

From Hierarchy to Ethnicity: The Politics of Caste in Twentieth-Century India

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Chapter 1

Introduction

1.1 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 (or *jati* 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.¹

¹Throughout this book, the English term “caste” will be used as a synonym for the Hindi term *jati*, reflecting common practice in South Asia. The majority of Indians are conscious of belonging to a *jati*, of which there are several thousand within India as a whole, several hundred within a given state, and usually one or two dozen within a given village cluster. *Jatis* are defined by endogamy, common stories of origin, and by (widely varying) restrictions on social contact between groups. Most *jatis* also possessed at one time a traditional occupation, and the relative status of *jatis* is often defined by its associated occupation. Many *jatis* are also associated with a single region and religious affiliation, though this is not always the case. Some tribal groups and “communities” of non-Hindus are occasionally considered to be the functional equivalents of *jatis* as primary identity units, especially in political contexts.

The English term “caste” is sometimes used to describe two other categories of identities. *Varnas* are the categories into which society is organized in the Sanskrit texts that form the sacred books of Hinduism. In order of prestige, they are: the Brahmins (priests), the Kshatriyas (warriors), the Vaishyas (traders), and the Shudras (farmers and craftsmen). An informal fifth *varna* is composed of the so-

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 Shanana 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 “Shanana” was a Tamil synonym for king (Hardgrave 1969: 82-7). Shanans petitioned the colonial census authorities three times to allow members of the group to be recorded 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). Some 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 called untouchables. In practice, varnas serve as legitimating super-categories to which jatis seek to attach themselves. While varnas are important in how Indians think about the caste system, there is considerable regional variation in the numerical presence of groups claiming linkages to the three higher varnas, and there is considerable variation in social status within the shudra category.

For statistical and redistributive purposes, social scientists (and, more importantly, the Indian state) group jatis and into categories, such as “scheduled castes,” “other backward classes,” and “upper castes.” While these groupings of somewhat similar groups are sometimes referred to as castes, they are secondary to jati as a focus of political identification (Huber and Suryanarayan 2016), and do not have the long history of social construction characteristic of jati identities.

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 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 group consciousness developed in this period to win considerable political power in Tamil Nadu, much of it at the expense of the high-caste Hindus they had previously 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, 1,130 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. Even seven decades after independence, the caste identities mobilized during this period remain central to political behavior in India, with elections featuring political parties relying on mobilizing caste “vote banks” (Chandra 2004). Prominent examples include Mayawati’s Chamars in Uttar Pradesh, Laloo Prasad Yadav’s Yadavs in Bihar, and Hardik Patel’s Patels in Gujarat. Similar types of identity politics (both violent and non-violent) are found in many poor countries (Horowitz 1985).

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 (Horowitz 1985) 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 (Jaffreot 2000), creating an additive, voting block identity politics that resembles in certain respects ethnic politics in other parts of the world.

This book will describe the causes of the upsurge in caste activism that has occurred in India over the past century, 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?* Finally, it will show how the differential and occasionally ranked nature of identity mobilization in modern India has influenced its society and politics.

Caste as a Puzzle

Non-scholars, particularly outside of India, often do not know what to make of caste. Many features of the caste system seem to set it apart from the forms of social difference with which Europeans and Americans are familiar, including the very large numbers of groups, the religious legitimation, the non-visible markers of difference, the subtle hierarchical relations between groups, and the ties to traditional occupation. This has led many to conclude that caste is distinct from ethnicity, should be analyzed within a different analytical framework from ethnicity, and is unique to the Indian scene. This conception of caste as exceptional is closely related to the idea, popular in the 19th century, that caste would become less salient once India became more “modern” (Marx 1853).

