepherd 2019b), many of whom are seen as the last hope of a secular, egalitarian India, and as the last embankment against the onslaught of the very Hindutva movement they share space with as actual / potential casteists.

Precisely because Brahmanical is a description for a vast variety of individuals and organisations, from Pragya Thakur to Arundhati Roy and from the Congress Party to the Sangh Parivar, it loses its descriptive power. What do we learn about the Sangh when we learn that it is Brahmanical? Only that it is what many Indian organisations, political parties and social phenomenon with little in common are alleged to be. To appreciate the limited efficacy of Brahmanical as a description of the Hindutva movement, consider the vastly different situations of political parties considered Brahmanical in India today. The Congress Party, the Communist Party of India (Marxist), and the BJP – all three are considered Brahmanical, and for similar reasons such as predominance of Brahmins, particularly in their leadership. The CPI never enjoyed much relevance in India outside of states such as West Bengal and Kerala. The Congress Party, once more or less the only political party in India, is now struggling to maintain its relevance even as the main opposition party. The BJP, in contrast, is by far the most dominant political party in India today. If three Brahmanical parties are facing such different outcomes in 2021, it compels us to conclude that the BJP's differentiating factor is not its Brahmanism, but something else. In a quest to understand an organisation like the BJP, and by extension the Sangh Parivar and the Hindutva movement it represents, identifying this "something else" then, is the vital, so-far-unfulfilled goal. Descriptions of the Hindutva movement as Brahmanical add very little to our understanding of the movement.

3.2. Opposing Caste-based Reservations is Casteist

Over the decades a variety of groups and ideologues have refused to support caste-based reservations. This includes Jawaharlal Nehru, India's first prime minister, who believed focus on caste would undermine efforts to build India as a socialist republic, and Jyoti Basu, former Chief Minister of West Bengal from the Communist Party of India (M) who responded to the Mandal commission report by saying that there are only two castes in West Bengal – the rich and the poor. A link commonly made in academic and popular discourse on the caste system is that opposition to caste-based reservation is in itself a Brahmanical, casteist stance (Gudavarthy 2012, Subramanian 2019, Deshpande 2021), and indeed, Nehru and the CPI (M) have both been criticised as being Brahmanical because of their opposition to caste-based reservations, particularly for OBC communities. The same rationale and criticism is applied to the Sangh Parivar as well (Jaffrelot 2007, Doniger and Nussbaum 2015, Chatterji *et al.* 2019).

One of the fundamental problems with this argument is that it is almost impossible to find a consistent stance on caste-based reservations amongst the many organisations and individuals considered part of / foundational to the Sangh Parivar. For instance, in his discussion on the Sangh and caste-based reservation Jaffrelot mentions K.N. Govindacharya, BJP general secretary between 1991 and 2000 (and a Brahmin), who argued staunchly in favour of caste-based reservations throughout the Mandal era (Jaffrelot 2007, p. 257). Similarly, in its 1981 resolution on the issue of reservations the Akhil Bhartiya Pratinidhi Sabha (ABPS), the apex decision making body of the RSS, expressed its support for reservations as follows:

> The R.S.S. considers it necessary that reservation be continued for the present with a view to bringing all these brethren of ours who have remained backward in educational, social and economic fields over the centuries at par with the rest of society. (Kaushal 2007, p. 100)

The ABPS also stressed (in keeping with its previous statements on the issue) the need for reservations for economically weak citizens belonging to the general category. The 1981 resolution further goes on to say that the ABPS, like the Prime Minister (Indira Gandhi at that time), believes that "reservation cannot be a permanent arrangement."

Thus, individuals and organisations within the Sangh have had complex and often contradictory stances on caste-based reservations. Even today, the Sangh continues to call for a non-partisan evaluation of the reservation system to identify negative aspects and strengthen the policy's efficacy. Andersen and Damle are among the few scholars who acknowledge this fact and describe the Sangh's stand on caste-based reservations as "largely neutral" (Andersen and Damle 2019a, p. 73).

Despite these complex / contradictory stances on reservations, for now let us accept that the Sangh has been against caste-based reservations in the past. However, as Jaffrelot, has pointed out, given the caste-based politics of India, the BJP has actively supported caste-based reservation at least since the 1990s. As Jaffrelot quotes, in its 1999 election manifesto the National Democratic Alliance (NDA), a coalition led by the BJP, promised that:

> If required, the Constitution will be amended to maintain the system of reservation (…). We are committed to extending the SC/ST reservation for another 10 years. Reservation-

percentages above 50 per cent, as followed by certain states, shall be sanctified through necessary legislation measures. (Jaffrelot 2007, p. 258)

