

making sure always to make generous donations to the local mosques, for Eid-ul-Fitr, the feast that comes at the end of Ramadan, the month of fasting, and money for the Ganapati procession, in which the elephant-headed Ganesh is paraded through the streets. "The people want it," he said. "Religion is important to them." Then two large suited men arrived carrying briefcases and desiring to talk to Gawli. He introduced me to them as his lawyers. They help Gawli to keep the state at arm's length. "In my line of work you need lots of lawyers," he said. "Everything is paperwork."

The lingering sandalwood smoke was suddenly replaced by industrial quantities of insect repellent, which small vehicles below were pumping out into the streets. Mumbai had just suffered one of its worst floods in decades, after receiving a record thirty-seven inches of rainfall in one day. The authorities, who had wasted valuable years failing to upgrade the city's sanitation systems, feared an epidemic and were taking no chances. As ever, the state was waking up too late to a problem about which activists and the media had long since warned. We were quickly enshrouded in a cloud of fumes and were forced to retreat indoors. After the air outside had cleared, Gawli took me to his elevator and clasped his hands together in the conventional Indian good-bye. "It has been a pleasure and an honor. May you take the blessings of Shiva," he said, as the elevator doors were closing. The gods may or may not be in sympathy with Gawli. But there are policemen in Mumbai who are certainly not.

3. BATTLES OF THE RIGHTEOUS

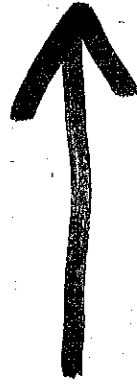
The Rise of India's Lower Castes

The liberation of spirit that has come to India [since 1947] could not come as release alone. In India, with its layer-below layer of distress and cruelty, it had to come as disturbance. It had to come as rage and revolt. India was now a country of a million little mutinies.

V. S. NAIPAUL

There is a Sanskrit word, *dharma*, that appears frequently in India's ancient Hindu texts. It is usually translated as "duty" or "religion." Someone who is dharmic is "righteous." But the word has many layers of meaning.² The ancient texts talk of a dharma of life, in which the individual should always be truthful, respectful of elders, obey the law, and live generously and selflessly. There is also a dharma of governing, in which the king should uphold harmony and stability. And there is a dharma of the universe, which underlines the unity and spirituality of all things.

But it is the dharma of castes that perhaps gives us the best insight into how India's traditional society saw itself. Each caste possessed a different dharma, which specified separate duties and abilities depending on the



caste into which you were born. At the summit was the dharma of the priestly Brahmin caste, which granted these people control over all spiritual and religious aspects of society. They also possessed the "sacred power" of the word, and were the only caste permitted to read and write. Next there was the warrior Kshatriya caste, whose dharma was to command the military and to rule the secular world as kings. If a new dynasty emerged from the wrong caste background, then the Brahmin priests would invent the necessary Kshatriya family tree for it: "Whoever rules is a Kshatriya," say the texts.³ The merchant Vaishya caste follows in the traditional ranking. As we have seen, the Vaishyas were viewed by some of their betters as a caste of "thieves who are not called by the name of thief."⁴ But they had an important dharma to take care of the material needs of society. One of their original roles was to look after the principal currency of ancient India, which was cattle. The cow gradually evolved into a holy animal. Fourth, there is the Sudra caste, who were the farmers, the servants, and sometimes the foot soldiers at the bottom of society. They kept their distance from other castes and were not even permitted to hear the recitation of the sacred Vedic texts. The ancient laws of Manu, which set down caste duties in detail, teach that each caste must rigidly stick to its own dharma: "It is better to do one's own duty badly than another man's well."

