



The Association for  
Asian Studies

---

What Is Happening to Caste? A View from Some North Indian Villages

Author(s): Anirudh Krishna

Source: *The Journal of Asian Studies*, Vol. 62, No. 4 (Nov., 2003), pp. 1171-1193

Published by: [Association for Asian Studies](#)

Stable URL: <http://www.jstor.org/stable/3591763>

Accessed: 09/01/2014 19:44

---

Your use of the JSTOR archive indicates your acceptance of the Terms & Conditions of Use, available at  
<http://www.jstor.org/page/info/about/policies/terms.jsp>

JSTOR is a not-for-profit service that helps scholars, researchers, and students discover, use, and build upon a wide range of content in a trusted digital archive. We use information technology and tools to increase productivity and facilitate new forms of scholarship. For more information about JSTOR, please contact [support@jstor.org](mailto:support@jstor.org).



Association for Asian Studies is collaborating with JSTOR to digitize, preserve and extend access to *The Journal of Asian Studies*.

<http://www.jstor.org>

# What Is Happening to Caste? A View from Some North Indian Villages

ANIRUDH KRISHNA

**T**HE ROLE OF CASTE IN INDIAN politics is undergoing considerable change. Caste and patron-client links have been regarded traditionally as the building blocks of political organization in India (Brass 1994; Manor 1997; Migdal 1988; Kothari 1988; Weiner 1967), and vertical and horizontal mobilizations by patrons and caste leaders, respectively, have been important influences on political outcomes (Rudolph and Rudolph 1967). There are indications, however, that the influence of patronage and caste might have declined considerably in recent years:

[National-level] survey data reveal some important facts that run counter to the conventional wisdom on voter behavior. . . . In 1996, 75 percent of the sample said they were not guided by anyone in their voting decision. . . . Of the 25 percent who sought advice, only 7 percent sought it from caste and community leaders . . . that is, *less than 2 percent of the electorate got direct advice on how to vote from caste and community leaders*. . . . The most important survey data show the change over time. In 1971, 51 percent of the respondents agreed that it was “important to vote the way your caste/community does” (30 percent disagreed), but in 1996 the percentages were reversed: 51 percent disagreed with that statement (29 percent agreed). . . . In 1998, “caste and community” was seen as an issue by only 5.5 percent of the respondents in one poll . . . and [it] ranked last of nine issues in another. All the evidence points to the fact that these respondents are correct: members of particular castes . . . can be found

Anirudh Krishna (krishna@pps.duke.edu) is Assistant Professor of Public Policy and Political Science at Duke University. He has a Ph.D. in Government from Cornell University. Before turning to academia, he served for thirteen years in the Indian Administrative Service.

An earlier version of this paper was presented at the 2001 Annual Meeting of the American Political Science Association, 30 August–2 September 2001, San Francisco. Earlier versions were also presented at sessions organized by Cornell University; the Institute of Development Studies, Jaipur; Duke University; North Carolina State University; the World Bank; and the chief secretary of the Government of Rajasthan. I would like to thank Arun Agrawal, Hans Blomkvist, Valerie Bunce, Milton Esman, Bob Fisher, Joe Foudy, Ron Herring, Niraja Jayal, Mary Katzenstein, Peter Katzenstein, Atul Kohli, Bishnu Mahapatra, Shail Mayaram, Ellen Mickiewicz, Mick Moore, Philip Oldenburg, David Rueda, K. Sivaramakrishnan, Judith Tandler, Norman Uphoff, Steven Wilkinson, and three anonymous reviewers for comments and helpful advice. I remain solely responsible for any errors and omissions.

*The Journal of Asian Studies* 62, no. 4 (November 2003):1171–1193.

© 2003 by the Association for Asian Studies, Inc.

voting for every party. . . . It is less and less true that knowing the caste of a voter lets you reliably predict the party he or she will vote for.

(Oldenburg 1999, 13–15, emphasis in original)

Indications concerning the declining political salience of caste are accompanied, however, by other evidence that tends to support the opposite conclusion. Analysts have shown that there have been deliberate and strategic reconstructions of caste-based alliances in some parts of India, and savvy political entrepreneurs have built effective constituencies for themselves by holding out economic and commercial rewards to their caste fellows (see, for example, Chandra 2000). The rise of the Bahujan Samaj Party in the Indian state of Punjab is attributed, for instance, to initiatives taken by city-based political entrepreneurs who have built a base among their fellow caste members belonging to former untouchable and other lower castes (Chandra 2000). Caste is being reconstructed in these areas as a potent force for political mobilization.

In other areas, however, the evidence points to a declining influence of caste on politics. Reporting on *panchayat* (rural local government) elections held in Uttar Pradesh in summer 2000, for example, Mahi Pal observes: “The caste factor, which has been considered the bedrock of Indian politics, was pushed to a secondary position. . . . In fact, caste character has, to some extent, been [replaced by] group character, comprising different castes and communities having almost similar socio-economic status in rural society and economy” (2000, 3289).

One set of analyses attests, thus, to the decline of caste in Indian politics, but another set demonstrates the continued validity of caste for political choice and political organization. Which of these conclusions is the accurate one? Is caste declining, or is it on the ascendant? Or might the truth be, in fact, more interesting and fine grained? Could caste possibly be gaining renewed strength in some parts of the country while simultaneously losing ground in other parts?

This article is intended to contribute to the accumulating research on this subject. It is based on a body of fieldwork conducted over two years starting in summer of 1997 in a group of sixty-nine villages located in two Indian states, Rajasthan and Madhya Pradesh.<sup>1</sup> Initially I lived for eight months in sixteen Rajasthan villages, and I followed up this period of intensive study with an extensive survey conducted over twelve months in sixty villages in Rajasthan—in the districts of Ajmer, Bhilwara, Rajsamand, Udaipur, and Dungarpur—and nine villages of Mandsaur District in the adjoining state of Madhya Pradesh.

Village selection was purposive. Villages sharing different characteristics—large and small villages, villages located close to major roads and others more remotely situated, majority Scheduled Tribe villages<sup>2</sup> (in Dungarpur District), and others with

<sup>1</sup>The results of this research, intended principally to assess the concept of and examine the utility of social capital in developing country contexts, are reported more fully in Krishna 2002.

<sup>2</sup>“Scheduled Caste” refers to the former untouchables, and “Scheduled Tribe” refers to those who are, loosely speaking, India’s aborigines. India’s constitution, which provides schedules listing specific castes and tribes as “SC” and “ST,” respectively, recognizes these categories. “(Other) Backward Caste” (OBC) is a more recent administrative listing, and it refers to caste groupings that are neither upper caste nor listed in the schedules for SCs and STs. The distinction among SC, ST, and OBC is an important one in the Indian context: members of these groups were historically disempowered and oppressed by other groups, and discrimination against them continues to some extent even at the present time. Specific state benefits, such as positions in the government bureaucracy, are earmarked for members of these groups.

considerable Muslim population (in Ajmer District)—were all covered by this selection. I started this examination initially in Rajasthan, a state that I know quite well—I lived and worked there for thirteen years as a government official, and I understand the local dialects<sup>3</sup>—and I extended the research later to consider villages in Madhya Pradesh. I worked together with a team of eight field investigators, four men and four women, who are themselves village residents and belong to the local area. On average, these investigators have about six years of school education. They are not highly educated, urbanized, or wealthy; and these investigators and their interviewees were quite at ease with one another. The investigators and I trained together for a month before commencing interviews in villages. In all, 2,232 villagers, equally men and women, were selected through a process of random sampling using the latest voters' list for each village, and they were interviewed using questionnaires that I had developed at the end of the intensive phase and had piloted in four villages.

Some part of the sample, no more than 3 to 5 percent in any village, needed to be replaced with other respondents, whose names were drawn from a reserve list prepared at the time of initial sampling. Some people had left the village since the voter list had been compiled, and some (no more than 1 to 2 percent in any village) never existed. Some people had possibly been left off the voter lists. In the sixteen villages that I studied closely and where I lived for a total of six months, however, I do not recall having met anyone, nor did my colleagues come upon any villager, whose name was not found on the voter list. Subject to this extent of sampling error, thus, the sample of 2,232 villagers is representative of the population of these villages.

We conducted interviews mostly in the months of May and June, corresponding to the lean agricultural season. Villagers were interviewed in the security of their own homes, which were identified with the help of schoolchildren and other villagers. Male investigators interviewed the men, while female investigators spoke with the women of these villages.