Caste, however, has much more in common with other forms of identity than a casual view would suggest. Virtually every aspect of caste identity has a parallel elsewhere in the world. Non-visible ascriptive differences can still be powerfully motivating, as any visitor to Northern Ireland can attest. Similarly, religious principles have been used to justify a wide variety of systems of ethnic division, including American slavery (Fox-Genovese and Genovese 1987). In fact, many societies outside India feature ranked, religiously legitimated, occupationally associated forms of stratification that closely resemble the caste system. These include the Burakumin minority within Japanese society; the Haratin minority among Maghrebi Arabs; the division between nobles, herdsmen, holy men and artisans within Tuareg society; and systems of clan ranking among the Amhara people. Many further examples could be cited, particularly within sub-Saharan Africa, where craft knowledge or slave origin has been the origin of many minority groups (e.g. Larick 1991). Similarly, caste has failed to fade away over time, and caste identities play a robust political role of in both colonial and post colonial India (Rudolph and Rudolph 1967, Chandra 2004).

These generalizations ignore the enormous variation in the ways that caste identities have been expressed, both over time and between groups. The political role of caste

identities has changed over time, and has always been very uneven between groups and regions, with the mobilization by a single leader around a caste party being the exception rather than the rule. Similarly, in the past century India has moved from a system where ranked ideas of identity enjoyed a prominence probably unique in the world to one where most mobilization is on an unranked basis.

This is not to say that caste identities in India are now conceptually identical to racial identities in the United States or ethnicities in Uganda. Three unique features of caste politics in 21st century India stand out as especially puzzling from a comparative perspective. One is the extraordinary diversity of caste identities: India is thought to have well over four thousand discrete jatis, and jatis that make up more than 10% of a state's population are considered exceptionally numerically powerful. Calculated on a jati basis, India is almost certainly the most ethnically diverse country in the world. Secondly, while identity and socioeconomic status (SES) are highly correlated in many countries, this correlation is especially strong in India, which has the third highest identity-class association in the world (Baldwin and Huber 2010). Finally, while many caste identities form the basis for politicized and consolidated "vote banks," this is not true of all identities, particularly at the extremes of the socioeconomic spectrum. Understanding the way in which caste identities have developed historically is essential to understanding not just the way in which caste has become a more "normal" political identity, but also the ways in which it remains unique.

Identity politics is a well-explored topic. Why do some groups engage in identity-specific political activity (or *mobilize*) while others do not? Why, for instance, is Scottish identity more politically salient than Welsh? Or Yadav identity more political salient than Kahar or Bania identity? The causes of the rise of identity-based activism in the 20th century 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 succeed in political competition (Lacina 2017, Posner 2005, Bates 1983, Wimmer 1997) or gain some other type of material benefit from the state (Weber 1976, Cassan 2015).

For these authors, the mobilization of Nadar identity 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 as just another instrumental 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 with 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 Risley (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 Sanskrit 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. This understanding of caste as a pervasive aspect of Hindu civilization was also influential among Indians, including both those who saw the caste system as a social

good (Yogananda 2003[1946]) and those who saw Brahmin power as deeply illegitimate (Ambedkar 2014[1936]).

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 1920s and 1930s, 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 (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 South Asian states, both before, during, and after colonialism, 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?

This Book

This book builds on the ethnic politics, structuralist and constructivist literatures to explain the changes in identity politics that occurred in 20th century India. 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 caste activism took.

These insights are the basis of a new theory of both ethnic mobilization in general and ranked mobilization in particular. It supplements existing theories of group mobilization that focus on group size and state policy by showing that the socioeconomic status of the group has a non-linear impact on mobilization. It contributes to discussion of ranked identities both by showing how they differ from a simple correlation between power and identity, and showing how this differing mode of constructing identity stems from the structure of political distribution, and the differing incentives of individuals in patrimonial political systems and modern democracies.

The theory provides an explanation for why South Asia has historically been so permeated by ranked identities relative to other parts of the world. It suggests that the hierarchical elements of caste systems, far from being unique to India, are merely an extreme manifestation of trends found in most developing countries. These trends are of more than historical interest: Although ranked identity is now very uncommon in the macropolitical sphere and in urban areas, it has left India two major legacies: A very

high level of identity diversity and a high degree of correlation between identity and socioeconomic status, both factors widely thought to have negative effects on economic development and social conflict (Alesina Baqir and Easterly 1999, Miguel and Gugerty 2005, Alesina and Li Ferrara 2005, Easterly and Levine 1997, Baldwin and Huber 2010, Huber and Suryanarayan 2016).