Over the years the party has maintained this stance. Most recently, the BJP-led government at the Center resurrected an endeavour by its predecessor (a Congress-led) government to strengthen the Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes (Prevention of Atrocities Act), 1989 (Popularly known as the SC / ST Act). In 2015 it moved a bill in parliament proposing amendments to the SC / ST Act. These amendments provided for much stricter penalties and stringent terms for anyone accused of committing a caste atrocity. The amendments were challenged in court and in 2018 the Supreme Court struck down the changes over concerns that the amended Act violated Constitutional guarantees to personal liberty and equality before law. The BJP government urged the Supreme Court to reconsider its ruling, and when the Supreme Court refused to do so, the Central cabinet led by Prime Minister Narendra Modi approved an amendment bill that would bypass the apex Court's ruling. Within a week the bill was passed by parliament, nullifying the Supreme Court's ruling earlier that year and delivering the amendments promised by the BJP. In 2019 the Supreme Court recalled its March 2018 ruling. In 2020, it upheld the Amendment Act passed in 2018, nullifying its March 2018 ruling (*Prathvi Raj Chauhan v Union of India & Ors*, 2018).

The BJP government's deft and determined manoeuvring in response to the controversy over the amended SC / ST Act seems to indicate the opposite of what critics claim. It appears that the BJP is as determined as every other political party in India to increase reservations, legal protection, social welfare benefits, and political representation for Dalits and OBC communities, and that it will make exceptional efforts to do so. In response, critics who claim the BJP is Brahmanical argue that these efforts are made in bad faith, and that, through these politically motivated overtures to Dalit and OBC communities, the Sangh Parivar is in fact furthering its own Brahmanical agenda (Louis 2000, Bhatt 2001, Jaffrelot 2007, Narayan 2009, 2021, Salam 2018, Teltumbde 2020b).

The problem with this argument is that it is impossible to test. Short of having access to the true intentions of the Sangh Parivar, if at all it makes sense to speak in such terms about political parties and organisations (and if it does, where should one look for a party's / organisation's true intentions?), there is no way to determine whether the Sangh acts in good faith. The impossibility of proving or refuting such an argument is well-reflected in the fact that all political parties and ideological organisations in India accuse each other of appeasement politics and acting in bad faith, and indeed, none has been able to convince its critics otherwise.

For instance, while the BJP is criticised for acting in bad faith towards Dalit and OBC communities, the Congress Party is criticised for acting in bad faith towards Muslims (Daniyal 2014). Similarly, Ambedkarite and OBC politicians have promised time and again to work for upliftment of all Dalit and / or OBC communities. Are these promises made in good faith? Uttar Pradesh (UP) is heralded as the state where the political power of Dalits and OBCs came into its own. It is the home of the Bahujan Samaj Party (BSP), whose chief, Mayawati, rose to prominence as a Dalit leader and was projected as a prime ministerial candidate at the height of her success. After coming to power at the state level, however, Mayawati was widely criticised for focusing disproportionately on the welfare of Jatavs, her own caste (Narayan 2021), and as a result, the BSP has

effectively become a Jatav party rather than a Dalit one (Babu 2019). Similarly, during its tenures at the helm of the UP government Mulayam Singh Yadav's Samajwadi Party (SP), ostensibly an OBC party, brought political and economic gains almost exclusively to Yadavs, and today the SP remains a Yadav party, unable to gain the trust of other OBC communities in the state (Narayan 2021).

Since, for the sake of argument, we accepted the popular view that the Sangh Parivar is against caste-based reservation and then went on to discuss the BJP's stance on the issue since the 1990s, it is also worth noting that in Indian politics all parties operate based on political expediency rather than fidelity to ideological standpoints. For instance, in UP the Mayawati-led BSP has often built electoral alliances with Brahmins despite being a Dalit party formed to combat caste discrimination against the many (Dalits and OBCs) by the few (Brahmins, Kshatriyas, Vaishyas). The BSP's Dalit-Brahmin alliances are completely contingent on the party's "social engineering" plan, which dictates what castes the party will woo and changes from election to election. In 2002 when the BSP ran an anti-upper-caste campaign its election slogans included the following: "Tilak, Tarazu aur Talwar, Inko maaro jutey chaar" (roughly translated it means, "Tilak (a mark worn on the forehead, often by Hindus), weighing scale and sword, hit them with shoes four times". When the symbolism is deciphered, the slogan has this import: Brahmins, Vaishyas, and Kshatriyas, beat them with shoes). In contrast, when the party ran a sarvajan or all-community campaign in 2007, one of its slogans was: "Tilak, Tarazu aur Talwar, Inko pujo barambaar" (roughly translated it means: "Tilak, weighing scale and sword, pay your respects to them several times". When the symbolism is deciphered, the slogan has this import: Brahmins, Vaishyas, and Kshatriyas, to them pay your respects) (Desai 2007). As recently as in the run up to the 2019 Lok Sabha election, Mayawati again attempted to cobble together an alliance of Dalits and Brahmins (Abhishek 2019).