A separate questionnaire was administered among 408 leaders who were identified by the villagers. Village leaders were identified following a reputational, a positional, and, most important, a functional approach. We asked villagers to identify the following types of individuals in their village: those who occupied official positions, including within panchayats and cooperative societies; others who did not occupy any governmental position but were still regarded as leaders, for example, caste leaders; and persons to whom villagers would go when they needed assistance in connection with one or more activities related to economic, social, or political objectives. The functional approach proved most useful because it helped identify individuals who, although not usually thought of as "leaders," are nevertheless still prime movers of events in the village.

In addition to these village residents, I also interviewed several city-based individuals, including lawyers, doctors, bankers, government officials, and party politicians who are in regular contact with these villages. These persons were interviewed mostly in subdistrict and district towns located closest to these villages, although some senior party organizers and government officials were also interviewed at the state capital.

<sup>3</sup>I was careful, however, to select areas and villages where I had not worked before as a government official. Social and psychological distance is considerable between villagers and government officials, and it was important that villagers recognized me for nothing other than a visiting researcher.

The average population in the sixty-nine villages is 1,089 persons, and the average village area is 867 hectares, about half of which consists of agricultural fields, while the remainder is wasteland, scrub forest, and common grazing grounds (residential areas are tiny in proportion). Agriculture is the principal occupation of the majority of these villagers: 54 percent of all respondents identified themselves as farmers, and another 31 percent identified themselves as farm laborers. Landholdings, however, are quite small overall—1.4 hectares per household, or 0.25 hectares per capita (given average household size of 5.5 persons). Land reforms, especially the breakup of large estates, have tended to reduce inequalities in landownership to some extent. Landownership per capita among upper and middle castes (0.5 hectares), however, is still considerably higher than among Scheduled Castes (SCs) (0.14 hectares) and Scheduled Tribes (STs) (0.18 hectares). A total of 22 percent of all village families are virtually landless, owning less than half a hectare of land in all. On the other hand, less than 1.5 percent of families own tracts larger than 10 hectares, and hardly any family owns more than 25 hectares, so the distribution of landownership is not terribly skewed.

Despite being the villagers' principal occupation, agriculture hardly assures villagers of a reliable livelihood. Agricultural yields vary greatly from year to year on account of scant or untimely rainfall. All villagers keep cattle and other farm animals to insure against low and variable crop yields. In addition, nearly half of all villagers supplement their incomes every year by working as casual and mostly unskilled laborers. A total of 45 percent of all villagers interviewed mentioned that incomes derived from wage labor undertaken for at least one month annually were essential for meeting their household expenses. Many more villagers go looking for such employment in years when the harvest is particularly bad, which is two years out of every five in this region.

People of several different castes live in all of these villages, albeit in distinct caste-denominated neighborhoods, and different caste groups have been living in each village since antiquity. The distribution of political influence among castes, however, has changed considerably in recent years.

Over the last two decades, a new group of non-caste-based political entrepreneurs has emerged, and its rise has been associated with a declining influence of caste on politics. Caste continues to be a primary means of social identification. In terms of political organization, however, other alliances have superseded caste, and caste is no longer very important in these villages.

## New Political Entrepreneurs in Rajasthan and Madhya Pradesh

When political parties campaign for votes in north Indian villages, they can no longer rely exclusively or even primarily on big landlords and caste leaders. These leaders' influence with other villagers has declined considerably, and a new group of non-caste-based political entrepreneurs has emerged, whose role and influence in the village have increased sharply within the past twenty years. Party leaders and organizers increasingly prefer to deal with these new non-caste-based village leaders.

Mangilal Joshi, president of the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) for Udaipur District of Rajasthan, states:

We look for persons of influence in each village. But, the nature of influence has changed. Those persons who are able to get villagers' day-to-day work done in

government offices are gaining most influence in villages. Persons who take a sick villager to the district hospital and who can get doctors to attend properly are remembered by the patient's family for long afterward. Those who can do *jugaad* [liaise effectively] with the police, with the Tahsil,<sup>4</sup> with banks—these are the persons who matter in the village today [rather than those who have more land or high caste rank].

(interview, 9 July 1998)

Sheshmal Pagariya, president of the Congress Party, the other major party in this district, shares a similar view:

The criterion for voting was earlier *jati* [caste], now it is *vikaas* [development]. Development work done in a village has the most effect on voting. People ask us: "What have you done for us? How many new works [projects] can you open? How much labor will be employed?" We cannot watch over development in every village, so we support and rely upon the local worker. We catch hold of these worker-type persons in every village, and we know that the other party will also do the same, so we try to get to them first at election time.

(interview, 12 July 1998)

Chunnilal Garasiya, Congress Party leader and state minister on numerous occasions, profiled typical village leaders as follows:

They are usually between twenty-five and forty years of age . . . [and] educated to about middle school. They read newspapers, have low-level contacts in numerous government offices, and are experienced [in dealing] with the government bureaucracy and with banks, insurance companies, and such like. . . . Their caste does not matter. These new leaders can be of any caste, but they must have knowledge, perseverance, and ability.

(interview, 13 March 1999)

Commonly known in villages as *naye neta* (new leaders) or *naye karyakarta* (new social workers), the new political entrepreneurs have gained considerable influence within the past twenty years. More villagers by far consult the *naye neta* for diverse tasks involving party politics, market brokerage, and interaction with government officials than any other type of leader.

Three sets of factors seem to have contributed to these developments. A vast expansion of rural education has helped produce a supply of younger villagers, especially men, who can liaise effectively with government officials and party organizers. The demand for these types of intermediary services has also increased enormously, especially over the past twenty years.

State expenditures in rural areas have increased fourteenfold in real terms over the last two decades, the government has started numerous new programs and offices, and villagers as well as government officials are keen to find intermediaries who can help transact this new business on behalf of both sides. New leaders have emerged who are more able to obtain these benefits and services from the state, and villagers look to these individuals for assistance, regardless of caste or economic background.

<sup>4</sup>The Tahsil is a subdistrict-level office—a critical feature of the colonial and postcolonial administration—that is responsible for maintaining land records, collecting land revenue, and performing magisterial duties at the local level and, increasingly, diverse other duties, including distributing old-age and disability pensions, supervising famine relief, preparing voters' lists and conducting elections, and so on.

Party organizers provide another source of demand for the new entrepreneurs' services. Weak grassroots organizations have led political parties in India to rely on preexisting social organizations for support. Whereas party organizers relied previously on caste- or patronage-based voting, they now find it more useful to forge links at the village level with the rising group of young and educated leaders. Intensified competition, especially since 1977 (when the Congress Party lost power for the first time in Rajasthan and other states), has provided incentive to each party for reaching out to new leaders with influence among villagers. The old caste-based leadership is no longer the only, or even the primary, contact that party organizers seek when they enter these north Indian villages looking for votes.

The emergence of these new non-caste-based political entrepreneurs is neither an entirely new phenomenon nor is it confined to Rajasthan and Madhya Pradesh. Frederick G. Bailey had anticipated that new forms of leadership would come up when villages opened up to external influences. "Power within the village community is achieved not only in the relationships which exist inside that community," he observed, "there is now an additional resource in the hands of the ambitious man: the relationship which he can establish with the Administrators. He can use this relationship to achieve his ends within the village" (1960, 114–15). As governmental and also, of late, market activity has expanded within rural areas, leadership based on such *outside* connections has gained importance, and it overshadows, in many instances, other forms of leadership that are derived from ethnic or religious groupings *within* the village.

Such new forms of village leadership had started becoming evident in the late 1970s and early 1980s, as G. Ram Reddy and G. Haragopal (1985) and Subrata K. Mitra (1991, 1992) report. James Manor (2000) indicates how such roles by now have become quite widespread in the Indian countryside. What these authors do not report, however, and what I found quite evident in the sixty-nine villages of Rajasthan and Madhya Pradesh, was the effect that these developments were having on caste. As a unit of political organization, caste is now being overshadowed in these villages. The increasing salience of new leaders in the political sphere has been accompanied by the decline of caste as a factor in rural political mobilization.

Incentives emanating from the state are responsible in part for these developments. A vast increase in rural development expenditure and rapid expansion of public education in rural areas help account for the rise of the new village leaders.<sup>5</sup> Societal responses, however, are never entirely conditioned by the state. While incentives from the state are transforming society, simultaneously the newly arisen societal forces are playing their part in transforming the state. The new village leaders are changing the ways in which parties and state officials operate in the countryside. Previously restricted conduits of influence are being widened. More villagers are participating in politics, and more programs of a decentralized nature are being launched to attend to their concerns. The impetus from the state has been refracted by society, and the impetus has been reflected back to influence the state.

