

From Hierarchy to Ethnicity: Constructing Caste in
Colonial India

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Contents

1	Introduction	1
1	One Caste, Two Strategies	1
2	The Argument	7
3	The Literature	13
4	Measuring Activism	19
5	The Research Design	23
6	The Plan of this Book	27
2	Explaining Identity Activism	29
1	What is Identity Activism?	30
2	Ranked vs. Unranked Identities	34
3	Where Do Identities Come From?	41
4	The Origins of Identity Activism	46
5	The Origins of Ranking	52
6	Conclusion	59
3	Caste in Historical Context	60
1	The Background to Precolonial Identity Politics	61
2	Caste Politics in Precolonial India	66
3	The Background to Colonial Identity Politics	75
4	Colonial Caste Activism	81
5	The Role of the Colonial State	87

6	Conclusion	90
4	Caste in the Census of India	92
1	Caste in the Census	93
2	Petitioning in Context	98
3	Coding Petitions	101
4	The Dataset	106
5	Conclusion	115
5	The Causes of Petitioning	117
1	Modeling Petitioning	118
2	Trends in Petitioning	120
3	Testing Hypotheses One and Two	121
4	Alternative Explanations	126
5	Illustrative Examples	132
6	Conclusion	139
6	The Causes of Ranked Rhetoric in Petitions	141
1	Modeling Ranked Petitioning	142
2	Results	144
3	Alternative Explanations	151
4	Illustrative Examples	154
5	Conclusion	161
7	Conclusion	165
1	Ranking Without Sanskrit	166
2	Caste Identities Since Independence	174
3	Implications for the Literature	180
1	Additional Tables and Figures	200

List of Figures

- 1.1 The Path to Identity Activism 8

- 3.1 Average Male Literacy Rate by Year in India, 1901-1931 76

- 4.1 Proportion of Castes Petitioning for a Name Change, 1901-1931 96

- 5.1 Rate of Petitioning by 1901 Literacy Rate and Years, 1901-1931 121
- 5.2 Kernel Density of Petitioning and Non-Petitioning Groups by Literacy Rate 123
- 5.3 Predicted Rate of Petitioning by Male Literacy Rate 124

- 6.1 Kernel Density Plot of Ranked and Unranked Petitioning Groups by Land
control 146
- 6.2 Kernel Density Plot of Ranked and Unranked Petitioning Groups by Public
Force Employment 148

- A.1 Proportion of Castes Petitioning for a Name Change by Province, 1901-
1931 209

List of Tables

4.1	Census Caste Classification Schemes by Year 1891-1931	95
4.2	Aggregate Number of Petitions by Year	96
4.3	Disaggregated Types of Caste Petition by Year	106
5.1	Number of Petitions by Literacy (Pooled)	122
5.2	Main Results: Logistic Regression with Petition as Dependent Variable . .	125
5.3	Alternative Measures of Participation	127
5.4	Number of Petitions by Caste Status	128
5.5	Province Level Robustness Checks: Logistic Mixed Effects Regression with Petition as Dependent Variable	133
5.6	Caste Level Robustness Checks: Logistic Mixed Effects Regression with Petition as Dependent Variable	134
6.1	Traditional Institutions and Social Ranking: Sequential Logistic Regression	145
6.2	Number of Petitions by Caste Status	150
6.3	Institutions and Social Ranking: Simple Models	151
6.4	Robustness Checks: Sequential Logistic Regression	163
6.5	Robustness Checks: Sequential Logistic Regression	164
A.1	Census Petitions in India 1901-1931	200
A.2	Summary statistics	210
A.3	Traditional Institutions and Social Ranking: Sequential Logistic Regression	211
A.4	Traditional Institutions and Social Ranking: Sequential Logistic Regression	212

A.5 Participatory Institutions and Social Ranking: Sequential Logistic Regression	213
A.6 Traditional Institutions and Social Ranking: Heckman Selection Model . .	214
A.7 Robustness Checks: Subsamples	215

Chapter 1

Introduction

1 One Caste, Two Strategies

In the year 1880, Samuel Sargunar, a deputy registrar in the revenue department of Chingleput District in the far south of India, published a small pamphlet entitled *Dravida Kshatriyas*. The book concerned the social status of the Shanans, a Tamil caste traditionally associated with the disreputable occupation of palm liquor production, but many of whose members had recently become prosperous through their involvement in trade or (as in Sargunar's case) the colonial bureaucracy. Sargunar's argument was that a terrible historical mistake had occurred: The Shanans, instead of being liquor traders, were really kings and warriors, the ancient rulers of all of South India, and had gained their current bad reputation due to a revolt of the "servants" against their natural Shanans masters (Hardgrave 1969: 81-4). The natural solution was for the Shanans to reclaim their former status, by readopting the habits of high caste Hindus.

Over the next three decades, wealthy Shanans enthusiastically took Sargunar's advice. A series of books and genealogies "proved" that the word Shanans was a Tamil synonym for king (Hardgrave 1969: 82-7). Shanans petitioned the colonial census authorities three times to allow themselves as Kshatriyas, and when their petitions were refused many still managed to do so, despite warnings that this would depress the numbers of their own group and raise the numbers of the upper castes (Francis 1902, Molony 1912, Boag

1922). Wealthy Shanans began to wear the sacred thread (the traditional symbol of Hindu Orthodoxy), hire Brahmin priests to perform their ceremonies, practice vegetarianism, discourage widow remarriage, and even tie their dhotis and wear their hair in the upper caste fashion (Hardgrave 1969: 112). Shanana weddings became lavish displays of self-assertion, costing thousands of rupees, with the grooms carried on palanquins by other castes, a traditional mark of kingship. At the same time, the wealthy reformers were at pains to deemphasize their links to those Shanans who remained involved in palm liquor production. Not only did wealthy urban Shanans cease marrying and dining with poorer ones, but they created a system of kangaroo courts to punish with beatings those found to be selling liquor (Hardgrave 1969: 106, 137).