The argument shows how the uneven spread of caste mobilization and its focus on jati explains several interesting elements of contemporary Indian politics, including the coexistence of a widespread disdain for “casteism” with an equally widespread use of caste as a mobilizing identity (Assayag 1995), and the failure of the economic “rise” of certain traditionally poor caste groups to lead to improvements in descriptive representation (Jaffrelot 2003). In showing how certain group identities became politically important, it provides the background for accounts of how politicians from specific “dominant” caste identities have been able to exercise a controlling influence over public policy in most Indian states (Lee 2019, Srinivas 1994, Frankel and Rao 1989).

Much of the empirical basis for this project is historical and qualitative in nature, reflecting the difficulties of collecting quantitative evidence on events in the pre-colonial period, and the reluctance of either the Indian government or private organizations to collect and publicize quantitative data on caste identities after independence. In the colonial period, however, this approach can be supplemented with 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 and 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 India, the theory has implications for a wide variety

of periods and cases—for example, it provides an example for the much—debated divergence in the forms which racial identity takes in the United States and Latin America (Telles 2004, Degler 1971, Desdunes 1907, Hickman 1997), which it implies reflect differences in political institutions rather than cultural ones. Overall, it suggests that the “modern” concept of an ethnic group as an unranked identity is a product of specific, historically determined, institutional circumstances.

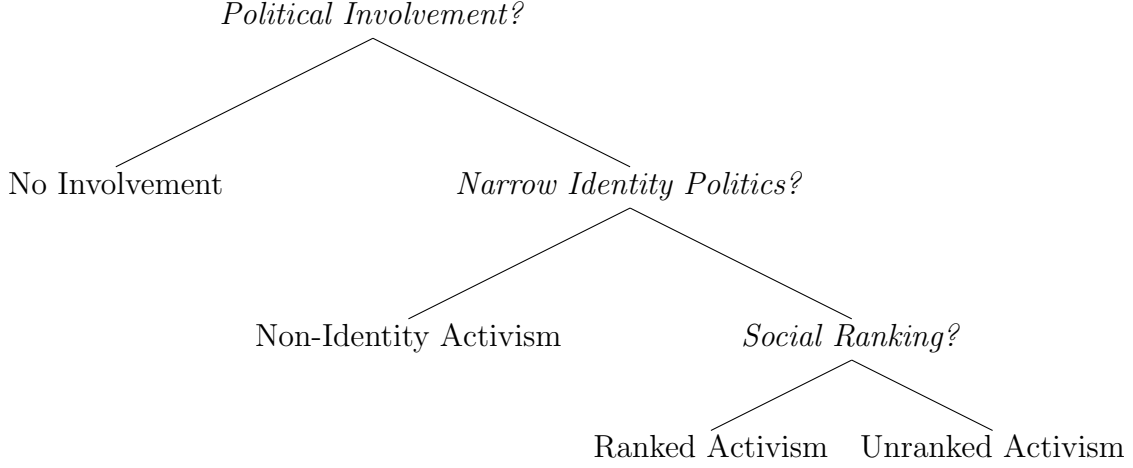
1.2 The Argument

This book focuses on a set of nested choices made by elites, in particular the elites from traditionally marginalized groups, regarding 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: Conditional on identity activism, individuals must choose whether to emphasize ascriptive identities in their political appeals and whether any such appeals should be ranked or unranked. The Nadars, for example, became involved in politics in the 19th century, and choose to focus their political efforts on their narrow caste identity rather than Tamil Nationalism or political Hinduism. In the early 20th century, the form that this activism took shifted from a ranked strategy (tied to the traditional hierarchy) to an unranked one. The meaning of these terms, and the reasons they made these choices, are discussed below.