Thus, the argument that the Sangh Parivar's anti-caste-based reservation stance is proof of its Brahmanism runs into the following problems: i) it is difficult if not impossible to show a consistent stance on caste-based reservation within the Sangh Parivar, ii) even if we accept that the Sangh Parivar was against caste-based reservations, that has changed since the 1990s, in keeping with the way Indian politics works, and iii) seeing this changed stance as a sign of bad faith is a weak argument since "bad faith", especially in the case of an organisation or a network of organisations, is unprovable and untestable. It also calls for a larger discussion about Indian politics, though such a discussion is beyond the purview of this article.

3.3. Opposing Proselytisation is Casteist

The Sangh Parivar is widely and correctly described as being anti-proselytisation. In arguments that criticise the movement for being Brahmanical, its anti-proselytisation stance is used as proof of its Brahmanism. This link between Brahmanism and opposition to proselytisation is based on the assumption in academic and popular discourse that conversion out of Hinduism is a means to free oneself from the shackles of the caste system (Mukherjee 2007, Adcock 2014, Teltumbde 2015, Cavallin 2020). This is not a novel idea. For centuries various Christian denominations in India promised their lower-caste converts an escape from the caste system. The same rationale was behind the mass conversions of Dalits into Buddhism led by Dr B.R. Ambedkar, and the same argument

is given for conversions to Islam as a protest against the caste system. Given this link between conversion and emancipation from the caste system, to oppose, discourage, or disallow conversion out of Hinduism, particularly of / by lower-castes, is to oppose their efforts to break free from the oppression of the caste system.

However, this link between conversion out of Hinduism and freedom from caste is far from straightforward. To begin with, right from the earliest European writing on India there is a long and complex discussion about what the caste system is and whether it is a religious practice of the Hindus. While Orientalist discourse on India developed such that the dominant view today is that the caste system is a Hindu institution and has basis in Hindu scriptures, there is as yet no consensus at all on any number of important questions such as the link between Hinduism and caste, the rules and structure of the caste system, and wherefrom this "system" draws its legitimacy and authority such as to fundamentally shape the lives of India's millions (De Roover and Claerhout 2015). To add to this, there is a growing body of work which argues that what we know about the "caste system in India" is a result of the European experience of India and exists in that experience only; that the caste system as it is spoken of today, is not Hindu, and does not exist in India (Fárek *et al.* 2017).

To add to this lack of clarity on the link between caste and Hinduism, there is the fact that caste is widely acknowledged to have become a part of Indian Islam and Indian Christianity and is seen to have been so for several centuries. As such, conversion to these religions will not and cannot be an escape from caste. Proponents for extension of reservations to Dalit Christians and Dalit Muslims make precisely this argument – that lower-caste converts to these religions continue to face caste discrimination within their own communities and face the same oppression and lack of access to opportunity as their Hindu counterparts.

Thus, the argument that conversion out of Hinduism is an escape from caste contradicts academic and popular knowledge about Indian Islam and Indian Christianity. If we take away the premises that i) the caste system is a Hindu institution, and ii) that conversion out of Hinduism = freedom from the caste, the argument that the Sangh Parivar's anti-proselytisation stance reflects its Brahmanism is no longer tenable. The Sangh Parivar's opposition to proselytisation could be criticised for going against freedom of religion – though even this criticism is not without complex problems (Claerhout and De Roover 2019) – but it cannot be used to characterise Hindutva as a form / agent of Brahmanism.

What happens however, if we combine 3.3 and 3.2? Drawing a link between opposing caste-based reservations and conversion, David Mosse (2020) and Guharpal Singh (2019) for instance, criticise the Hindutva movement for opposing caste-based reservations for Dalit Muslims and Dalit Christians. Similarly, proponents of caste-based reservation for lower-caste converts to Islam and Christianity, while not critiquing the Hindutva movement but the Presidential Order of 1950 which limits caste-based reservations to adherents of Hinduism, Sikhism, Buddhism and Jainism, argue that denial of reservation to lower-caste converts is a violation of their right to freedom of religion (Arora 2020).

A striking aspect of these arguments is their conception of religious conversion. In the religions that proselytise, i.e., Islam and Christianity, and to a much lesser extent, Judaism, conversion is acceptance of religious tenets, i.e., ideas about God, the believer's relationship with God, worship, etc. Crucially, it is based on / propelled by *faith*, i.e.,

belief in God and in the claim that this religion into which the individual is converting, is *the true* religion (see for instance: Guldner 1908).

Reservation then, or indeed, any economic, social, or political factor is and must be irrelevant to conversion. This is also the position of those arguing against allegations of motivated conversions, i.e., conversions where people are incentivised to convert to another religion for education, healthcare, cash, jobs, etc. (Vincent 2021).