Three factors—the spread of education in rural areas, a vast expansion in government program expenditures, and intensified political competition—are

<sup>5</sup>Social legislation by a proactive state has also helped in this process. The intent of legislation, however, is never automatically transformed into action on the ground. Without concurrent accretion of capacity among villagers, this legislation might have remained—as so much legislation does in India—merely in the books, a statement of intent and symbolic action.

Table 1. Distribution of Functional Literacy by Percentage of Villagers with Five or More Years of School Education

Group	Age Group, in years					
	Over 65	55–65	45–55	35–45	25–35	18–25
Upper Castes (n = 326)	32.6	49.5	51.7	58.1	69.9	81.0
Middle Castes (n = 206)	9.3	14.2	21.7	37.8	42.9	50.0
Backward Castes (n = 702)	9.7	27.7	28.7	34.4	55.8	72.0
Scheduled Tribes (n = 410)	0.0	7.4	12.1	14.6	23.9	52.6
Scheduled Castes (n = 254)	0.0	11.7	18.3	23.6	40.4	72.4
<b>Average (all castes)</b>	<b>15.2</b>	<b>22.5</b>	<b>27.6</b>	<b>32.8</b>	<b>48.2</b>	<b>69.6</b>
Gender Gap	25.2	34.4	37.8	36.2	27.8	24.4

Note: Gender gap measures the difference in percentage terms between men and women in each age group.

important to account for the rise of the new village leadership. We cannot say within the confines of this analysis which among these is the most important factor; all three have played a role.

### The Rise and Spread of Education

Commercialization and access to markets have weakened the nexus between caste and occupation. As D. L. Sheth notes, “[a] brahmin dealing in leather or an untouchable dealing in diamonds is no longer looked upon as a social deviant” (Sheth 1999, 2504). Land reform has helped to some extent reduce the economic stranglehold of upper castes. Land reform in Rajasthan, as in other parts of India, however, has hardly equalized land ownership among all villagers (Ladejinsky 1972; Varshney 1995). On the other hand, basic education is becoming much more equally distributed among villagers of different castes.

Upper castes, particularly Brahmins, have historically dominated other castes insofar as education is concerned. Lower castes and even Scheduled Castes, however, are quickly catching up. In terms of functional literacy—the ability to read and write and work out elementary mathematics—the gap between the castes is narrowing rapidly. Especially over the last two decades, lower castes have achieved quite significant gains, as illustrated in table 1. This table presents figures for functional literacy subdivided by caste and age group for the random sample of over two thousand villagers who were consulted for this study in 1999. A person who has gone to school for at least five years is regarded as functionally literate for the purpose of these calculations.

Average literacy figures for all villagers tend to conceal the vast differences that exist between older and younger villagers. Only 30.5 percent of all rural Rajasthanis were literate in 1991 (and 38.5 percent of all Rajasthanis) (GOR 1997, 4), but almost 50 percent of villagers between twenty-five and thirty-five years of age and nearly 70 percent of those aged eighteen to twenty-five years have had five or more years of school education, as is seen from table 1. Villagers who went to school about forty years ago (that is, those who are presently fifty-five to sixty-five years of age) are more educated than other villagers who went to school ten years before them (those aged 65 years or more). The decadal increase in this case is, however, quite small—only



7.3 percentage points. The largest and most significant decadal increase has been registered within the past twenty years. A total of 21.4 percentage points separate eighteen to twenty-five year olds from those aged twenty-five to thirty-five years, and 15.4 percentage points separate the latter cohort from other villagers who attended schools ten years previously (that is, those aged thirty-five to forty-five years). In sum, therefore, functional literacy among villagers between eighteen and twenty-five years of age is about 37 percent higher than among villagers aged thirty-five to forty-five years—and it is almost 55 percent higher than among villagers aged sixty-five years and older.

Younger villagers of all castes have gained rapidly in educational attainment over the past two decades, and Scheduled and Backward Castes (OBCs) have registered a higher rate of increase compared to upper and middle castes. Especially over the last twenty years, the gap in educational achievement has substantially narrowed. Not a single SC or ST person aged over sixty-five years had five or more years of school education, but 72 percent of the members of SCs between eighteen and twenty-five years of age and 53 percent of the members of STs of the same age group are educated to this level. The gap in functional literacy between Scheduled Castes and upper castes is 32.6 percent among villagers aged 65 years and older, and it is 37.8 percent among villagers aged fifty-five to sixty-five years. Among villagers aged eighteen to twenty-five years, however, this gap has narrowed to 8.6 percent. Similarly, the gap between upper castes and Backward Castes, almost 42 percent for villagers between fifty-five and sixty-five years, has narrowed over time, and it is just about 9 percent among eighteen- and twenty-five-year-old villagers.

Even when we consider overall educational achievement—measured as the total number of years of school education—the gap between upper and lower castes has narrowed over time, most rapidly within the past twenty years. On average, upper castes aged between eighteen and twenty-five years have 7.1 years of school education. Scheduled Castes of the same age group have 7.0 years of school education on average—hardly a significant difference compared to fifty years ago. Among villagers aged sixty-five years and older, upper castes have on average 3.6 years of school education, while SCs and OBCs have none at all.

This narrowing of the educational gap between upper and lower castes has had significant consequences upon the distribution of influence and authority within these villages. Educated younger villagers of Backward and Scheduled Castes are less willing to accept without question the authority of the upper castes. Education gives them the ability to forge connections independently with sources of influence and patronage outside the village, and they use their newfound abilities to build independent power bases for themselves. Not all educated villagers have invested in building these connections, as we will see later. Those who have done so, however, have acquired considerable influence within their villages. When they help other villagers connect profitably with diverse markets and state agencies—and especially when they do so without profiteering from these transactions—the new leaders acquire considerable status and regard within their villages.

Relatively few women occupy these roles of new village leaders. Despite the rise of educational attainment overall, a considerable gap separates male and female villagers. This gender gap has narrowed over the generations, but the extent to which it has narrowed is nowhere comparable to the virtual erosion witnessed among different castes. Calculated in terms of functional literacy—percentage of villagers educated five years and beyond—34.4 percentage points separate males from females among villagers aged between fifty-five and sixty-five years. The corresponding gap

among villagers aged forty-five to fifty-five years is 37.8 percent. The gender gap stands at 27.8 percentage points among twenty-five- to thirty-five-year-old villagers, and among those aged eighteen to twenty-five years, it is still quite high: 24.4 percentage points. Although the gap has narrowed somewhat in recent years, there is still a long way to go before equality is achieved between the sexes.

In general, however, younger villagers of all castes are much better educated than their older counterparts. More than 70 percent of villagers aged eighteen to twenty-five years are functionally literate, compared with just 15 percent of villagers aged sixty-five years and older. Higher education levels acquired by younger and lower-caste villagers especially over the last two decades have provided them with a greater ability to deal directly with the complex procedures of state agencies, free of their patrons and caste leaders. In terms of its effects on political organization and political participation, the spread of education in Rajasthan and Madhya Pradesh is having a similar effect as that which was observed earlier for the state of Kerala:

If democracy in Kerala works better than in the rest of India . . . it is in large part because individuals have been equipped with the basic human capabilities required of citizenship. Literacy in Kerala has reached 91 percent, compared with 49 percent for India as a whole. . . . As a direct result, traditionally marginalized groups, most notably women and dalits [SCs and OBCs], have acquired the basic social skills required for informed participation. . . . Caste and community in Kerala continue to be a powerful basis of social identity and civic engagement. But in the realm of politics and in the expression of public authority, these forms of association have been subordinated to broader aggregations.

(Heller 2000, 497–99)

Richard Sisson had anticipated that the spread of education would help produce such democratizing effects: “While participation in the [Congress] party organization [in the 1950s and 1960s] has not been extensive among Scheduled Castes and Tribes,” he observed, “some representatives of these groups have enjoyed [greater] access . . . [particularly] recent recruits who were of higher educational achievement and less dependent upon high-caste patrons than their forefathers” (1972, 315). “New and more assertive leadership from among these groups will no doubt arise,” he predicted, who, because of their higher education levels, “will be less responsive to the paternal cues that have customarily emanated from well-intentioned, high-caste patrons” (323).