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 jatis. However, at any given time, the number of *salient* or

Figure 1.1: The Path to Identity Activism



activated dimensions is much smaller than the number of possible dimensions.²

Despite the constructed nature of social identities, there is no doubt of their importance. Large bodies of work have shown the influence of identities, even fairly recent and artificial ones, 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, Lee 2018a), though most of these accounts do not directly address the question of where where these identities come from.

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

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.”

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 activists, 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. Activists actively campaign to convince citizens that particular identities are salient: imagining a shared history for the group, defining who is legitimately 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). Accounts of identity shift outside of India have also focused on activism (Laitin 1986). Note that this does not necessarily mean that the identities “take”—that ordinary individuals adopt them in their political behavior. In many cases, particularly historical ones, answering this question is impossible due to a lack of reliable public opinion or census data. However, in many contexts, the success of these campaigns is demonstrable, in the form of increased voting and identification along group lines.

One noticeable form that such an activist 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, individual leaders, or informal groups. In colonies, 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. Even in the post-independence period, where identity based parties have become possible, many identity politics projects are still pursued by individuals or factions within the context of larger political parties.

This type of associational activity is especially important for groups that are not able to employ the state as an ally. 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 2015, Weber 1976, Brass 1974, Scott 1998, Luong 2004, Peisakhin 2010). A state might establish benefits that incentivize the adoption of certain types of identities (Cassan 2015) or set up an educational system that inculcates certain types of identity (Darden and Grzymala-Busse 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 than neighboring African (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 2015).

The other common factors cited in the existing literature as explanations for mobilization are potential group size (assumed, at least as a methodological convenience, to be exogenous) and democracy. Some contemporary authors have emphasized the importance of democracy, parties and elections in promoting identity mobilization (Chandra 2004, Eifert, Miguel, and Posner 2010, Wilkinson 2006). 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. 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 explain why identity shift sometimes occurs within authoritarian regimes or why ethnic activism is often observed among small groups that have little or no chance of winning an election on their own.³

³Some authors have emphasized that identities that are highly visible can easily become the basis for

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 and Grzymala-Busse 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 socioeconomic 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

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.

to maximize the size of their political constituency, this dynamic is balanced by the desire of rentseeking elites to be the leading figure in a particular constituency. This claim fits what we know about the backgrounds of caste politicians in modern India such as Mulayam Singh and Mayawati or in colonial India such as Sir Chhotu Ram and W.P.A Soundrapandian. They are members of the first educated generation of an upwardly mobile group, who found in caste mobilization a road to political success that their own modest contacts and credentials would have been unlikely to have brought them had they competed with the Brahmin elite on their own terms.

Members of the most educated groups, therefore, may be involved in politics—perhaps even overrepresented—but their group’s identity will not be publicly emphasized, as group members prefer to project identities with a broader appeal. In colonial India, the elites of the most educated groups tended to disdain caste-based position-taking, and 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. In post-independence India, upper caste groups are both less likely to use caste rhetoric and to vote as a block and more likely to support parties based on non-caste social identities, such as the Bharatiya Janata Party and the various Communist Parties.

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).

This book focuses on an aspect of identity that is relatively understudied in the political science literature: ranking. 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.⁴

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 formally 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

⁴Like the discussion of mobilization above, this discussion will focus on variation within a given identity dimension. The main portion of the argument takes for granted that colonial India was a society in which religiously legitimated ideas of social hierarchy existed as an ideological possibility. 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.

adherence to the norms of the ranking system, and this may lead to subtle patterns of status differentiation even within groups.⁵

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 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).

Over time, ideas of social hierarchy gradually became a less important element in the ascriptive social difference than it had been previously. The recent trend in the political science literature has been to emphasize the similarities between caste and other types of identity. (Chandra 2004: 18-19) or to emphasize the contestation of norms of ranking by traditionally low-status groups (Gupta 2000). However, the decline of ranking 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, and the decline of status-based caste distinctions in 20th-century Japan. Within India, this change in the nature of caste has been widely noted (Rudolph and Rudolph 1967), and we have a number of accounts of how caste has been “substantialized” (Barnett 1977), “ethnified” (Jaffrelot 2000), “politicized” (Assayag 1995), or “cultureized” (Natrajan 2011).