By the 1920s, however, a group of younger Shanana activists, led by W.P.A Soundrapandian, began to question every element of this approach to caste self-assertion. They argued that instead of trying to advance themselves within the caste hierarchy, Shanans should reject it entirely. Brahmin priests and upper caste hairstyles were discarded. Wealthy Nadars began to holding public banquets (where all attendees ate the same food) to emphasize their solidarity with their poor coethnics, as well as holding and financing scholarships for their education through the Nadar caste association, the Nadar Mahajana Sangam (Hardgrave 1969: 170-181). Nadars abandoned ostentatious weddings with Brahmins in favor of “self-respect” weddings officiated by representatives of the Sangam (Templeman 1996: 72-3). All these activities occurred simultaneously with the expansion of the political involvement of the Sangam (notably in the campaigns of Soundrapandian himself for the provincial Legislative Council and local district board), and the demand for affirmative action in government jobs. Over the next few decades, under a variety of party and ideological labels, elite Nadars would use the institutions and groups consciousness developed in this period to win a considerable political power in Tamil Nadu, much of it at the expense of the high caste Hindus they had previous tried to emulate.

The Nadar experience was atypical only in the quality of the archival record. In much of the colonial world, the decades before independence saw a rapid increase in the political importance of ascriptive identities among nascent political elites, with groups large and

small forming organizations, petitioning government bodies and distributing propaganda. For instance, the colonial period saw Yoruba elites in Nigeria begin to organize their political conflicts around ancestral cities (Laitin 1986: 120-3) and the formation of the Malay ethnic category in Malaya (Shamsul 2001). In India in particular, the late colonial period was a golden age of caste activism, during which hundreds of caste sabhas [associations] were formed in all regions of the subcontinent: Between 1901 and 1931, 1130 petitions were filed with the census authorities for a change of caste name. Even more interesting than the general rise in ethnic or caste consciousness was its uneven distribution across groups, with many individuals disdaining narrow ethnic appeals in favor of the broader rhetoric of imperial loyalty or incipient nationalism.

The changing strategies of Shanan activists also underscore a basic change in the way in which ascriptive identity is conceived that has occurred in many countries over the past two centuries. While most scholars today think of ethnic groups as “conceptually autonomous” categories, there were (both in South Asia and elsewhere) many cases of groups that relied on external legitimation and emphasized their similarities to high status groups over their own distinctive characteristics—where upwardly mobile members of poor groups sought to assimilate the values and behaviors of rich ones rather than challenge them. Such “ranked” identities were common in many parts of the world before the industrial revolution. In India, where ranking was highly salient during the colonial era, the gradual evolution of a very different “ethnified” view of identity was one of the key events of the 20th century (Jaffrelot 2000).

This book will describe the causes of the upsurge in colonial caste activism in India, and the strategic choices made by caste activists from upwardly mobile poor groups as to what role caste should play in their political careers. This resolves itself naturally into two questions. Firstly, *why do some identities become the focus for elite activism?* Secondly, *why do some activists participate in maintaining existing ranked identity systems by rejecting opportunities to create a conceptually independent identity of their own?*

1.1 Explaining Identity

The causes of the rise of caste activism have been the focus of scholarly discussion formidable in both quality and quantity. In the past few decades, authors such as Chandra (2004, 2012), Posner (2004, 2005) and Lacina (2014, 2017) have developed sophisticated theories as to how social identities are formed and become politically relevant. They stress the *instrumental* and *constructed* nature of identity. Individuals, choose particular identities to “activate” or “mobilize.” Their choices reflect a desire to gain resources, either by forming ethnic blocs large enough to successful political competition (Lacina 2017, Posner 2005, Bates 1983, Wimmer 1997) or gain some other type of material benefit from the state (Weber 1976, Cassan 2010).

For these authors, the Nadars’ behavior in the 1920s and 1930s is readily explicable, and indeed a textbook demonstration of what ethnic politics should look like. The organization building, the elision of internal differences, the emphasis on common traits, the demand for transfers, and the gradual cooptation of fraternal organizations for electoral ends all reinforce the impression of identity activism is just another political tactic, albeit a somewhat sticky one. All these behaviors parallel the types of mobilization strategies pursued by ethnic groups in Africa, Europe and South-East Asia, and have many affinities to the development of national identities in all parts of the world (Gellner 1983, Anderson 1994).

The Nadars’ behavior in the earlier period, however, is a puzzle for existing theories of ethnic politics. Why should elites emphasize their differences with members of their own group, their most obvious potential political supporters? Why should their activism rely so heavily on the external legitimation of the Hindu tradition? And why should they, rather than claiming a unique history, emphasize their similarity to other groups, even to the point of denying themselves a separate identity?