Very few newly educated villagers have been successful in procuring jobs in urban areas. According to statistics compiled by the Rajasthan government, 819,362 individuals were registered with employment exchanges at the start of 1996, and an additional 294,164 put in fresh applications during that year, making for a total of over 1,000,000 people seeking jobs in urban occupations. Less than 2 percent of these applicants—only 11,483—were successful in this quest (GOR 1997, 27). The majority of applicants—more than 98 percent—were unable to find jobs in the public or private sectors, and many have returned to their villages, doing what they can to put their talents and education to good use.

Some among these individuals have become new village leaders. A tale narrated by one such person is illustrative in this regard:

After getting primary education in the village school, I rented a room in Udaipur [the district capital] to study in a high school there. After completing high school, I applied for many jobs and I spent a lot of money on these applications, but I did not have “approach” anywhere, so I could not get a job and I returned to the village. I just idled away my time for the first two years. I was sitting by the village well

one day when Bhola Balai asked for my help to fill out an application form for getting an old-age pension from the Tahsil. He asked me to go with him to the Tahsil. "You wear pants [and not a dhoti like other villagers], you can speak without fearing the babus—you read and write," he told me.

So, I went to the Tahsil with him, and the babus there ran circles around me. They ignored me and said they were too busy to help . . . [but] most of the time they were sitting around drinking tea and gossiping. I came back home, tired and humiliated. Bhola came for me again the next day. He would pay my fare, he said, and I was doing nothing anyway, so I went back to the Tahsil. This time I pleaded with the babuji. I sat at his feet and I said I would not leave until my work was done. I waited the whole day, and people laughed at me. I returned again the next day. The babuji asked for some money and I gave it, not much, just a little bit. . . . He taught me how to complete the file. . . . Bhola's pension started two months later. . . .

Other villagers then asked me to help with their work in the Tahsil—to get copies of land records, for registration of land sales, to deal with rent notices, and so on. I kept going back to the same babuji. . . . Then one day I had to do some work in the Panchayat Samiti [another subdistrict office that deals with development programs], so I asked the Tahsil babuji if he had some friend who worked in that office. . . . Now that friend is also a regular contact. I have contacts in many government offices now and also in political parties. . . . If anyone falls ill, I take them on my motorcycle to the Udaipur hospital. I know all the doctors there. I don't charge anything for these services, only what I have to pay from my pocket. Not all government officials ask for money, but there are other expenses—bus fares, tea. . . .

(interview with Devendra Singh, a new leader of Ghodach Village, Udaipur District, 16 June 1998)

State expenditures on rural development programs have expanded greatly over the last twenty years, and a number of new state benefits have become available, particularly for poorer villagers. There is great incentive for villagers to make contact with state agencies and avail themselves of these benefits. Villagers, however, still face a great deal of complexity and bewilderment in making contact with the agencies of the state (Vithal 1997; Robinson 1998). The increased presence of the state in the economic life of villagers has led to a vastly increased demand for intermediaries possessed of bureaucratic know-how and skilled in the fine art of persuading government officials actually to perform the jobs that the public exchequer pays them to perform but which—in this top-down and highly bureaucratic system inherited from colonial times—are hardly ever performed unless pressure or inducements are offered from outside (Migdal 1988).

## Expanding State Programs

Ever since 1971, when Indira Gandhi rode to electoral victory on her slogan of *Garibi hatao* (abolish poverty), all political parties have promised ever increasing antipoverity benefits as a regular part of their election manifesto and funding for rural development schemes has increased continuously. It increased *sevenfold* (in inflation-adjusted terms) in the period between 1980 and 1995 (GOI 1998, S41–43, S63), and it has increased further in recent years. While expenditure on the sixteen schemes classified together as Rural Development was Rs 1.008 billion in Rajasthan in fiscal

year 1992–93, it was more than double this amount just four years later. In fiscal year 1996–97, Rs 2.315 billion were provided for these schemes (GOR 1999, 3).<sup>6</sup>

The largest chunk of these funds is spent on public-works programs intended to construct community assets such as school buildings, approach roads, and health centers. Simultaneously, these projects are intended to provide employment and wages to large numbers in rural areas. In the five-year period of 1992–97, upward of four billion rupees were allocated for various rural employment schemes in Rajasthan, and 104 million person days of employment were generated, or approximately ten days worth of wage employment for every adult who lives in the rural areas.<sup>7</sup>

As these programs have been sustained and expanded continuously for over twenty years now, they have come to form a part of normal life for the ordinary villager. Nearly half of all villagers supplement their incomes every year by working as casual and mostly unskilled laborers. In sixty Rajasthan villages, 861 of 1,898 villagers surveyed—45 percent—stated that additional income derived from working on government projects as casual laborers for at least one month every year was essential for meeting their household expenses. A similar proportion (46 percent) was recorded among 334 villagers interviewed in nine Madhya Pradesh villages. Government-sponsored employment-generating works have come to form an essential lifeline for nearly half of all villagers.

Politicians in rural areas are commonly convinced that “those who can get the votes of the poor . . . will win [elections]” (interview with Dharamnarayan Joshi, divisional organizing secretary of the BJP, Udaipur Division, 16 March 1999), so large and increasing subventions for employment-generating and poverty-reduction programs are a staple diet of election campaigning for all contenders. The manifestos of the two major parties for the 1999 elections to Parliament are virtually indistinguishable in this regard. The ruling BJP-led National Democratic Alliance’s manifesto held out the promise that its “government will measure growth by generation of gainful employment. The Government has decided that ten crore [one hundred million] people should get employment opportunities over the next ten years” (National Democratic Alliance 1999). The opposition Congress Party’s manifesto echoes this promise: “Accelerated employment creation will be the cornerstone of all the Congress’s economic policies and programmes. Jobless growth is socially unacceptable. There is a need to review and revamp such laws and regulations that stand in the way of faster employment generation. We have to create a hundred lakh [ten million] jobs a year” (Indian National Congress 1999)—or one hundred million jobs over ten years, exactly the same number promised by the BJP.<sup>8</sup>

The poor, however, are not the only ones who demand principally economic development benefits from the state. More than 90 percent of villagers selected at

<sup>6</sup>Inflation during this period ran at under 10 percent per year, so very large increases were made in real terms.

<sup>7</sup>Employment-generating schemes of similar scope have also been introduced in other Indian states. In Maharashtra, the Employment Guarantee Scheme generated “nine days of employment for each worker in the rural labor force” in the late 1980s (Echeverri-Gent 1993, 94).

<sup>8</sup>Similarly, both parties also promise to double government outlays on poverty reduction and community-development programs over the next five years. In relation to other economic and social programs, too, very little distinguishes the two major parties. Sudeep Chakravarti compares the manifestos of the BJP and the Congress Party (and also the Left parties and the United Front) and finds convergence as well on many other social and economic issues, particularly as they affect rural areas (1998, 38–40).

random in Rajasthan and Madhya Pradesh (2,078 of 2,232 villagers), including both richer and poorer villagers, mentioned roads, schools, teachers, health centers, water supply, electricity connections, and employment-generating and other similar projects among their five principal demands from the state. Narayan Upadhyaya, Congress Party activist and local labor leader, told me that “now people want a bus to come to their village; they are no longer willing to walk five kilometers. They want electricity to run their pumps [for irrigating fields]. . . . They want schools. . . . If they have a primary school, they want a middle school, . . . [then] a high school. They have seen these things [available] in other villages, so why not in their village? Anyone who can get them these things will have their [political] support” (interview, 20 March 1999).

Parties and candidates respond to these demands and promise development projects to all villages, but these promises are nearly always forgotten once the election is over: “First the Congress candidate came to our village,” recounts Gyarsi Bai (of Balapur Village in Ajmer District) during the 1999 election campaign, “and he promised a new school building for the village. Then the BJP team came and said that [the BJP] would give us a new water tank if it came to power.” In village after village—or at least for those eleven villages where a group of local residents recorded these events on my behalf—candidates competed for votes by holding out promises of more and better material benefits: upgrading school buildings, improving water supply, increasing electric power availability, allocating more funds for employment-creating projects, and so on.<sup>9</sup>

Because all villagers are keen to have development works situated within their village, the budget for rural development has not only been expanded many times, but it has also been fragmented into a large number of tiny parcels that can cover a larger number of villages than before. Government officials are increasingly required to supervise larger numbers of smaller projects spread out over scattered villages, and they are finding it hard to cope with this much-expanded span of supervisory control.<sup>10</sup> Increasingly, officials of different departments have turned to capable villagers for help with informally supervising site implementation on their behalf. One government official recounts his experiences in this regard:

I have been in this [Soil Conservation] department for twenty-one years. First there were large works. Four or five engineers used to work on the same site. Now there are many more sites. Small works have been opened in many villages. Three junior engineers work under me, and my unit has work sites in twenty-four villages, located many kilometers away from each other. It is not easy to get around. I cannot visit any site more than once every month or two months. My junior engineers cannot go

<sup>9</sup>The 1999 parliamentary elections were announced just as I was preparing to return from India after an extended field visit. Since I could not extend my stay (because funds as well as the stock of family goodwill were both running out), I did the next best thing: I requested my friends (“research associates”) in eleven villages to maintain elaborate diaries, recording the details of all campaign declarations made by competing parties in their villages. I am grateful to these eleven persons for doing this task diligently, especially Gyarsi Bai, Nandlal Parmar, and Ramesh Rau, who kept the most elaborate records.