In practice this difference mirrors two distinct approaches to lower caste activism. During the early 20th century, many Indians have participated in activist programs that combined modern associational forms and formalized ideology. Some caste activists emphasized their distinctiveness from other groups and rejected or deemphasized the traditional caste status ordering, while other groups chose to emphasize their hierarchical

⁵This 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.

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."

Where do these differences come from? This book suggests that 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 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.

This explanation has several advantages over existing accounts of the ranked nature of identity politics in colonial and pre-colonial India (or, in older work, theories of the "cause" or "origin" of caste). Firstly: This explanation can be applied outside India, unlike theories based on racial differences or a remote history of Aryan conquest (Risley 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]). It also challenges accounts that focus on the role of the colonial state (Dirks 2002, Srinivas 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. 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.

Implications of the Theory

Any book about identity mobilization using Indian data, faces a major challenge in generalizing the findings to the rest of the world. Most notably, the embrace of ranking common in most popular depictions of the caste system seems to make caste *sui generis*. However, some scholars have moved towards the other extreme, and treated caste as being similar to ethnicity, and caste politics as having similar motivations and dynamics as ethnic politics in other parts of the world.

The argument discussed above can be seen as mediating between these two approaches to the external generalizability of India's caste politics. On the one hand, it acknowledges that many aspects of caste identities, particularly before 1947, appear influenced by ranking in very profound ways, while similarly acknowledging that the caste activists of 20th and 21st-century India have little time for these norms. In fact, it shows how and why ranking became less important over time: how caste became ethnicity. While this process is not complete, it has been recent enough that both views of the caste system are consistent with the behavior of specific groups in the 20th century.

By developing for the first time an explicit theory of what ranked identities are and how they emerge, the argument puts the emphasis on social ranking in the political ideologies in pre-1947 India in a comparative context. It shows how they stemmed from a confluence of factors that was unique in its strength in early modern India: A patrimonial political system that rewarded the development of rich and carefully ordered political

networks, and a level of wealth (at least among the elite) high enough to support ritual specialists dedicated to articulating these orders. Where these conditions held in a slightly less intense form, as in many other parts of Asia and the Americas in the early modern period, ranked distinctions that bore a striking resemblance to India's also emerged.

Even if we accept this line of argument, it is unclear why the developments of the colonial and pre-colonial periods are still of interest. After all, if both India and the rest of the world have converged to a situation of fully mobilized unranked categories that closely parallels existing theories of ethnic politics, what's the point of discussing how things were different in the 1820s, or even the 1920s?

This book will show, however, that the uneven, often ranked mobilization of the colonial period has had tangible consequences for modern India. Some of these represent elements of the colonial pattern that never really went away, such as the preferences for members of the most educated castes for political ideologies (nationalism, Hindu nationalism, communism, etc.) that attempt to activate social identities larger than jati, and the persistence of ranked rhetoric (and discrimination based on ranked distinctions) in areas with little exposure to state authority, particularly villages in more isolated parts of subcontinent.

Other effects are more indirect, though possibly more consequential. In particular, India, relative to other parts of the world, is notable both for having very high levels of social diversity (probably the highest levels in the world, if jati is considered to be the relevant social category) and very high levels of economic inequality between groups. Both these facts have been shown to be potentially important for the political economy of countries, and the ability to generate a political consensus to supply public goods (Alesina Baqir and Easterly 1999, Miguel and Gugerty 2005, Easterly and Levine 1997, Baldwin and Huber 2010). Both these facts, however, have obvious connections to the long history of ranked identity mobilization in India. A system where economically advantaged individuals sought to raise their social status by existing their own groups would, over time, lead to the creation of a society with a large number of small groups closely associated with particular rungs of the economic ladder, an effect that would persist long after ranked

rhetoric vanished from high-level politics.

1.3 Measuring Activism

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. Identity politics in 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 has 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.