For contemporary European students of the caste system such as Risely (1892), and for later structuralist scholars such as Louis Dumont (1980[1966]), the answers to these questions would have seemed either obvious or irrelevant. Caste, to these scholars, was fundamentally different from ethnicity or tribe. Castes were subordinate parts of a larger

whole, defined by a single cultural and ideological tradition, itself defined by the sanskritic classics and the primacy of the Brahmin caste. Castes were arranged in a hierarchy from clean (and high-status) to dirty (and low-status) based on their adherence to a set of normative behaviors, and this hierarchical positioning was what defined group boundaries. On this basis, caste was usually held up as the world's best example of a "ranked" identity system (Horowitz 1985).

The structuralist model of caste, however, has a great deal of difficulty accommodating change. If social hierarchy was really a fundamental aspect of Indian civilization, how could the Nadars so blithely defy it in the 20s and 30s, even as they clung to their caste identity? In fact, if hierarchical ideas were as fundamental to caste as the structuralists claimed, even the Nadars' earlier attempts to climb the ladder seemed to embody a worrying degree of fluidity in group status, which is why colonial census superintendents were critical of the Nadar petitions (Francis 1902). Moreover, structuralists had only vague explanations for why a hierarchical identity system would emerge in the first place, particularly after the discrediting of the racial explanations current in the colonial era.

The shortcomings of the structuralist approach were the starting place for a wholesale critique of the literature on identity and colonialism, most associated with the work of Nicholas Dirks (2002, 1993) but also found in the work of other Indianists (Gupta 2000, Bayly 1999, Cohn 1987), and scholars of other parts of the world (Laitin 1986, Berman 1998). These accounts, echoing broader constructivist trends in the social sciences, emphasized the role of the colonial state and the forms of knowledge it developed. British officialdom, in this view, turned fluid and contested concepts (such as caste) into rigid and hegemonic ones. The colonial state used its institutions, particularly the census, to create a set of rigid, mutually exclusive, categories from a far more complex pre-colonial reality. These studies parallel the large existing literature on how states can shape the development of both national and ethnic identities (Brown 2003, Brass 1985, Weber 1976, Miguel 2004, Singh and vom Hau 2016), and on the long-term influence of colonialism on the political and economic patterns of developing societies (Banerjee and Iyer 2005, Iyer 2010, Lee 2017, Lee and Schultz 2012, Acemoglu, Johnson, and Robinson 2001, 2002).

As we will see, there is formidable evidence that colonial states were closely involved in shaping social identities. However, several aspects of the explanation remain puzzling. If colonialism promoted a novel hierarchical form of caste identity, what are we to make of groups (such as, laterally, the Nadars) who both embraced caste identities and derided the hierarchical aspects of the caste system? How can we explain why some elites energetically embraced caste identities while others did not? And how can we reconcile the sustained and enthusiastic engagement of many Indian elites with the concept of caste with the half-hearted, temporary and remote nature of the colonial interventions hypothesized to cause them?

1.2 This Book

This book builds on the insights of these three literatures to explain the changes in identity politics that occurred in the colonial period. Like the ethnic politics literature, it shows the strategic motivations of elites in making specific identities salient. Like the structuralist school, it shows that in many times and places identity is not equivalent to category, and involves a strong hierarchical element. Like the constructivist literature, it shows the relative flexibility of both caste identities and caste hierarchy positioning, and the role of the colonial state in shaping the forms which caste activism took.

These insights are the basis of a new theory of both ethnic mobilization in general and ranked mobilization in particular. Overall, group size (the variable most often mentioned in existing work) is less important than the socio-economic status of castes in predicting of ethnic rhetoric. While educated groups tend to mobilize more than the poor, the most educated groups rarely exhibit ethnic activism. Among groups that do mobilize, the embrace of social ranking is conditioned on the political context. Ranked rhetoric is useful in building patron-client networks, and is thus common in areas with patrimonial institutions. Unranked rhetoric is useful in building large blocs of supporters, and is thus more useful in areas with participatory political institutions. This implies that as education levels rise and elections became more common, we should see both an increase in ethnic mobilization and a decline in the degree to which it uses ranked rhetoric.

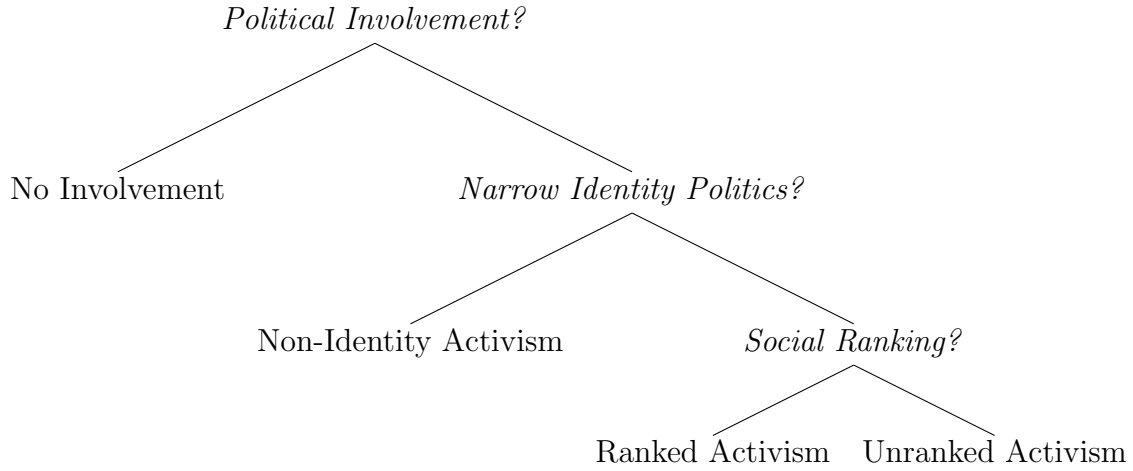
The empirical base of this project is a large panel dataset of the petitions filed by caste groups with the Indian census authorities, a common form of caste activism. The explicit goal of these petitions was to change the way in which the census referred to the group—a goal in which they were almost invariably disappointed. However, petitions provide a window into the complex processes of identity formation that are usually hidden from the historical record. In particular, they represent an index of the presence of an activist group and the rhetoric of that group. The petitions allow, for the first time, the construction of a measure of ranked rhetoric. The panel structure of the data enables comparisons of petitioning behavior within groups or categories of groups, a crucial factor given the many plausible cultural and historical differences between castes.