<sup>10</sup>Interviews with government officials in diverse departments concerned with rural construction works attest to the generality of this assertion (interview with L. K. Laddha, Range Forest officer, 12 July 1998; interview with H. K. Sharma, assistant engineer, Irrigation Department, 17 July 1998), and numerous other officials—of the Public Works Department, the State Electricity Board, and the Soil Conservation Department—separately gave evidence of such a change in their work programs.

more than once a week. In between, we have selected local persons to supervise the work. . . . Without their help we cannot achieve our targets. . . . We soon find out when we go to any village who the individuals are who can work on our behalf. Everyone knows who has supervised [labor-generating] works in the past. . . . We had such “mates” earlier also in our large sites, but they worked under our direct supervision. Now we must rely on these individuals much more. They measure and record the work, they take the attendance of laborers, they handle payment.

(interview with assistant engineer, Soil Conservation Department, 10 July 1998)

Accounts that I gathered from officials in many other rural departments attest to a similar trend. K. C. Tak, a medical doctor responsible for family-planning activities in the district of Bhilwara, mentioned how he and his colleagues “cannot achieve our targets unless . . . [some] important villager helps us. We look after these fellows when they bring patients to us at the hospital, and we go to them when we need cases for family-planning targets” (interview, 23 July 1998). A senior banker recounted how bank managers in rural areas need local people who can fill out loan application forms on behalf of other villagers and who can help them recover the loaned amounts (interview with N. K. Singhvi, deputy manager of the State Bank of Bikaner and Jaipur Zonal Office, 10 July 1998). A police officer stated how, because of an expanding work program, “we do not have frequent contact with villagers like we did ten or even twenty years ago. When we go to the scene of a crime, we ask first for individuals with whom we are in constant contact. These are the people who bring cases to us from the village. We help them at that time, and they help us when we go to the village” (interview with Saubhagya Singh, police-station officer in charge, 21 March 1999).

Caste is relatively unimportant for selecting appropriate intermediaries in villages, these findings suggest, and education is vastly more important. The village intermediary is required to understand written rules and procedures, keep records, make payments, and maintain accounts, so he or she must be at least functionally literate. The pool of newly educated younger villagers provides a nearly ideal set of candidates for this purpose, and the vast majority of intermediaries are drawn from this pool. The description of village intermediaries provided by the police official and the banker exactly matched that provided by the doctor, who profiled these individuals as being “about twenty-five to thirty-five years of age, who are educated and who understand the [official] procedures. . . . Their caste,” he averred, “did not matter” for these transactions (interview with Tak, 23 July 1998).

Vastly expanded demand for intermediary services—on the part of villagers *and* on the part of government officials—has been matched by an increasing supply of potentially capable intermediaries produced by the almost concurrent expansion in rural education. The new set of younger and more educated village leaders is involved in multiple transactions outside the village.<sup>11</sup> The great demand for their services gives these new leaders positions of influence within their villages. New leaders,

<sup>11</sup>In addition to dealing with diverse government agencies, the new leaders also mediate on behalf of villagers with a variety of market operators, including insurance agents, lawyers, and wholesale merchants of grain: “Newspapers give prices in different markets. Educated villagers are asked by others about where they can get the best prices. They also bring these educated fellows along to check that the merchant does not cheat them. We cultivate these educated villagers ourselves, for they have become an important link between us [merchants] and our clients [villagers]” (interview with Ramesh Chaudhury, president of Udaipur Chamber of Commerce and Industry and three other grain wholesalers, 23 March 1999).

however, cannot easily use their special connections with state agents and market operators to benefit at the expense of ordinary villagers. The spread of education and information among other, especially younger, villagers has given rise to a more widespread capacity for independent action. Leaders, young or old, can no longer easily deceive a significant percentage of villagers.<sup>12</sup>

Leadership exercised in the spirit of service is more likely to create a fund of obligations. New leaders who have political ambitions or who aspire to higher social status are careful not to overcharge villagers for the services that they provide. Not all new leaders behave in these laudable ways, but a significant percentage—more than half, according to my figures—are in it for the long haul and invest in institution building at the grass-roots level. They acquire status and respect in their village by working seemingly selflessly on behalf of their neighbors—and status and respect are important motivations for people who hail mostly from quite humble origins. The hope of acquiring high political positions in the future also acts as an incentive. Babulal Bor, a *naya neta* of Kundai Village, Udaipur District, recalled his situation as follows:

I have been working for the villagers for about ten years now. It is hard work. People come in the middle of the night, and I cannot refuse them. I take them to the hospital on my motorcycle. I am available to them night and day. I have no time for my family. . . . But, it has become my life now. If a day goes by when no one comes to my door, I cannot sit peacefully. I feel unwanted. . . . We get by all right. I have a small salary for the work that I do for the [state government's] Cooperative Department. I will never be rich, . . . but someday I might be an M.L.A. [member of the State Legislative Assembly]. I came close to getting a ticket [party nomination] the last time [elections were held].

(interview, 16 June 1998)

Their role as intermediaries requires *naya neta* to remain faithful both to villagers and to government officials. They establish their status and leadership in the village by providing regular employment opportunities to laborers (up to 45 percent of all villagers, as we saw earlier), so they are keen to stay in the good graces of government officials who control this work and appoint the village supervisor. Villagers are free to select whom among the newly educated youth they will have as their intermediary, however, so the *naya neta* must keep faith, as well, with fellow villagers. Logar Lal Dangi, a new leader of Nauwa Village, Udaipur District, tells of how this balance is maintained in practice:

I was eight years old, and my mother and father were dead. There was very little land in the family, hardly two *bighas* [one-third of a hectare]. My uncle sent me to school for eight years. Then I had to go to work. I started by helping the village *sarpanch* [elected chairperson of the panchayat]. I supervised labor on [government-sponsored] works implemented by the village panchayat, and I looked after accounts for these construction projects. I could read and write well, and there were few such

<sup>12</sup>Reports of the last twenty years from other parts of India also provide indication of increasing political efficacy among villagers of different backgrounds. "The rural elites are losing some of their powers," concludes Marguerite S. Robinson, writing of rural Andhra Pradesh in the early 1980s, "the vote banks are collapsing. . . . The critical factor is that some members of the central, state, and district bureaucracies and increasing numbers of the poor have both begun to realize that their 'interpreters' have been carefully and systematically distorting their messages in both directions" (1988, 10).

persons at that time in the village who were also willing to stand all day in the sun and work with laborers. Then a new NGO project was started in the area for farm forestry. They looked for a person in the village who knew some official procedures, who could work hard, and who was trusted by laboring villagers.

Trust is important. Many times labor is not paid for weeks after the work is done, so they come to work only on the say-so of someone in the village whom they trust and who can compel these agencies to make payments on time. The NGO supervisor saw me laboring day after day in the hot sun. He came to me and he asked me to lead the new project in the village. . . . After that there have been other projects.

We have a *team* now. . . . Tekaram among the Bhils, Sangram Singh among Rebaris, and others—we all work together. I convince the villagers that the project is sound and that they will be paid fairly, even if the payment is a little delayed. On my guarantee, the village shopkeeper gives *atta* [flour] and other goods to them against future wages. To government officials and NGO supervisors, I promise a loyal and hard-working labor force. We protect these officials from complaints and inquiries—but they must pay the laborers fully and on time.