In post-colonial India, the trends of the colonial period accelerated. Primary education became widespread even among groups and regions that had previously had very low rates

of educational attainment. At the same time, India became a parliamentary democracy, where the ability to win votes became the ultimate criterion for the distribution of political power. These trends led to a reduction in the diversity of ideological strategies pursued by groups—caste-based mobilization became virtually universal (outside of the most highly educated groups) and unranked rhetoric spread widely. The most visible manifestations of these trends, the “rise” of OBC castes to political power in Northern India and the success of explicitly caste-based parties, have been widely discussed (Jaffrelot 2003, Chandra 2004).

These temporal changes in the levels of the independent variables influence the nature of the empirical evidence presented here. In the pre-colonial and post colonial periods, we should expect limited variance in the outcomes of interest; not coincidentally, these periods also have tended to produce only limited quantitative data at the caste level. For this reason, while the book will describe developments in both these periods, it is difficult to make comparisons between groups, particularly on a large scale. To do this, it is necessary to examine the colonial period.

The Colonial Data

This book makes use of a new 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 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 book, 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 supplements existing empirical accounts of ethnic or caste mobilization, which focus on the rise or fall of the salience particular categories of identities (“religion,” “tribe,” “caste” “region”). Unlike these approaches, this data allow to see which groups are mobilized *within* an identity category (caste) that is 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 socioeconomic status.

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 allows an examination of groups’ embrace of ranking. To get at this question, the dataset classifies 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: Rough equivalents in less ranked contexts would involve Welsh communities petitioning to be reclassified as English, Roma petitioning to be reclassified as Romanian, or Iraqi Kurds petitioning to be reclassified as Arab.

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 education, and (given the absence of individual data from this period) of the presence of an educated elite within the group. 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). Data on participation in the Indian National Congress and the colonial bureaucracy allows us to see which groups were prominent in political arenas not tied to caste.

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 for some of the more obvious alternative predictors of ranked mobilization, such as ascribed caste status. It should be noted, however, that the modest number of petitions means that these comparisons have a smaller sample size than the models of mobilization, and are correspondingly less robust.

These findings match the overall patterns we see in petitioning. Overall, petitions rise over time, but proportionally fewer of them seek upper caste names. This parallels larger trends in colonial India towards (relatively) higher levels of political participation and (relatively) higher levels of literacy. Both these trends were especially strong in Southern and Western India and in areas that were under direct British rule, and both the move towards petitioning and the de-emphasis on ranking were especially marked in these areas.

Limitations of the Colonial Data

Like any quantitative study, the petitioning tests trade depth for breadth, sacrificing deep knowledge of particular groups in return for the gains from analyzing a wide variety of cases. The debate between qualitative and quantitative research methodologies is an old one, with persuasive arguments on both sides. Without taking an absolute position in this debate, it is worth mentioning two reasons why a quantitative approach is worth pursuing in this case. The first of these is the sheer dominance of small *n*-studies, both qualitative and quantitative, in the literature on identity.⁶ Many authors examine the competition between two identity dimensions within a single group (Laitin 1986), or variation between a small number of groups within a single region (Posner 2004, Miguel 2004). This approach limits the extent to which we can assess variation in identity mobilization *within* a single dimension, or the extent to which we can identify non-linear or second order effects.

Secondly, in many cases the process of identity activism, particularly historical activism, is poorly served by the archival record, and impossible to survey. Most caste associations were private, often ephemeral organizations with varying levels of institutionalism. As a result, the source base for an in-depth historical study of colonial Indian caste activism in the early 20th century is quite poor. Even the most careful attempts to write a “history from below” of Sanskritization would be dependent on material collected by the colonial state, and would naturally focus on the interactions of these activists with the state, or on post-independence material.