While the empirics are focused on colonial India, the theory has implications for a wide variety of periods and cases, some of which are discussed below. The theory provides potential answers to some of the most contentious questions in South Asia studies: Why South Asia has historically been so permeated by ranked identities, why caste became more politically relevant in the 20th century, why this increase in salience was accompanied by a decline in its ties to ranking, and why the most educated elites have disdained explicitly caste-based rhetoric? Overall, it suggests that the “modern” concept of an ethnic group as an unranked identity is a product of specific, historically determined, institutional circumstances.

2 The Argument

This book focuses on a set of nested choices made by elites, in particular the elites from traditionally marginalized groups, regarding both their political involvement. They can remain politically uninvolved, become politically involved while emphasizing a broad identity dimension, or choose between ranked or unranked forms of narrow identity activism. These nested decisions are summarized in Figure 1.1:

Figure 1.1: The Path to Identity Activism



2.1 Why Identity Politics?

Individuals possess an almost limitless number of descent-based social attributes, the possession of which divides individuals into ethnic *categories* (Chandra 2012, Laitin 1998). These attributes are organized into *dimensions* of closely related traits, sometimes assumed to be mutually exclusive. In India, for instance, the dimension “caste” includes several thousand individual castes or *jatis*. At any given time, the number of *salient* or *activated* dimensions is much smaller than the number of possible dimensions.

In some cases, the activation of a dimension implies the activation of all its component categories (Chandra 2012, Posner 2005). The activation of the “ancestral city” dimension, for instance, made Yoruba from all ancestral cities value this attribute (Laitin 1986), while the activation of language in Malawi made both Chewas and Timbukus value their identity more (Posner 2004). However, in practice some categories tend to be more salient than others, even within an activated dimension. While caste is a politically salient identity dimension in India, caste is more important to the political alignment of some groups than others. This may reflect other groups’ preference to align on an alternative dimension, such as religion. Alternately, it may simply reflect groups that are not very politicized, or do not use ascriptive traits as a basis for their political decision-making.

Identity shift does not occur spontaneously, and is closely associated with the actions of elites, and of the parties and associations that they control. While elite position taking

is not always associated with mass change, it is often a necessary precondition for it. Elites actively campaign to convince citizens that particular identities are salient: imagining a shared history for the group, defining who constitutes as a member, and promoting certain types of actions as desirable for members. These ideas provide the vocabulary and rules by which ordinary people express their identities. For this reason, most existing work on caste politics has tended to focus on the growth and messaging of caste parties or caste associations rather than individual behavior (e.g. Chandra 2004, Rudolph and Rudolph 1967, Kothari 1970, Jaffrelot 2000). Many accounts of identity shift under colonialism outside of India have also focused on elite activism (Laitin 1986). There is considerable evidence, however, that these elite campaigns did in fact lead to enduring changes in trait salience.

This type of action is especially important for groups (like caste groups in colonial India) which were not able to employ the state as an ally. While the nation builders of 19th century Europe were able to use institutions such as the schools or the army to spread their ideas, caste entrepreneurs were in *most* cases forced to rely on more informal appeals. While the colonial state often provided an extensive vocabulary for describing ethnic divisions (often discouraging nationalism and favoring narrower identities) it used the state apparatus to promote specific categories less often and less effectively than contemporary European states did.

One noticeable form that such an elite campaign can take is the formation of a specifically ethnic political party. However, ethnic and nationalist campaigns can also be organized by ostensibly non-political associations or informal groups. In the colonial period, where party formation was difficult, such non-partisan activist groups played a leading role in identity politics, though they were quick to take advantage of those electoral opportunities that did present themselves.

The most common factors cited in the existing literature to explain elite identity choice are state efforts (discussed above), and potential group size (assumed, at least as a methodological convenience, to be exogenous) (Chandra 2004, Posner 2004). This book supplements these accounts by focusing on the role of *education*, measured at the

group level. While many authors have argued that education influences identity through the content or language of instruction (Posner 2003, Weber 1976, Darden 2013), even politically neutral education can have impacts on identity politics. As groups grow more educated, they are more likely to produce individuals with the literacy, sophistication and disposable time necessary to become involved in politics. Increasing levels of education should thus have a strong initial impact on individual politicization, which should in turn be strongly (though imperfectly) related to group-level politicization.

This argument has many affinities with the literatures on the causes of nationalism (Deutch 1969, Gellner 1983, Anderson 1994), the growth of the nation state more generally (Bendix 1977, Weber 1947) and informal discussion of “backward” groups (Horowitz 1985) which link the socio-economic causes of identity change to the broader phenomena of social modernization. However, these accounts fail to explain why the effects of social change are not apparent in all cases, and why the initial stages of modernization are often accompanied by a resurgence of “traditional” or sub-national identities.