(interview, 25–26 June 1998)

Like many other new leaders, Dangi has also built up a network of followers, including people from many different castes. The new leaders are concerned about having such a widespread network because this increases the bargaining power that they have vis-à-vis state bureaucrats and party politicians. Government officials need large numbers of laborers in order to implement agency targets, and they are not usually concerned about the castes to which these villagers belong. Party politicians recognize and reward the new leaders according to the numbers of voters whom they can influence. In either case, the new leaders hardly have any incentive to confine their activities to any specific caste or group of castes. Instead, building large crosscutting coalitions within their village is beneficial.

### Intensified Party Competition

Political parties in Rajasthan and Madhya Pradesh do not have any permanent organization that reaches down to the village level. Their lowest-level offices are located at district headquarters. Since there are more than a thousand villages on average in any given district, party officials are poorly positioned to maintain contact regularly with people in villages (Kohli 1990). Parties in India have been constructed from the top down—as in many other new democracies—and party organizers have relied upon preexisting social networks to help bring in the vote. Programmatic differences are relatively minor among the major parties, as we saw earlier,<sup>13</sup> and each party tries to collect its votes by striking a better deal with influential people in villages. Party leaders in north India have traditionally relied upon caste- and patronage-based networks for these purposes (Weiner 1967, 1989; Manor 1990). These alliances are being bypassed of late, however, as party organizers are finding it increasingly worthwhile to make contact with *naye neta* and to take advantage of their increasing influence with other villagers.

<sup>13</sup>“Even nominal reference to ideology and policy are nearly absent from the [appeals of] mainstream parties” (Drèze and Sen 1997, 99). “Membership and party support,” argues Berthold Kuhn, speaking of southern Rajasthan, “are not characterized by adherence to programs or ideologies, but to the purpose of establishing connections” in order to derive economic benefits (1998, 275).



Table 2. Party Strength in Rajasthan State Assembly by Percentage of Seats Won

	1957	1962	1967	1972	1977	1980	1985	1990	1993	1998
Congress	67.6	50.6	56.0	79.3	20.5	66.5	56.5	25.0	38.0	76.5
BJP	4.0	8.5	10.3	4.3		16.0	19.0	42.0	47.5	16.5
Janata Party			7.1		75.0	4.0	5.0			
Janata Dal/Lok Dal						3.5	13.5	27.0	3.0	1.5
Ram Rajya Praishad	9.7	1.7								
Swatantra Party		21.0	19.0	6.0						
Independents and Other Parties	18.8	39.2	26.6	16.3	6.5	10.0	6.0	6.0	11.5	5.5

Note: From 1952 to 1971, the Congress Party was known simply as Congress. In 1971 the party split, and the dominant faction was renamed the Indian Congress. Between 1980 and 1990, the dominant faction was known as the Congress (I). From 1992 on, its name has been the Indian National Congress. The BJP was remade in 1980 from constituents of the earlier Jan Sangh Party that merged in 1977 with the Janata Party. Electoral results before 1977 that were reported against the BJP relate in fact to the Jan Sangh Party (GOR 1998).

Competition among political parties has intensified over the last two decades, particularly since 1977, and the leaders of different parties are acutely aware that they, too, can be in power at the state capital; consequently, parties have intensified their efforts to mobilize votes in the countryside. More than 70 percent of Indians continue to live in villages, and political parties must reach out to and bargain with diverse types of village networks. New and emergent village networks led by new and emergent men (and some women) have come to constitute important targets of opportunity for politicians, and the scope for younger leaders of lower castes to participate in politics has widened as a result.

The dominance of the Congress Party, which regularly formed the government of the state, is obvious until the late 1970s. After the election of 1977, a trend of alternation in power set in that continues until this day (see table 2, which provides the percentage distribution by party of legislators elected to the Rajasthan State Assembly). A longtime participant in local politics explained how the alternation in power at the state capital has been accompanied by significant changes in the grass-roots-level strategies of party organizers:

Politics was a one-sided game [before 1977]. People would put their stamp on whomever got the Congress Party nomination. In 1977, the Janata Party won. . . . Since then, *jagruti* [awareness of issues] has come to the village. Before 1977, people voted on *vishwas* [faith alone]. After that, work and performance have become the primary considerations. . . . Before 1977, when we [Congress Party workers] went into any village, we thought it enough to speak to the Mukhiyas, Patels, and Lambardars [village headmen, caste leaders, and traditional strongmen], and these persons would tell all other villagers to vote in a certain way. Now every villager has to be contacted individually. . . . Individuals have realized that their votes can make a difference to the results. . . . People's concern for development has also increased enormously; *vishwas* has no worth any more. . . . only *vikaas* matters. Even the smallest village wants electricity, a road, a school, a health center—these basic minimum requirements are wanted by all villagers. Leaders are judged by what they can achieve. . . . The M.L.A. and M.P. cannot look after every village personally, so they all rely upon local workers. We can no longer rely on the Mukhiyas and Patels as we did in the past. We look for individuals in the village who understand how government offices work and who can get villagers' work done in these offices. . . .

Youth have come up in large numbers in politics since 1977. Old leaders who were not able to get villagers' work done are now in the corner [i.e., they have been sidelined]. Because no party has any fixed organization in the village, we all have to rely upon these young village workers.

(interview with Bhanwarlal Garg, Congress Party worker for twenty-five years, presently the chairman of its Block Committee for Suvana Block of Bhilwara District and also *pradban* [president] of Panchayat Samiti Suvana, 25 July 1998)

These "young village workers," the *naye neta* in villages, have consequently acquired greater political clout than either caste leaders or traditional patrons. Most villagers readily attest to the political importance that the *naye neta* have acquired. Only 352 villagers (15.7 percent) felt that candidates to the State Legislative Assembly or Parliament would do well to contact caste leaders for mobilizing votes in their villages. A much larger number (1,018, or 54 percent) thought that candidates could gain the most votes by contacting the *naye neta*.

Despite the obvious role that they can play for political parties, however, very few new leaders are keen to tie themselves down to any permanent relationship with a particular political party. Their status in the village depends on obtaining greater economic benefits for villagers, and those who are successful in playing off parties against one another can achieve much higher benefits. Even in terms of their own personal ambitions, these village leaders do not have much to gain through allying themselves loyally with any one party: "Most of these political formations, which serve as instruments of democratization of society, . . . are themselves completely undemocratic in their organizational set-up as well as style of functioning" (Yadav 1996, 100). New leaders are aware that party nominations are not usually awarded in any democratic or transparent manner, and ability ranks alongside, and often below, a host of other characteristics, such as family connections. Parties rely quite a lot upon *naye neta*, particularly at election time, however, and *naye neta* use these occasions as opportunities for obtaining greater development funding for their village. Political parties have been equipping themselves to meet their side of this bargain by enlarging the portion of funds at their disposal.

Members of Parliament voted in 1993 to approve a new M.P. Local Area Development Scheme. Large and increasing budgetary allocations are provided to each parliamentary constituency under this scheme, which are used at the discretion of the area M.P. to finance construction and employment-generating projects in particular villages. Amounts allocated have risen steadily. In fiscal year 1998–99, a sum of Rs 10 million was allocated for this purpose to every M.P. By 1999–2000, the allocation was doubled, and each M.P. was provided with Rs 20 million under this scheme. At the state level, M.L.A.s have voted similar schemes into existence, and the amount allocated to each constituency has increased at a phenomenal rate. In fiscal year 1998–99, each M.L.A. in Rajasthan had recourse to Rs 500,000 that he or she could use to fund development works in villages. For 1999–2000, each M.L.A. was allocated Rs 2.5 million under a newly expanded M.L.A.s' Local Area Development Scheme, an increase of five times over the previous fiscal year.

M.P.s and M.L.A.s utilize these subventions for making political bargains with influential villagers, and *naye neta* play a prominent part in these transactions. Anita Kunwar Sisodiya—of Dhoodalka Village in Mandsaur District and one of few female *naye neta* whom I met—mentioned that education and knowledge of the rules have enabled her to garner a disproportionately large amount of development funds for her village. Because she has been able to unite her village in collective action, overriding

Table 3. Caste Composition of New Leaders (n = 211)

Group	Percent Share in Village Population	Percentage of New Leaders
Upper Caste	16	9
Middle Caste	7	5
Backward Caste	41	49
Scheduled Caste	22	26
Scheduled Tribe	14	11

caste divisions, she has been able to bargain more effectively than other people and than she could before with politicians and government officials (interview, 1 August 1999).