By linking reservations with conversion, such arguments transform religious conversion into an economically / politically / socially motivated and / or deterred act. As such, their understanding of religious conversion is the same as that of the Sangh Parivar, which argues that the majority of religious conversions in India are undertaken not for religious belief but for economic and other secular reasons. The difference between the Sangh and its critics (on this ground) is in their conclusion on the ethics of this situation. While the Sangh sees motivated conversions as unethical, its critics argue that loss of reservations penalises Dalit Christians and Dalit Muslims for not being Hindu while deterring Hindu Dalits from converting out of Hinduism or forcing them to hide their new religion after conversion, and that this violates / undermines their right to freedom of religion, which is unethical (and Brahmanical).

The problem with this reasoning is that it depends on a (Christian or Abrahamic) theological understanding of conversion as religious freedom (Claerhout and De Roover 2005, Balagangadhara 2012) while simultaneously contradicting the same theological understanding of conversion as a purely religious act. That it is say, on the one hand arguments equating the right to religious conversion with freedom of religion depend on theology for this link between the two, but on the other hand, they also fundamentally contradict the same theology by claiming that religious conversion is, can be, and should be allowed to be, an act motivated by / dependent on continuity of secular factors such as reservations.

There is yet another possibility to address. What if caste is not related to religion? Mosse (2020) writes about the irrelevance of religious beliefs vis a vis caste identities and caste disabilities in southern India. Such a claim severs the link between the caste system and caste discrimination and Hinduism, making religion-agnostic caste-based reservation no longer contradictory to one of the foundational ideas about the caste system (namely that it is a religious, Hindu institution).

Approaching the issue from a historical perspective, Rupa Vishwanath (2014) examines the "pariah problem" in colonial southern India and argues that the idea that caste and caste discrimination are religious, Hindu institutions was put forward and endorsed by the colonial government in cahoots with Indian upper-caste employers of Dalit labour. As Vishwanath writes, this allowed the colonial government and Indian upper-caste landowners to maintain forms of Dalit servitude on which the agrarian economy of India was based, effectively leading to the sanctioning of this form of slavery under the pretext of religious neutrality in order to further the economic interests of Empire.

If Mosse and Vishwanath are right and caste and caste discrimination are not religious, Hindu institutions, what then are they? Mosse notes that:

> Dalits were an excluded section of society subject to enforced landlessness and agrestic servitude/slavery. They were a constitutive 'outside,' so that the spaces of society that

counted as the village (the Tamil ūr), the public/common, or the Hindu presumed the exclusion of Dalits. And the public rituals of temple, tank, or village enacted Dalit exclusion or subordination, further articulated in ideologies of impurity and untouchability. (Mosse 2020, 9)

Similarly, Vishwanath describes Pariahs (or Dalits) thus:

… being a landless laborer and being a Pariah were essentially, and not accidentally, linked. 'Ritual' forms of degradation, the fixing of grain payments, casual slurs, and corporal punishment all functioned together in tense synchronicity, producing and reproducing the labor regime. (Vishwanath 2014, 36) (italics in original)

In her book, Vishwanath rues that once caste and caste discrimination were formulated as religious institutions, the thrust of colonial and post-colonial policy for the upliftment of Dalits remained focused on the "social" and limited to policies such as reservation, foreclosing the possibility of larger redistribution of wealth and land or farther-reaching legal enactments to guarantee these communities their rights.

Are caste and caste discrimination then based on social factors such as impurity and untouchability (which if Mosse is right, are secular ideologies) and, crucially, on economic factors such as poverty and control / ownership of means of production?[3] If this is the case, several foundational ideas within the received view on the caste system make little sense. For instance, in its recommendation regarding separate electorates for the Depressed Classes, the Lothian Committee did not use economic criteria (De Roover 2017). As De Roover quotes from Ambedkar's *Note on the Depressed Classes*:

As 'untouchability' is a social or religious and not an economic test a considerable number of the depressed classes will find their way on to the electoral roll, for in some provinces numbers of them are both prosperous and well educated. (De Roover 2017, p. 45)

Furthermore, once we understand the caste system and caste discrimination as rooted in economic status, possibly even class, and other secular factors, there is nothing to suggest that caste, the caste system, and caste discrimination are particularly Indian. Indeed, Isabel Wilkerson's *Caste: The Lies That Divide Us* (2020) situates caste and the caste system as a global, cross-cultural phenomenon. If the caste system and its resultant discrimination are not intrinsically, culturally Indian, are they perhaps, universal? Is dividing people into violent, oppressive hierarchies something we as a species do?[4]

Thus, while the de-linking of religion from caste, the caste system and caste discrimination makes reservation across religions a congruent solution to a caste system understood to be an irreligious, secular institution, it simultaneously raises fundamental issues for the received view on the caste system itself and we are left with more questions about the nature of caste, the caste system and caste discrimination than we are with answers about the Hindutva movement.

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[3] I am not making the claim that they are, I am only pointing out what follows from Mosse's and Vishwanath's writing on the subject.