In fact, the effect of education is not linear. As middle-status groups grow more educated, their members become more likely to possess the resources and contacts necessary to be politically successful outside of their own group. Elites balance the negative returns of being associated with a particular group (and alienating other potential supporters), with the positive returns of having a limited but reliable support base. Politicians with a potentially broad appeal are less likely to attempt to activate their narrow ascriptive identities, instead preferring to emphasize broader ascriptive identities, or deemphasize ascriptive identities entirely. Elites from poor groups, by contrast, try to construct narrow categories in which they will not have wealthy and talented political rivals. This is a modification of Posner’s (2004, 2005) argument: While elites do seek to shape identities to maximize the size of their political constituency, this dynamic is balanced by the desire to be the leading figure in a particular constituency.

In colonial India, education had a positive association with political and cultural involvement, but the elites of the very wealthiest groups tended to disdain caste-based position taking. These elites were correspondingly predominant in the Congress and

the colonial bureaucracy, which emphasized identification with broad constructs such as nation and empire as the focus of loyalty.

2.2 Why Ranked Identities?

When predicting identity change, the ethnic politics literature has made a set of implicit assumptions about what ethnic identities look like. In particular, it assumes that the most important aspects of identities are the ways they define group members and non-members. In the language of Abdelal et al. (2006), they focus on “Constitutive Norms,” the rules that define group membership. However, there are other aspects of group identity: Abdelal et al. mention “Relational Comparisons” (Views and beliefs about other identities or groups) and “Cognitive Models” (worldviews or understandings of political and material conditions and interests).

I focus on an aspect of identity that is both relatively understudied in the political science literature and very important in the Indian context: ranking. While the differences between ranked and unranked identities are many and subtle, they are especially different in their approach to intergroup relations. Unranked identities, the “normal” type in the existing literature, emphasize the differences between groups. Unranked groups are “conceptually autonomous:” each could exist without the others, and there is no consensus on which group is superior.

Ranked identities, by contrast, emphasize not differences, but values. Some groups are considered normatively superior to others, and all other groups attempt to imitate their behavior, or even assimilate into the higher group. Rather than distinguishing in and out, ranked identities distinguish high and low. They thus tend to emphasize the relational aspects of identity over its constitutive aspects: Up and down over in and out. These ideas may or may not be tied to some larger ideological or religious project.

Similarly, ranked and unranked identities also differ in their effect on intra-group relations. Within unranked groups, all members of the category are formerly equal, and group leaders are at pains to deemphasize previously salient divisions within the category. Within ranked identity groups, there may be considerable internal variation based on

adherence to the norms of the ranking system, and this may lead to subtle patterns of status differentiation even within groups.¹

Ranking has traditionally been seen as characteristic of caste identities, and as the major difference between caste and other forms of ethnic identity (e.g. Dumont 1980). However, ranking norms are not confined to India. For instance *burakumin* peoples of Japan have an identity defined (at least in the minds of others) by ideas about pollution and status similar to the Indian model (Amos 2011). Similarly, while racial divisions are often been thought of as a rigid binary, outside of the 20th century United States they have encompassed a more subtle and value-driven gradation between black and white, (Telles 2004, Degler 1971, Desdunes 1907, Hickman 1997).

Conversely, today not all Indian caste identities have a strong ranked element, and the recent trend in the political science literature has been to minimize the differences between caste and other types of identity. Others have emphasized the contestation of norms of ranking by traditionally low status groups (Gupta 2000). In practice this difference mirrors two distinct approaches to lower caste activism. One emphasizing the caste's pride in itself and its distinct history, and another (often called "Sanskritization" (Srinivas 1956)) emphasizing the group's high status within the traditional caste hierarchy, and close links to traditionally prestigious groups

Where do these differences come from? The popularity of these approaches differs across time and countries, due to differences in the political system. Unranked identities help build a homogenous support group for an aspiring leader among his peers and coethnics. They are thus politically useful in societies where power is distributed based on popular support: democracies or quasi democracies. The strategy will be especially attractive among larger groups, where the gains from forming a voting bloc are the largest.

Ranked identities, by contrast, help a leader build patron client-ties, both with the elite above him and with clients below him, with the rituals of ranking mirroring and reinforcing hierarchical political relationships. In the same way that the ideology of ethnic pride

¹This definition of ranked identities differs somewhat from the definition provided by Horowitz (1985). See Chapter Two for a more thorough discussion of Horowitz's approach.

or nationalism legitimizes and organizes social and political solidarity, ranked identities legitimize and organize social and political difference. These ties are thus most useful in patrimonial societies, where power is distributed based on personal connections within the elite. Within countries, ranked identities are more popular in rural areas, and in areas with more informal state institutions, the areas where informal patron client ties are more important in structuring political interaction.

3 The Literature

3.1 Mobilization

The causes of campaigns to increase identity salience (or *mobilization*) have been the subject of extensive study. Why do some groups engage in identity-specific political activity while others do not? Why, for instance, is Scottish identity more politically salient than Welsh? Or Yadav identity more political salient than Kahar identity?²

There is no doubt of importance of these questions. Large literatures have shown the influence of identity on voting (Chandra 2004, Huber and Suryanarayan 2016, Ordeshook, and Shvetsova 1994, Carlson 2015, Ichino and Nathan 2013), conflict (Fearon and Laitin 2000, Cederman, Weidmann and Gleditsch 2011, Wilkinson 2006) and public goods provision (Easterly and Levine 1997, Alesina Baqir and Easterly 1999, Miguel 2004, Banerjee and Somanathan 2007, Singh and vom Hau 2016, Singh 2015), though most of these accounts do not directly address the question of origins.