Logar Lal Dangi of Nauwa Village in Udaipur District is another *naya neta* who has successfully played the new game of political exchange, attracting large amounts of money for his village out of politicians' discretionary funds. He has invested in building a team of fellow villagers—"Tekaram among the Bhils, Sangram Singh among Rebaris, and others" of different castes—and this large network is an attractive target for politicians of all parties. Nauwa's residents received more than five times the average allocation from their M.P.'s discretionary funds after they pooled their votes and helped elevate Shanti Lal Chaplot from member of the State Legislative Assembly to member of the national Parliament (interview with Dangi, 26 June 1998).

### Caste and the New Leadership

As historical accounts such as those of Bernard S. Cohn (1969) and Robert E. Frykenberg (1969) inform us, upper castes have traditionally mediated between villagers and the state. Things have changed, however, and upper caste is by itself no longer either necessary or sufficient for performing the kinds of mediation tasks that villagers most require. Another set of qualifications—including education, information, and knowledge of rules and procedures—is more important than caste rank for performing the new set of leadership tasks. Backward as well as Scheduled Caste individuals are equipped as well as—and often better than—upper castes for undertaking these tasks effectively.

The 197 caste- and patronage-based village leaders interviewed for this exercise were found to have only 3.5 years of education on average. Nearly one quarter of these leaders are entirely illiterate. The new set of younger leaders who have emerged in villages in recent years, mostly within the past two decades, have almost three times as much education—9.6 years on average. They are much better informed than the older leaders, and they have more regular contacts with government officials and party politicians.

Compared to their share in village population, SCs and OBCs are better represented than upper castes within the ranks of *naya neta* (see table 3). Upper castes form 16 percent of the population in all sixty-nine villages where these data were collected, but only 9 percent of *naya neta* hail from this caste group. On the other hand, Scheduled Castes constitute 22 percent of village population, but 26 percent of *naya neta* come from this group. Upper- and middle-caste persons are underrep-

resented and Scheduled and Backward Caste persons are overrepresented within the ranks of the new village leadership.

We cannot really determine within the scope of the present inquiry why the caste composition of new leaders should follow such a pattern. Some reasons of a speculative nature, however, can certainly be advanced. Education is a necessary requirement for the new leadership, as we saw earlier, and the dispersal of educational attainment among younger villagers (particularly males) of different caste groups provides part of the explanation. Education by itself, however, does not provide a complete explanation for the caste composition of new village leaders. A certain amount of education is necessary for dealing with the rules and procedures of the state bureaucracy, but higher education does not necessarily confer any greater advantage. A villager with a Ph.D. does not necessarily make a better new leader than someone who has only a middle school education.

In addition to being functionally literate, a new leader also needs to have personal qualities, including perseverance and humility—and a willingness to work hard on behalf of other villagers. To scurry around from office to office, to fill out forms and lobby government officials, to work on officials' behalf supervising construction labor, to fill out forms and keep accounts, to arrange elaborate site visits when officials or politicians come to the village—to do all of these things and also to attend to villagers' everyday concerns—to take a sick person to the hospital (often in the middle of the night) and to keep up one's contacts among doctors, to have someone's government pension approved and paid out in time, to know the associated rules and the people in charge in the Tahsil and Block offices, to secure for someone a loan sanction from a bank (to badger, pester, entreat, implore, threaten, cajole, and bribe, if necessary)—and to do these things day in and day out—is not an easy life. People who are accustomed to privilege and comfort find such lives difficult to lead.

High caste by itself is not very helpful for exercising the kinds of leadership that people in these villages value at the present time, nor does caste provide any viable or attractive means of mobilization for the leaders themselves. Villagers associate themselves with different leaders depending on what these leaders can deliver to them in terms of economic benefits. Jati (caste) is quite unimportant in these transactions, while vikaas (development) plays a larger role. The majority among my random sample of village interviewees confirmed these impressions. When villagers need assistance with any of several different types of transactions outside the village, most—more than 60 percent in each case—prefer to contact the naye neta. Very few of them—less than 20 percent in any case—prefer to contact any other type of leader. Caste leaders have particularly unimportant roles in these transactions, and naye neta play much more useful roles. Table 4 demonstrates that villagers of different castes prefer to contact naye neta—regardless of the caste to which the naya neta belongs. “Naye neta have no caste. They belong to the entire village, and they help everyone in the village, irrespective of caste,” stated Kanhaiya Lal Khator, pradhan of Panchayat Samiti Raipur (interview, 1 August 1999). Not all new leaders are so unselfishly devoted to the welfare of other villagers, but enough people in this category—such as Logar Lal Dangi, Anita Kunwar, and many others—have risen to positions of leadership in these villages, and they have helped construct a new basis for collective mobilization among villagers.

The connection among caste, occupation, and leadership has weakened, as D. L. Sheth observes, and “households within a single caste have not only been greatly differentiated in terms of their occupations, educational and income levels, and lifestyles, but these differences have led them to align outside the caste, with different

Table 4. Demand for Leaders of Different Types by Percentage of Villagers Who Prefer Types of Leaders for Assistance with Different Tasks

Tasks	Types of Leaders				
	Political Party Officials	Traditional Patrons ( <i>Jajmaans</i> )	Elected Panchayat Officials	Caste Leaders	Naye Neta
Dealing with the police or the Tahsil	6.0	3.8	5.3	19.6	61.7
Securing a bank loan or an insurance policy	4.8	14.6	7.2	7.7	62.9
Learning about agricultural technology	5.6	2.6	16.5	10.7	60.5
Replacing a nonperforming schoolteacher	4.4	1.3	17.5	11.3	64.2
Obtaining wage employment	3.5	3.4	11.3	8.2	70.1

Note: Numbers across rows may not add up to 100 percent on account of nonresponse or missing entries.

socio-economic networks and groupings in society—categories which cannot be identified in terms of the caste system” (1999, 2504). The importance to villagers of caste- and patronage-based local leadership has declined considerably as a result.

### So, What Is Happening to Caste?

Caste continues to be a primary source of social identity in these villages, people live in caste-specific neighborhoods, and the clothes that they wear reveal their caste identity. Yet insofar as political organization is concerned, caste no longer has primary importance. Non-caste-based political entrepreneurs are more successful than others in delivering economic benefits and providing avenues for greater political participation, these findings show, and villagers associate with these entrepreneurs regardless of caste or religion.

Might a similar dynamic be leading to the decline of caste as a political factor in other parts of rural India? We certainly cannot make any countrywide predictions based merely on data from these six north Indian districts. Similar factors can produce different results, and the contributory factors identified here—rising education, a huge increase in government expenditure, and intensified party competition—might operate differently in other states.

Data from the latest census show, for example, that, in the ten-year period from 1991 to 2001, the literacy rate in Rajasthan increased from 38.5 percent to 61 percent—the highest gain (22.5 percent) recorded among all Indian states. Madhya Pradesh’s literacy rate increase of 19.4 percent during the same time period is also considerably higher than the all-India average (13.75 percent) (Census of India 2001). State domestic product has also increased faster in Rajasthan over the last two decades as compared to most other Indian states. These refreshing conclusions that comparatively greater progress has been made in states usually regarded to be *bimaru* (sickly) are provided, along with other interesting state-level data and analysis, by Montek S. Ahluwalia (2000).<sup>14</sup> Therefore, trends in political organization in other

<sup>14</sup>I am thankful to an anonymous reviewer for bringing this article to my attention.

parts of India could quite possibly differ significantly from those observed in Rajasthan and Madhya Pradesh. On the other hand, similar trends might also possibly be observed if and when village investigations are carried out elsewhere in India. We cannot really second-guess what the results of detailed field investigations might yield in other rural and urban parts of India. Important to discern in each case will be the microlevel reasons that make individuals in one region or area prefer one form of political organization over another. In each case, leaders and organizations that enable individuals to connect more effectively with the state will tend to have an edge over other kinds of organizations.

Political parties, in theory, should play the role of helping citizens connect with the state, but because parties are only very poorly organized in most parts of India, they are largely incapable of providing villagers with a reliable conduit for upward communication (Kohli 1990, 1997; Kothari 1988; Manor 1990; Varshney 2000). Local governments have provided a viable means in some countries (e.g., Italy and France) for conveying the demands of the people to state officials (Tarrow 1977), but local governments in rural India—the village panchayats—function mostly as implementing agencies on behalf of the central government and are not considered to be very useful for making upward representations on behalf of ordinary villagers (Chhibber 1999; Jain 1993; Mayaram 1998). Alternative organizations are required in this context that can help convey citizens' demands and desires upward to the state. In the absence of effective parties and local governments, different forms of organizations can emerge to assist villagers with these tasks.