The Census of India was a pioneering work of data gathering, but for that reason much caution is required in interpreting the data (Barrier 1981). Among the most important limitations from our perspective was a non-transparent, arbitrary and inconsistent set of policies for defining caste groups for the tabulation, failure to tabulate caste-level data for many caste-years, and inconsistent definitions of literacy and occupation across years. Even formatting the caste census data in a consistent manner across census years is a difficult problem (Conlon 1981). Chapter Four will explain these issues in greater

⁶Lacina’s (2017) account of language politics in India is a partial exception.

detail, but it should be noted that an extensive set of robustness checks are implemented to ensure that these problems do not effect the reported results. Among many others, the results are robust to excluding particular census years, all castes with substantial population fluctuations, castes affected by definitional changes, and census years with low data quality.⁷

The unit of analysis is the “census” caste, which reflects a categorization by the census authorities of the various names that individuals were gave to the census takers. This does *not* imply that these names correspond exactly to some underlying primordial social reality. However, though the census categories did not necessarily represent “real” groups of people, they did represent categories of people to whom a label was applied. The question in this book is what use the people in these categories made of them. In some cases they sought to challenge them and move into a different category, while in others they sought to reify and inhabit the category. The census categories should be understood more as potential ideological hooks than as real communities (though in some cases, they perhaps were both).

Both the theory and empirics focus on activists. Petitioning, and the organizational work that led to petitioning, were the work of a small, educated minority, both within the groups involved and within Indian society as a whole. Millions of Indians experienced caste in different ways, often ways that were less intellectual and more closely related to patterns of violence and social domination.

However, the actions of these activists are worth studying because they shaped subsequent political events. While names such as “Yadav,” “Adi-Dravid,” and “Bhumihar

⁷A related issue is that individuals were free to move from caste to caste, as long as they could convince census-takers to record them under a different name. While the census bureaucracy made determined efforts to combat this practice (e.g., Edye 1922: 151), there was a certain amount of individual migration from caste to caste (Cassan 2015). This movement, is in accord with the theory, in particular the idea that elites adopting ranked versions of caste identity would attempt to merge into castes above them. However, individual-level identity change would potentially substitute for the type of group-level identity change captured by the petitioning variable. However, the empirical analysis will show that that these strategies tended to complement rather than substitute for each other.

Brahmin” began to be adopted among a small circle of caste activists in the colonial period, they have since that time become central parts of the identity of millions of people (Jaffrelot and Kumar 2012). Similarly, ideas about the relationship between these names, other groups, and the caste hierarchy that emerged in this period influenced the process of group consolidation and alliance formation (vertical, horizontal, etc.) that occurred after independence (Rudolph and Rudolph 1967). Precisely because they were the first people to think of caste using the new vocabulary of the colonial state, the choices that these elites made influenced all who came after them, just as the provision of missionary education in Africa influenced subsequent identity politics (Ranger 1984).

While petitions were filed by individuals, all the census data was collected at the group-level. This means that the submitters of the petition were not necessarily representative of the group as a whole, and group-level data does not describe the distribution of traits within the group. This is an unavoidable problem, given the failure of the census to collect detailed information on the actual submitters. Fortunately, many of the theoretical predictions are unaffected by this problem, since they concern factors at the regional level. Even testing theories about the influence of education using group-level data requires the relatively modest assumption that petitioners in more educated castes are in general better educated than petitioners in less educated castes.

The Post-Colonial World

While the interest of colonial officials in caste divisions had important effects on the strategies of activists, the withdrawal of that interest had serious effects for scholars of caste in India. The Indian government immediately ceased disseminating (though not, in all cases, the collecting) statistics at the jati level. Even the dissemination of information at the category level (especially the strength of the “Other Backward Classes” category) remains politically controversial. Survey data collected by non-governmental bodies can also be problematic in this regard, with collectors even refusing to tackle the problem of categorizing the thousands of confused responses to jati questions, or refusing to make any data available beyond basic tabulations.

For these reasons, the quantitative analysis of the changes of caste politics in the post-1947 period represents a difficult problem. However, several conclusions are possible from the limited data available. Firstly, the political mobilization of jati identities has remained a very common electoral strategy in India, and has, if anything, intensified over time. Caste-based parties have become very popular in some regions, as has voting along caste lines, the use of caste in political rhetoric, and the strategic use of reservation policies as distributive tools. This mobilization has had measurable consequences for both descriptive representation and public policy. Newly educated groups used mobilization along caste lines to enter legislatures and party leadership in increased numbers, while both these groups and more established groups have used their disproportionate political power to influence public policy in ways that favor their group, a point made strongly in Lee (2019).