Many scholars have traced the origins of identity politics to the policies of the state, either in favoring some identities over others or by creating the vocabulary in which such identity projects could be expressed (Laitin 1986, 1998, Dirks 2002, Cassan 2010, Weber

²Most of these accounts have tried to explain the salience of broad identity *dimensions* (such as “caste” or “race”) rather than the *categories* within those dimensions (“white” or “brahmin”). Chandra (2012) notes that “A change in identity dimension, furthermore, is typically seen as predicting perfectly which category is likely to become activated.” This tendency has limited the number of hypotheses predicting within-dimension variation in identity mobilization.

1976, Brass 1974, Scott 1998, Luong 2004, Peisakhin 2010). A state might establish benefits that incentivize the adaptation of certain types of identities (Cassan 2010) or set up an educational system that inculcates certain types of identity (Weber 1976, Darden 2013). The Tanzanian state, for instance, is generally thought to have suppressed the expression of ethnic identities and encouraged the development of a broader national identity (Miguel 2004). While such conscious programs of state identity politics are more common among post-independence states, there are also well-attested examples from the colonial era, such as the Yoruba in Nigeria (Laitin 1986) and caste groups in the Punjab (Cassan 2010) .

To explain variation in the identity, state-centered explanations must have variation in the state policy, either at the group or regional level. For this reason, such accounts have trouble explaining cases where differences in mobilization emerge without any heavy-handed propaganda or favoritism by the state. In the colonial Indian case, while colonial policies such as the “martial races” theory and reservations for southern Indian lower caste groups did transfer resources to particular groups, their impact was very modest (both temporally and spatially) relative to the thousands of sizable castes in India. While the rhetoric of caste and the rhetoric of the colonial census was available everywhere, there were sharp differences, both across regions and across groups, in the degree to which Indians engaged with this rhetoric.

Another strand of the literature has focused on the role of democracy, parties and elections in promoting in identity mobilization (Chandra 2004, Eifert, Miguel, and Posner 2010). In this view, ethnic entrepreneurs shape identities in such a way as to create minimal winning coalitions within the population. Ethnicity should thus become more salient during election season, or when the political system becomes more competitive. Certainly, politicians will try, even to the extent of fomenting riots (Wilkinson 2006) to make it more salient in these periods.

One natural extension of this idea is that large groups should mobilize more often than small groups, since a large group is politically more viable than a small one (Kasfir 1979, Posner 2004, 2005, Chandra 2004, Rao and Ban 2007). Members of small categories, in

this view, will seek to join larger categories (or redefine the categories) rather than mobilize a category of below minimal-winning size (Posner 2004, 2005). However, these theories do not discuss the types of pressures in play in spaces with only imperfect democratic institutions, or the types of non-electoral associational activity that are common in these situations, even though ethnicity is often salient in non-democratic contexts. Similarly, ethnic activism is often observed among small groups that have little or no chance of winning an election on their own.

Finally, some authors have emphasized that identities that are highly visible can easily become the basis for distributional decisions, or may have increased cognitive salience (Alcoff 2006). This might, for instance, explain why ethnicity is often more salient than class in poor countries (Chandra 2004). However, such theories cannot explain the expansion of identities, such as caste, where members are often not readily distinguishable from each other physically or behaviorally.

3.2 Ranking

At the same time that some group identity was becoming more salient, it was changing in nature. In particular, ideas of social hierarchy gradually became a less important element in the ascriptive social difference than it had been previously. This trend extended well beyond India, and encompasses shifts such as the gradual shift towards a sharply dyadic view of racial identity in the United States, the decline of cosmopolitan elite identities such as “Ottoman” in favor of national ones, or the decline of caste distinctions in 20th century Japan. Within India, this change in the nature of caste has been widely noted since (Rudolph and Rudolph 1967), and we have a number of accounts of how caste has been “substantialized” (Barnett 1977), “ethnified” (Jaffrelot 2000) or “cultureized” (Natrajan 2011).

What was the nature of this transition? Classic descriptions of ethnic politics have divided ethnic identity systems into two ideal types: Ranked identity systems (in which groups are defined by relationships of superiority and subordination to each other) and Unranked identity systems (in which groups are conceptually autonomous)(Horowitz 1985,

Weber 1958). This distinction is based on the fact that in some identity systems, such as the caste systems of India and the racial systems of the early colonial new world, ethnic group relations are fundamentally structured around status inequality. Although the differences among these types of identities are widely acknowledged among political scientists, there has been little or no theorizing on their functions or causes. In particular, we know very little about why many subaltern groups participate in ranked systems defined by others, and why norms of ranking have gradually declined in many countries.

Ranked identity systems, like the patrimonial systems that gave rise to them, have been found in many parts of the world, particularly before the 19th century. However, India is often seen an extreme example of a ranked identity system, where religiously-legitimated ideals of social ranking have been pervasive for a long time. However even when writing about India, the contemporary political science literature on ethnic politics has tended to deemphasize ranking in favor of making larger causal statements applicable to all forms of ethnic politics (Chandra 2004:18-19).