Different types of organizations will possibly emerge in different parts of India that will help with the requirement for upward representation. In some places, reconstructed caste-based associations led by savvy political entrepreneurs can arise to represent citizens' demands, while in other places different forms of organization will emerge. In either case, the nature of political organization will need to be explained—it cannot be assumed.

Diverse dynamics might be in place in different parts of India, it appears, and observation of new and emergent forms of political organization that are gaining ground in different parts will be necessary. Broad, macrolevel pictures can be more accurately constructed piece by piece through the assessment of the microfoundations of emergent political organizations. A “palace-eye view” of Indian politics “has hidden from us for far too long the story of popular opposition to designs imposed from above . . . [and] of the participatory upsurge” bubbling up from the grass-roots level (Yadav 1999, 10). A more localized view, such as that represented in this article, can help uncover the contours of the emerging political landscape.

### List of References

- AHLUWALIA, MONTEK S. 2000. “Economic Performance of States in Post-Reforms Period.” *Economic and Political Weekly* 35(19):1637–48.
- BAILEY, FREDERICK G. 1960. *Tribe, Caste, and Nation: A Study of Political Activity and Political Change in Highland Orissa*. Manchester: Manchester University Press.
- BRASS, PAUL. 1994. *The Politics of India since Independence*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- CENSUS OF INDIA. 2001. “Literacy Rate: India.” *Provisional Population Totals*. Office of the Registrar General, India. Accessed 28 August 2003 at [www.censusindia.net/results/provindia3.html](http://www.censusindia.net/results/provindia3.html).

- CHAKRAVARTI, SUDEEP. 1998. "So What's New, Anyway?" *India Today*, 9 February, 38–40.
- CHANDRA, KANCHAN. 2000. "The Transformation of Ethnic Politics in India: The Decline of the Congress and the Rise of the Bahujan Samaj Party in Hoshiarpur." *Journal of Asian Studies* 59(1):26–61.
- CHHIBBER, PRADEEP. 1999. *Democracy without Associations: Transformation of the Party System and Social Cleavage in India*. New Delhi: Vistaar Publications.
- COHN, BERNARD S. 1969. "Structural Change in Indian Rural Society." In *Land Control and Social Structure in Indian History*, edited by Robert. E. Frykenberg. Madison: University of Wisconsin Press.
- DRÈZE, JEAN, and AMARTYA SEN. 1997. *Indian Development: Selected Regional Perspectives*. Delhi: Oxford University Press.
- ECHVERRI-GENT, JOHN. 1993. *The State and the Poor: Public Policy and Political Development in India and the United States*. Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press.
- FRYKENBERG, ROBERT E. 1969. "Village Strength in South India." In *Land Control and Social Structure in Indian History*. Madison: University of Wisconsin Press.
- GOVERNMENT OF INDIA (GOI). 1998. *Indian Economic Survey, 1997–98*. New Delhi: Ministry of Finance, Government of India.
- GOVERNMENT OF RAJASTHAN (GOR). 1997. *Some Facts About Rajasthan*. Jaipur: Directorate of Economics and Statistics, Government of Rajasthan.
- . 1998. *General Elections, 1998, to the 11th Vidhan Sabha*. Jaipur: Election Department, Government of Rajasthan.
- . 1999. *Progress Report: Eighth Five-Year Plan: 1992–1997*. Jaipur: Planning Department, Government of Rajasthan.
- HELLER, PATRICK. 2000. "Degrees of Democracy: Some Comparative Lessons from India." *World Politics* 52(4):484–519.
- INDIAN NATIONAL CONGRESS. 1999. "Manifesto." Accessed 19 September 2003 at [www.congresssandesh.com/manifesto/1999/manifesto6.html#jobs](http://www.congresssandesh.com/manifesto/1999/manifesto6.html#jobs).
- JAIN, S. P. 1993. "Reorganizing Grassroots Institutions for Sustainable Development." *Indian Journal of Public Administration* 39(3):396–405.
- KOHLI, ATUL. 1990. *Democracy and Discontent: India's Growing Crisis of Governability*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- . 1997. "From Breakdown to Order: West Bengal." In *State and Politics in India*, edited by Partha Chatterjee. Delhi: Oxford University Press.
- KOTHARI, RAJNI. 1988. *State Against Democracy: In Search of Humane Governance*. Delhi: Ajanta Publishers.
- KRISHNA, ANIRUDH. 2002. *Active Social Capital: Tracing the Roots of Democracy and Development*. New York: Columbia University Press.
- KUHN, BERTHOLD. 1998. *Participatory Development in Rural India*. New Delhi: Radiant Publishers.
- LADEJINSKY, WOLF. 1972. "Land Ceilings and Land Reforms." *Economic and Political Weekly* 7(7):401–8.
- MANOR, JAMES. 1990. "How and Why Liberal and Representative Politics Emerged in India." *Political Studies* 38(1):20–38.
- . 1997. "Karnataka: Caste, Class, Dominance, and Politics in a Cohesive Society." In *Politics in India*, edited by Sudipta Kaviraj. Delhi: Oxford University Press.
- . 2000. "Small-Time Political Fixers in India's States." *Asian Survey* 40(5):816–35.

- MAYARAM, SHAIL. 1998. "Panchayats and Women: A Study of the Processes Initiated before and after the 73rd Amendment in Rajasthan." Jaipur: Institute of Development Studies. Mimeograph.
- MIGDAL, JOEL S. 1988. *Strong Societies and Weak States*. Princeton: Princeton University Press.
- MITRA, SUBRATA K. 1991. "Room to Maneuver in the Middle: Local Elites, Political Action, and the State in India." *World Politics* 43(3):390–413.
- . 1992. *Power, Protest, and Participation: Local Elites and the Politics of Development in India*. London and New York: Routledge.
- NATIONAL DEMOCRATIC ALLIANCE. 1999. "For a Proud, Prosperous India: An Agenda." Accessed 16 September 2003 at bjp.org.
- OLDENBURG, PHILIP. 1999. *The Thirteenth Election of India's Lok Sabha (House of the People)*. New York: Asia Society. Also available at [www.asiasociety.org/publications/indian\\_elections.13.html](http://www.asiasociety.org/publications/indian_elections.13.html).
- PAL, MAHI. 2000. "Uttar Pradesh Panchayat Elections: From Politics to Tactics." *Economic and Political Weekly* 35(37):3289–91.
- REDDY, G. RAM, and G. HARAGOPAL. 1985. "The Pyraveerkar: The 'Fixer' in Rural India." *Asian Survey* 25(11):1147–62.
- ROBINSON, EVA CHEUNG. 1998. *Greening at the Grassroots: Alternative Forest Strategies in India*. New Delhi: Sage Publications.
- ROBINSON, MARGUERITE S. 1988. *Local Politics: The Law of Fishes: Development through Political Change in Medak District, Andhra Pradesh (South India)*. Delhi: Oxford University Press.
- RUDOLPH, LLOYD I., and SUSANNE HOEBER RUDOLPH. 1967. *The Modernity of Tradition: Political Development in India*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- SHETH, D. L. 1999. "Secularization of Caste and Making of New Middle Class." *Economic and Political Weekly* 34(34–35):2502–10.
- SISSON, RICHARD. 1972. *The Congress Party in Rajasthan: Political Integration and Institution-Building in an Indian State*. Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press.
- TARROW, SIDNEY. 1977. *Between Center and Periphery: Grassroots Politicians in Italy and France*. New Haven: Yale University Press.
- VARSHNEY, ASHUTOSH. 1995. *Democracy, Development, and the Countryside: Urban-Rural Struggles in India*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- . 2000. "Is India Becoming More Democratic?" *Journal of Asian Studies* 59(1):3–25.
- VITHAL, B. P. R. 1997. "Evolving Trends in the Bureaucracy." In *State and Politics in India*, edited by Partha Chatterjee. Delhi: Oxford University Press.
- WEINER, MYRON. 1967. *Party Building in a New Nation: The Indian National Congress*. Chicago: Chicago University Press.
- . 1989. *The Indian Paradox: Essays in Indian Politics*. New Delhi and London: Sage Publications.
- YADAV, YOGENDRA. 1996. "Reconfiguration in Indian Politics: State Assembly Elections, 1993–95." *Economic and Political Weekly* 31(2–3):95–104.
- . 1999. "Politics." In *India Briefing: A Transformative Fifty Years*, edited by Marshall Bouton and Philip Oldenburg. New York: Asia Society.