[4] Again, I am not making the claim that it is, I am pointing out what follows from the idea of a universal caste system.

4. Addressing the anomaly

The previous section examined major arguments used to describe the Hindutva movement as Brahmanical. It sought to show the inconsistencies and contradictions within these arguments. What happens if we accept these arguments nonetheless?

An anomaly arises. If we accept the description of the Hindutva movement as Brahmanical, we have to account for the movement's significant popularity amongst Dalit and OBC communities. While it is (and should be) impossible to know with certainty who voted for whom, multiple exit polls indicate that the BJP has gained a sizeable support base amongst Dalit and OBC communities (Bansal 2019, Kumar and Gupta 2019). As mentioned at the beginning of this article, the fact of the Sangh's popularity amongst Dalit and OBC communities raises a pressing anomaly: How can a movement criticised for being Brahmanical be the choice of those it seeks to oppress?

Academics have attempted to answer this question (Narayan 2009, Teltumbde 2020b, 2020b). In most explanations three themes emerge; the Hindutva movement is successful amongst Dalit and OBC communities because of: (i) a crisis in Dalit politics; (ii) the effect of economic upliftment on Dalit communities; and, (iii) the aggressive, perseverant wooing of Dalit and OBC communities by Hindutva forces such as the Sangh Parivar.

Let us consider each of these.

4.1. Crisis in Dalit Politics

Several scholars and commentators have written about an ongoing crisis in Dalit politics (Guru 2005, Gudavarthy 2019, A.P. Singh 2019, Teltumbde 2020a). While Anand Teltumbde traces it back to the splintering of the Republican Party of India after Ambedkar's death, Ajay Gudavarthy points to Mayawati's meteoric rise and subsequent fall from mass appeal as a portent example. Gopal Guru links it to a fracturing between the Dalit movement's past and its present, and between its intellectuals and representatives and the Dalit masses. There is a general agreement, however, that Dalit politicians have failed to retain the support of those they claim to represent. This crisis in Dalit politics is seen as an important reason for the Sangh Parivar's steady success amongst Dalit (and OBC) voters. But why have Dalit politicians failed to hold on to their supporters? In other words, whence the crisis in Dalit politics?

Here most explanations converge: Dalit politicians have either emulated the sure-to-eventually-backfire strategies of extant politics such as pitting communities against one another, or, concurrently and more importantly, they have been unable to forge a Dalit consciousness that rises above the inter-community boundaries that separate most castes considered Dalit. Going further, they have also failed to resolve intense divisions between Dalit and OBC communities, resulting in the fact that no truly Bahujan politics has emerged so far in India (Teltumbde 2020a).[5]

Explaining this failure of Dalit politicians to unite various Dalit communities and also to unite Dalits and OBCs, Anand Teltumbde makes a striking claim: Dalit is not a viable

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[5] Bahujan - A term used by anti-caste thinkers and leaders such as Jyotirao Phule and Kanshi Ram to refer to all oppressed people including for instance Dalits, OBCs, religious minorities, and tribals.

identity. There is no shared Dalit experience to unite the many many communities considered Dalit. This is Teltumbde's description of ground reality:

> Castes have sub-castes and perhaps sub-sub-castes and all of them seek hierarchy at their respective levels. Under exogenous pressure caste feigns as an identity but once the pressure is gone, it seeks hierarchy within its own ranks and begins splitting. Therefore any integrative identity constructed on the basis of castes in the emancipation project has not worked in history. (Teltumbde 2020a, p. 108)

If, as Teltumbde says, caste identities only come into existence under exogenous pressure, what do we make of the received view on the caste system, which tells us that Indians are divided into five caste categories of Brahmin, Kshatriya, Vaishya, Shudra and Panchama (the fifth, Panchama, is sometimes left out since these communities are, according to the received view, literally "outcaste", i.e., considered so low as to be outside the caste system)? What do we make of ideas such as Brahmanism, or adjectives such as Brahmanical, which purportedly stem from the Brahmin caste-category or varna, its value system and practices, when, if Teltumbde is right, on closer scrutiny we may find that Brahmin, the varna from which the practice / social evil of Brahmanism is supposed to originate, just divides itself infinitely into castes and sub-castes and sub-sub-castes further compounded by staggering regional variation? If Dalit (or lower-caste, or ex-untouchable, or scheduled caste, the label is inconsequential) is not a viable entity, then can Brahmin / Kshatriya / Vaishya be? If there is no common Dalit practice or experience, can there be a common Brahmin / upper-caste practice or experience?