This confusion about the relationship between caste and ethnicity reflects the changes in caste identity that have occurred in the 20th century. During this period, many Indians have participated in activist programs that combined modern associational forms and formalized ideology. Some castes emphasized their distinctiveness from other groups and rejected or deemphasized the traditional caste status ordering, while other groups chose to emphasize their hierarchical superiority to other groups, a process which often led them to adopt the values and identities of traditionally high-status caste groups, even to the point of denying their own group's independent existence. Among Indians, this latter strategy is referred to as "Sanskritization," (Srinivas 1966, 1956) while the unranked alternative has attracted names such as "Mandalization." Recognizing this shift, some few scholars have argued that the caste system has changed in nature during the 20th century, becoming "substantialized" (Barnett 1977) or "cultureized" (Natrajan 2011) during the 20th century, losing its attachment to traditional ranking norms. Rudolph and Rudolph (1967) advance a similar argument, with specific reference to the political system. None of these authors, however, advance theories of why this change occurred.

The debate on the origins of ranking and the causes of its decline has become bound up with the often contentious debate over “cause” or “origin” of caste. Scholars have variously proposed theories based on racial differences or a remote history of Aryan conquest (Risely 1892, Leopold 1974), the importance of economic and occupational specialization (Dubois 1906, Freitas 2010), and the close association of caste within Indian culture and civilization (Dumont 1980[1966]). All of these theories are either difficult to apply outside of India or cannot explain historical variation within India, or both.

To explain this puzzle, many authors have focused on the colonial state (Dirks 2002, Srinavas 1966, Cohn 1960, Gupta 2000). As Dirks (2002) and Cohn (1987) showed, colonial preoccupations (both scholarly and political) with caste identity shaped the process of sanskritization. Most notably the Census of India provided important legitimation for their efforts. However, colonial policies and ideologies, since they affected India as a whole, can at best provide only a partial explanation for sanskritization. Moreover, given the emphasis on ranking in most colonial accounts of caste, such theories have difficulty with the fact that many caste groups rejected or ignored sanskritic categories, a trend that has only accelerated since independence. While ideas about ranking (and the broader language of the sanskritic caste system) were widely known in early 20th century India, their appeal seemed to differ considerably among social groups.

3.3 Constructivism vs. Primordialism

In discussing the origins of political identities, this book must intervene in two bitterly fought scholarly feuds, one within the literature on identity politics and nationalism, and one within the literature on caste. In the first dispute, primordialists, who see ascriptive identities as being inherently important influences on political behavior, contend with constructivists, who argue that the importance of ascriptive traits is determined by contingent, and often historically recent, political events (Chandra 2012, Laitin 1986, Weber 1976).

The second dispute concerns the nature of caste identities in India, and features the same basic divisions. Scholars such as Max Weber and Louis Dumont have argued that

a fixed caste hierarchy is an essential attribute of South Asian societies and the social behavior of South Asians, while scholars such as Nicholas Dirks, Bernard Cohn and Dipankar Gupta have argued that this hierarchy is far from unchanging, and that many of its most salient attributes are in fact traceable to the colonial period (Dirks 2002, Cohn 1987, Gupta 2000).

This book takes an unapologetically constructivist approach to both these debates. Indeed, much of the book can be seen as providing empirical evidence for the constructivist viewpoint. Even within the comparatively narrow timespan of the late colonial period, there was variation in the articulation of identity politics. Moreover, this variation is related to the social and economic characteristics of groups, rather than their cultural attributes—in fact, much of the variation is within groups (both across time and across regions).

However, the argument makes two assumptions that cause the argument to differ somewhat from “pure” constructivism. Firstly, it focuses on which social identities will become hooks for political activism, rather than the creation of identities from nothing—it assumes that identities *as concepts* have an existence independent of group strategies. In doing so, this book takes as its starting place the existing constructivist literature on caste. These works acknowledge that caste identities (like ascriptive identities in other parts of the world) did exist before the advent of colonialism, though they were often quite different from what we know today (Dirks 1993, Bayly 1999). The colonial state, however, established a set of categories, and a language for understanding these categories, that has been broadly influential ever since (Dirks 2002, Gupta 2000). This book focuses on the next step of the process—how these social categories were utilized by elite Indians. In social science terms, the book examines the endogenous local response to a set of exogenously imposed social distinctions.

Take for instance, the term “Yadav” used to describe a large set of North Indian social groups with some connections to cow herding. This book not question what caused colonial ethnographers to establish these herding groups as a discrete category or the extent to which this division corresponded to a precolonial social reality. It will, however,

question why some members of these groups became involved in activism surrounding this identity category, and why they have come to use the term “Yadav” rather than some of the other possible ethnonyms such as “Ahir.”

A related point concerns the relationship of these identities to ideals of social ranking. The main portion of the argument does not speculate origins of caste as a concept, though in the conclusion does make some suggestions on this question. Rather, its takes for granted that colonial India was a society in which religiously legitimated ideas of social hierarchy were influential. For reasons of convenience, I will at times refer to these ideas as being “sanskritic,” although they have many origins other than the Sanskrit corpus. In this book, we will describe the process by which these ideas were embraced, and at times rejected, by Indian elites, particularly elites not at the top of the hierarchies. The discussion of ranking will thus focus on elite engagement with ideas, rather than the processes by which those ideas were created.