Secondly, this mobilization has not been even in nature. Many social groups, especially at the extremes of the social scale, do not vote as blocs, are represented (at least explicitly) by no parties, and are often outspoken in their denunciation of caste politics and caste-based distribution. The least educated groups remain underrepresented in politics, despite belonging to social categories whose more mobilized jatis have become more powerful. Caste mobilization thus remains, in an important sense, incomplete. While many Indians condition their political participation along caste lines, others do not, and are critical of the entire idea of caste as a relevant social division.

Finally, the 20th century had seen a precipitous decline in ranking as a political ideology. Deference to upper-caste groups, at least in the political sphere, has collapsed, and even sub-political behaviors associated with ranking, such as the practice of untouchability, are increasingly confined to rural areas. In fact, the rise of reservation policies has created a countervailing set of incentives: Groups now have very good reason to try to appear as “backward,” the result of which has been a strange race to the bottom that parallels many aspects of the colonial experience, with groups (many of whom had claimed high-caste status two generations previously) submitting petitions and applying political pressure in a desperate attempt to be officially deemed disadvantaged. The spectacle of

relatively wealthy groups such as Jats and Patels blocking the roads to assert their own backwardness shows how dramatically the politics of caste have changed over the past century. While the object of the game may still be the acquisition of state resources, the way in which this goal has influenced social identity has undergone a complete transformation.

1.4 Plan of This Book

Chapter Two will develop the theoretical argument of the book. This will involve describing both the existing theoretical debates on the origin of ethnic and caste identities, and developing two novel hypotheses about why some identities become salient. It will then describe in depth the differences between ranked and unranked identities, and discuss where these differences come from.

Chapter Three will discuss the historical background of caste identities in the colonial period. It describes social conditions in pre-modern India, with a particular focus on the two independent variables, state strength and economic growth, and explains how socially ambitious elite groups articulated hierarchical identities both in Hinduism and in other Indian religions. It then explains the changes in caste identities that occurred in the colonial period, giving several detailed examples of caste politicization.

Chapter Four describes the colonial Census of India, which is both a source of quantitative data for the project and one of the factors proposed in the literature as directly causing changes in the development of caste identities. This involves a detailed discussion of the relationship between the colonial census and caste, and examples of how Indians responded to the census. It then discusses the distribution of petitioning behavior across groups, noting how it illustrates the non-linear pattern predicted in Chapter Two. For reasons of space, some of the detailed discussion of the census data, and the extensive robustness checks of the main results, are included in the appendix.

Chapter Five discusses the evidence for the second set of hypotheses, on the origins of ranking. After discussing how ranked rhetoric manifested itself in the colonial census data, it shows how this rhetoric diminished over time, paralleling the rise of political

participation. To show how the argument extends outside India, it also discusses the development of racial identities in the United States and Brazil, showing how the rise of political participation in these countries has been associated with a decline in ranked rhetoric.

Chapter Six continues the story after Indian independence. It shows how the spread of literacy led to the mobilization of caste groups that had previously been unmobilized, and the full integration into the political process of groups that had previously been marginal. Similarly, the democratic character of the new state institutions led to a dramatic reduction in the use of ranked rhetoric, and the presence of ranked norms in the political sphere. These trends were intensified by the emergence of policies that allowed the reservation of jobs and educational opportunities for members of specific caste groups, which both created additional incentives for caste-based mobilization and created strong disincentives for groups to portray themselves as being of high-status.

Chapter Seven concludes with a discussion of the broader importance in the form political identities take, and how the historical prominence of uneven mobilization and ranked rhetoric have influenced contemporary India. It argues that India's high levels of diversity, intergroup inequality and uneven group mobilization are directly traceable to the uneven, ranked mobilization of the colonial period. It also shows how these processes relate to the larger historical processes that have affected both India and the developing world over the past two centuries.