Before we dismiss these questions by claiming that upper-caste communities are characterised by a unique cohesion that eludes Dalits because the latter are dispersed over large areas and usually only one Dalit family practicing a particular caste occupation lives in one village, consider that Brahmins, Kshatriyas and other upper-castes are also characterised by astounding internal heterogeneity. For instance, there are several jatis that call themselves Brahmin – Devrukhe Brahmins, Karade Brahmins, Konkanastha Brahmins, Deshastha Brahmins (Deshastha Brahmins have a further subdivision between Yajurvedi and Rugvedi Brahmins), Sanketi Brahmins, Halenadu Karnataka Brahmins, Shivalli Smartha Brahmins, Panchagrama Brahmins, Nambudiri Brahmins, Hussaini Brahmins, Maithil Brahmins of Nepal, Gangaputra Brahmins, Goud Saraswat Brahmins…the list can be continued endlessly. Amongst this abundance of Brahmin castes, there are some castes of Brahmins from whom other communities such as OBCs and other Brahmin castes do not accept cooked food or water (Srinivas 1997, pp. 170–171), a practice considered the hallmark of untouchability. Furthermore, there is also the distinction between the right and left handed castes, where, as M.N. Srinivas writes, "… a 'right hand' dalit would claim to be higher not only to the 'left hand' dalit but a brahmin of the 'left hand' division" (Srinivas 2003, p. 456).

It is no wonder then that Dalit politics is in crisis. This is a politics claiming to represent a section of society which, if Teltumbde is right, is not one or any section at all. Based on his description of caste heterogeneity we can go further and raise the question: In the face of pervasive heterogeneity amongst caste groups, does it make sense to describe / study Indian society as made up of caste "groups" in the first place?

4.2. Impact of economic upliftment on Dalit communities

If vote-bank politics and the entrenched divisions amongst various Dalit communities and between Dalit and OBC communities is responsible for the crisis in Dalit politics, Teltumbde (2020a, 2020b) argues that globalisation and the liberalisation of India's economy has transformed the Dalit populace itself, rendering it amenable to the overtures of the Sangh Parivar. Guru makes a similar argument, linking economic improvement to upper-caste, middle-class aspirations amongst Dalit communities, though he credits the economic upliftment of Dalits and the emergence of a Dalit middle class to State policies such as reservation (Guru 2017). As Teltumbde and Guru write, the new (according to them) Dalit middle class have markedly different wants and needs than their rural brethren. They are less likely to support radical politics for social reform and are also less likely to identify with the identity of Dalits as an oppressed people. Instead, this new class of Dalits seeks a part in the proud and assertive Hindu identity being promoted by the Hindutva movement. Seeing their urban co-communalists benefit from the neoliberal order ushered in by India's economic liberalisation, Teltumbde argues that rural Dalits too seek similar goals, rendering them less enthusiastic about revolutionary politics and eager to find a better life for themselves within the status-quo, which again (as the explanation goes) drives them towards organisations such as the Sangh Parivar.

What do we make of this explanation? If the possibility of economic betterment, or the fact of it, leads to Dalit communities supporting the Sangh Parivar, this would indicate that it is their economic condition / aspirations that play a decisive role in their political / ideological preferences, not their caste disadvantages or caste consciousness. If this is the case, it puts into question another important tenet of the received view on the caste system, namely, that economic betterment does not remove caste disadvantages because these operate according to an arbitrary birth-based caste hierarchy and are agnostic to a person's economic condition.

This is further compounded by the manner in which the political, social and economic ascendence of other castes is discussed in academic discourse. Take for instance Ornit Shani's description of the rise of the Patels as an influential community in Gujarat. In her *Communalism, Caste and Hindu Nationalism: The Violence in Gujarat*, Shani discusses successive political, administrative, and economic developments that led to the rise of the Patels. As a result of these socio-economic shifts, Shani concludes, "The Patel caste, shudras by Hindu law, emerged as an economic and political force, and was able to attain the *savarna*" (Shani 2007, p. 151) (Italics in original). In the glossary Shani explains savarna as "a generic term for upper-caste Hindus (also referred to as twice-born or Caste Hindus)".

If the Patels, a Shudra caste, were able to "attain the savarna", i.e., were able to become upper caste as a result of economic, social, and political gains, is the same thing happening to the new (according to scholars such as Teltumbde and Guru) Dalit middle class? According to the received view on the caste system this is not possible, since, as stated above, caste disadvantages or caste hierarchy are indifferent to economic conditions, especially for Dalits. However, the link between economic betterment and support for an allegedly Brahmanical organisation such as the Sangh Parivar leads us precisely to such a conclusion.

4.3. Wooing of Dalit and OBC Communities by the Sangh Parivar

The third explanation for the Hindutva movement's popularity amongst Dalit and OBC communities deals directly with the Sangh Parivar. Critics claim that the Sangh is purposefully, aggressively wooing Dalit and OBC communities as part of its larger Brahmanical agenda. One of its most successful strategies, they argue, is the Sangh's appropriation and manipulation of Dalit and OBC culture and cultural icons (Louis 2000, Bhatt 2001, Jaffrelot 2007, Narayan 2009, 2021, Salam 2018, Teltumbde 2020b). The BJP's and RSS's re-imagination of Ambedkar as a Hindutva visionary and their use of local caste heroes in political rhetoric and even whilst naming trains and public welfare schemes are cited as instances of this appropriation and manipulation.