4 Measuring Activism

To test these hypotheses, this book makes uses quantitative techniques, and a novel dataset of Indian caste groups’ interactions with colonial census authorities. This data provides crucial evidence on both the existence of activist groups and the content of their rhetorical strategies: a window into a world of private, vernacular identity activism on which we have little direct evidence in most colonial countries. Read together with other information from the census and the available archival materials, they give us a view into how Indians interacted with the new ideas about caste that were becoming common in the colonial era.

Using the panel structure of the data, we can make a rich an set of comparisons: between different groups with similar traits, between the same group in different states, and between the same group in different years. This approach allows the paper, unlike much of the existing literature on ethnic politics, to isolate economic changes from the many fixed cultural and social differences between groups. For instance, why does caste

identity seem to have been more salient for Kayasths in the United Provinces than Kayasths in Bihar? And why did the Shanans experience such a dramatic reversal in their approach to ranking in the 20th century?

The group-level data supplement existing empirical accounts of ethnic or caste mobilization, which focus on the rise or fall of particular categories of identities (“religion,” “tribe,” “caste” “region”), whether in society as a whole or among a finite set of groups. Unlike these approaches, this data allow to see which groups a mobilized within identities categories that are already potentially salient. Furthermore, they allow us to test effects that might be impossible to test in a small N setting, such as the non-linear effect of socio-economic status.

4.1 Why Colonial India?

The theory suggests that while identity expression is thus a product of economic factors, their content is a product of political ones. These two dynamics give some working hypotheses on why ranked identities have been more prevalent in South Asia than in many other parts of the world, and why the colonial era was a period of increased articulation of both ranked and unranked identities. Identity politics in the pre-colonial India was influenced by two stylized facts: The relatively high levels of wealth among political elites and the weak and unstable nature of their political authority. The first factor gave some social groups the educational and economic resources to construct highly articulated identity systems, while the second factor made it inevitable that these identity systems were largely hierarchical in form.

In the colonial period, this picture was altered by the (slow) expansion of education and the (slower) expansion of political rights. This led economically prominent groups to use their newfound education to strive to improve their status within existing Sanskrit concepts of social ranking. However, hierarchical mobilization was displaced by unranked mobilization in areas with elections. Over time, the intensification of these trends have made unranked caste mobilization very common in post independence India, almost erasing the memory of the ranked approaches that preceded it.

Colonial India was thus a period where education, patrimonialism, and democracy (the independent variables of this book) showed considerable variation across years, groups and regions. The colonial period saw a large number of groups gain the social conditions for mobilization, while the political system was an incongruous mixture of patrimonial and democratic elements. There was a correspondingly high level of variation in the outcome variables. Caste-based activism varied from the apathetic to the enthusiastic, while caste activists took diametrically opposed approaches to the preexisting system of caste ranking.

4.2 Measurement

In the panel dataset, attempted caste mobilization by elites is measured through petitions submitted by caste organizations to the colonial census authorities demanding a change of name, a common strategy of caste activists in this period. While they are an imperfect and partial measure of group activism, these petitions provide evidence about the existence and goals of non-state political activists whose behavior is usually difficult to study in a comprehensive way due to a lack of source material. While petitioners represent a narrow subset of the members of any given caste, they do indicate the existence of a politically aware elite that took its caste identity seriously: In fact the vast majority of petitions appear to have been submitted by formally organized caste associations, and petitioning is the best available index of the existence of such an association.

The petition data also allow an examination of groups' embrace of ranking. To get at this question, the dataset code petitions using the propensity to adopt upper castes group names. Dissolving one's distinctiveness in the high status group is in some ways a prototypical goal of a ranked system: The rough equivalent, in the American context, would be black people petitioning to be reclassified as white.

Information on petitioning is only one element of this dataset. Data on participation in the the Indian National Congress and the colonial bureaucracy allows us to see which groups were prominent in political arenas not tied to caste. Additional models include caste fixed effects and data on census policy changes, ensuring that the results are not a result of the status of groups or colonial intellectual fashions. Finally, data on group

population and occupational distribution allow tests of some of the factors most mentioned in the existing literature.

Education is measured using caste-level literacy rates taken from the census of India. While this measure has a number of limitations (discussed below), it is the best available measure of group socio-economic status. Participatory and patrimonial institutions are measured by the reach of government employment (taken from census data) and the spread of elected local institutions (taken from an original panel dataset of district and local board elections).

This argument will be supported with evidence drawn from the historical literature on South Asia. A general discussion based on secondary sources will show the general connection between patrimonial political institutions and hierarchical conceptions of caste, and education and social activism. This will be supplemented with cases studies of castes whose political role, and involvement with hierarchical norms, changed noticeably during the colonial era.

4.3 Findings

The patterns in the quantitative data generally support the theory. Group-level literacy is positively related to petitioning, but very high levels of literacy are associated with lower levels of petitioning. However, these highly literate groups dominate contemporary arenas of non-caste-based political action, like the colonial bureaucracy and the Congress Party. These findings remain constant when we compare within castes, provinces and years. These findings paint a picture not dissimilar to what we see in India: Caste identity was strong among upwardly mobile middle status groups, while the educated elite favored the broader appeals of religions or nation.

Among petitioning groups, hierarchical rhetoric is dominant among landed groups and groups with few state employees—the groups most exposed to patrimonial institutions. Unranked rhetoric is dominant among large groups in areas with electoral institutions—the groups that stand to gain the most from competition based upon group numbers—though elections have no effect on smaller groups. These findings are robust to controlling