Badri Narayan makes perhaps one of the most detailed (and balanced) analysis of this alleged strategy (Narayan 2009, 2021). On the whole Narayan's work gives the impression that by simply being present or active where SC or OBC communities are concentrated, the Hindutva movement and its forces are appropriating and manipulating these communities. Interestingly, this is his description of the BJP and Sangh Parivar's presence in Dalit and OBC localities and villages:

> The BJP and the Sangh Parivar's well-thought-out programme to include and appropriate OBC and Dalit communities in Hindutva politics is based on strategies, such as providing political representation and symbolic inclusion. The BJP government under Narendra Modi is also working to transform these marginalized communities into aspirational communities that may go beyond their caste identity. The distribution and dissemination of state-led policies, programmes and benefits is creating aspirations among underdeveloped and marginalized people to develop themselves and acquire democratic benefits with the help of the state. (Narayan 2021, Conclusion, paragraph 3)

Surely, "providing political representation and symbolic inclusion" to marginalised communities, enabling them to "go beyond their caste identity" in the cynical identity / vote-bank politics of India, distributing and disseminating "state-led policies, programmes and benefits", thus helping "marginalized people to develop themselves and acquire democratic benefits with the help of the state", all these should count as instances of a democracy that is fulfilling its purpose? Since this is Narayan's description of the Sangh Parivar's "well-thought-out programme to include and appropriate OBC and Dalit communities", and since it is unclear what is wrong with such actions or policies (indeed, prima facie it would appear these are laudable efforts), what then is Narayan's criticism of this programme to "include and appropriate OBC and Dalit communities"? In his work Narayan makes it clear that he takes exception not with the actions but with the actor, i.e., he is critical not of the Sangh's policies amongst Dalit and OBC communities, but rather, of the fact that these are the *Sangh's* policies. For instance, he writes:

> … ambivalence in the collective memory provides a fertile ground for the reconstruction and recreation of the collective memory of different castes for the politics of power. It is interesting that the emancipatory Dalit memories that are being reinvented and reinterpreted by BSP and other Ambedkarite political groups and the creation of saffron Dalit memories by the BJP are being done through the same strategies and devices (…). But the difference between the strategies of these two kinds of political forces lies in the result, as mentioned earlier. In the process of political mobilisation, one [the BJP] produces racial communal politics which empowers a

> powerful section of the society, while the other tries to provide opportunity to the powerless Dalits in the power and welfare politics. (Narayan 2009, p. 36)

Narayan's work is unique in that it makes explicit what remains implicit in most other works on the Hindutva movement. As he shows in his book, the cultural manipulation strategies of the Sangh Parivar are by no means unique to it. These are common practices in the vote-bank politics of India (one can go so far as to question what manipulation is taking place in these practices, and whether it makes sense to speak of them as manipulation at all). Making his stance explicitly clear, he expresses regret that Left organisations are missing opportunities to use Dalit and OBC culture to mobilise these communities towards their own ideology and politics (Narayan 2009, 155).

Let us consider Narayan's reasons for this criticism of the Sangh. As Narayan writes, the Sangh's success leads to "racial communal politics". What does he mean by racial communal politics? The first, the criticism of racial politics, is rooted in the hotly disputed Aryan Invasion Theory, which posits that a foreign people, the Aryans, invaded India and in their capture of the subcontinent, relegated its original inhabitants to lower positions within their own foreign system of hierarchy, which is known today as the caste system. This view on the caste system's origin thus argues that upper- and lower-caste communities are in fact two different races, the latter being oppressed by the former who are descendants of foreign invaders. This idea was a central tenet of the study of India for centuries and remains widespread in popular discourse on India today – it is in fact the foundational logic of the Dravidian movement in southern India (for the history of the Aryan Invasion Theory and debate on the issue, see: Bryant 2001, Keppens and De Roover 2014, 2020).

This then, is what Narayan is drawing from when he states that the Sangh's success amongst Dalit and OBC groups leads to a racial politics. What remains unclear however, is how the Sangh's politics could be racial when the Sangh in fact argues strongly against the Aryan Invasion Theory, denies the allegedly different racial origins of upper- and lower-caste communities and energetically maintains that all Hindus, regardless of caste, are of the same origin. Even here however, it is useful to note that attributing any singular stance to the Sangh is complicated if not impossible. For instance, while today the Sangh staunchly opposes the Aryan Invasion Theory, important ideologues such as Balagangadhar Tilak, Vinayak Damodar Savarkar, and Madhav Sadashiv Golwalkar agreed with the Aryan Invasion theory albeit while giving their own takes on the origin of the Aryans. Interestingly, Ambedkar, the foremost anti-caste ideologue of our time, rubbished the Aryan Invasion Theory (Sharma 2005).

The second aspect of Narayan's argument, that the success of the Sangh amongst Dalit and OBC communities leads to communal politics, is relatively clearer. The Sangh Parivar is criticised for practicing communal politics that pits different religious communities against each other, particularly Hindus against minorities such as Muslims and Christians. When Narayan refers to communal politics, he is referring to the argument that in the process of wooing Dalit and OBC communities, the Sangh Parivar also makes these communities anti-Muslim or anti-Christian. Politics as practiced by caste-based parties, which would, ordinarily, pit different castes against one another, or as practiced by Left groups which would, at least theoretically, pit different classes

against each other, does not result, according to Narayan, in the communal politics that arises from the success of the Sangh Parivar.

Even though with these reasons Narayan explicitly explains why he takes exception with the success of the Sangh Parivar, the question he sets out to address remains all the more unanswered. If the strategies of the Sangh Parivar are the same as those of their "competitors" such as caste-based or Left parties, why have the efforts of the Sangh succeeded against all others? This is doubly compounded by the anomaly this "explanation" of the Sangh's success set out to address – how can the Hindutva movement be the choice of those it seeks to oppress?

5. Conclusion

Focused only on arguments criticising the Hindutva movement as a Brahmanical phenomenon, one could conclude that such criticisms of the movement build a weak case for the indictment they hand down. The next step would be to say we need to build a stronger case by doing better, more in-depth research, by gathering more and better evidence. However, as this article has attempted to show, there are fundamental problems with the criticism of the Hindutva movement as Brahmanical.

To begin with, it raises more problems than solves. Arguments claiming the Hindutva movement is Brahmanical are either based on arbitrary / incomplete data, such as the claim that the Sangha Parivar is against caste-based reservations, or they betray a deep confusion over the nature of caste and the caste system themselves. For instance, the argument that the Sangh Parivar's opposition to conversion is proof of its Brahmanism i) betrays academic and popular knowledge on caste in Indian Islam and Indian Christianity, and ii) even when it is argued from a markedly different standpoint (de-linking of caste and religion), leads to conclusions such as the universal existence of caste and the caste system while also contradicting a foundational idea in the received story about the caste system, namely that it is agnostic to economic status. From such an understanding of caste it is not too far a leap to wonder that if poverty and landlessness are defining aspects of Dalit / lower-caste communities and if caste is based on, among other secular things, economic status and ownership of means of production, then perhaps Dalit / lower-caste communities are understood correctly as the poor of a society and that the caste system refers to the unequal distribution of wealth. In other words that, like all other countries in the world, India is an economically unequal society and that if the caste system refers to anything it refers to this fact.[6]

This is a surprising (though by no means new) conclusion. It is all the more remarkable that arguments describing the Hindutva movement as Brahmanical lead to such conclusions when taken to their logical end.

Taking a completely different route, we find ourselves returning to this conclusion again while following explanations for the Hindutva movement's success amongst Dalit and OBC communities, such as the claim that economic upliftment has created a new Dalit middle class amenable to the overtures of the Hindutva movement.

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[6] Again, I am not claiming that this is the case, I am only pointing out that the idea of caste as based on secular factors such as economic status leads us to this conclusion.

Perhaps the most striking insight, however, comes directly from a critic of the Hindutva movement. Anand Teltumbde writes that Dalit is not a viable entity because there is no shared Dalit experience. He claims that caste identities exist only under exogenous pressure and on their own, split endlessly into sub-caste and sub-sub-castes. This observation naturally leads to the question, if there is no Dalit identity / experience, can there be a Brahmin / Kshatriya / Vaishya experience? And if not, then what do these caste groups refer to? And what is the "system" these caste groups are allegedly components of?

Thus, descriptions of the Hindutva movement as Brahmanical and explanations for the movement's anomalous success amongst Dalit and OBC communities lead to multiple fundamental questions to / contradictions of the received view on the caste system, which in turn is the foundation of everything from terms such as "Brahmanical", "Brahmanism", upper-caste and lower-caste to the description of the Hindutva movement as Brahmanism itself.

If the description of the Hindutva movement as Brahmanical demonstrates a pervasive confusion about what caste and the caste system are, it follows that the description does not tell us anything about the Hindutva movement itself either. The inefficacy of Brahmanical as a descriptive category indicates this. Similarly, Badri Narayan's work demonstrates that while academic discourse enumerates the many common strategies of the Sangh Parivar and its ideological rivals amidst Dalit and OBC communities, it is as yet unable to tell us why it is the Sangh's efforts that succeed more than any other organisation.

Thus, even as academic discourse on the movement denounces the Hindutva movement as Brahmanical, two central, vital questions of its enquiry remains unanswered: how can Hindutva, an allegedly Brahmanical movement, be the choice of those it seeks to oppress? And, underlying this, the more fundamental question: The Hindutva movement, what is it?

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