Beyond these rankings, and outside of the pale of society, were the outcastes or untouchables, who had no caste name. The texts only mention them in the context of pollution: no other caste should have contact with them. It was forbidden to eat food prepared by an untouchable. Their role was to perform tasks that no other human would consider, such as removing human waste, usually referred to as "night soil," making leather from the carcass of a cow (that had died of natural causes), or sweeping the streets. So polluted were the outcastes that in some parts of India they were required to forewarn others of their approach by clapping two blocks of wood together. Fa Hsien, a Chinese Buddhist traveler to India in

the fifth century AD, recorded his observations of the "pollution on approach" of untouchables. He also wrote that only the untouchables and the other lower orders were permitted to eat meat.⁵ India's texts also prescribed different punishments for the same crime depending on your caste. For example, a Sudra who insulted a Brahmin faced death, whereas a Brahmin who killed a Sudra was awarded the same light penalty—usually a fine—as he could expect for killing a cat or a dog. One text states that a Sudra who "arrogantly teaches Brahmins their duty shall have boiling oil poured into his mouth and ears."⁶

Such are the conventional accounts of the origins of traditional Indian society. However, more recent scholarship has shown that the ancient texts should not always be taken literally. There is historical evidence to show that in practice, as opposed to what is described in the pages of the manuals, ancient India was less rigid than many supposed, and that castes could and did change their ranking through either luck or alliance. For example, the great Mauryan dynasty, which was headed by Emperor Ashoka, is believed to have originally been Sudra. But caste as a system was rarely transcended, even if groups or individuals could occasionally improve on their particular ranking. Thus, the Mauryas were reclassified as Kshatriya (in spite of the fact the Mauryas were Buddhist and a rejected caste). The gradual spread of Islam and its militant sense of equality after the eighth and ninth centuries AD inspired a wave of anti-caste movements within Hinduism during what is called India's medieval period. These breakaway cults were known as bhakti, or devotional, movements, which stressed worship of a particular deity and equality of all before God. They generated great fervor and attracted followings from all castes. But over time the anti-caste bhakti movements gradually morphed into new castes themselves and were quietly slotted into the traditional hierarchy. Hinduism has a way of pacifying and absorbing its challengers. It is both rigid and flexible. Modern Indian society is similar. India's lower orders have been struggling for decades to

achieve equality of respect and recognition. That struggle still has a long way to go.

In many respects the town of Aurangabad, in an arid corner of Maharashtra, India's second largest state, is unexceptional. Aurangabad's dilapidated old town, which dates from the days when it was ruled by the princely state of Hyderabad, several hundred miles to the south, is surrounded by the nondescript sprawl that characterizes so much of contemporary India. Its narrow waterways are choked with rubbish. Flies proliferate in the searing dry heat of summer. A puff of wind can scald your skin. Traffic, mostly scooters and motorbikes, collects lazily at railway crossings and, now and then, is halted altogether by a noisy wedding procession. On the main commercial avenues you pass the provincial bank branches, roadside tea stalls, and chain sweet shops that are to be found all over small-town India. Then there are the sacred cows, feeding on piles of garbage and whatever else has been discarded on the streets. The town somehow manages to be both colorful and drab.

Aurangabad also happens to be a center of the Mahar community, populated by an untouchable, or Dalit, caste many of whose members were converted to Buddhism in 1956 by Bhimrao Ambedkar, the Dalit lawyer who framed India's constitution. Ambedkar, who established a college here in 1950, which was inaugurated by Jawaharlal Nehru, the prime minister at the time, was also a Mahar. The caste's duties included being porters, messengers, watchmen, and guides for their social betters. Although there were other Dalit groups* required to

*The term *Dalit* is generic. In practice India has hundreds of untouchable sub-castes, including the Mahars, who traditionally lived separately from each other and did not intermarry. The same applies to the four *Varnas*—the traditional name for caste. Each Varna—the Brahmins, Kshatriyas, Vaishyas, and Sudras—has hundreds of *jatis*, or subcastes, who traditionally married only within their communities. In today's India, many *jatis* are now merging to form larger subcastes.

perform more humiliating tasks, the Mahars were never permitted to enter temples or to draw water from the same well as the rest of the village. Ambedkar helped them to reject the role to which they were born. Other lower-caste leaders were agitating, along with Mahatma Gandhi, for Dalits to be given access to temples and wells. But Ambedkar was dismissive of the chances of bringing about any real change in the mentality of upper-caste Hindus. He declared that he did not want to enter their temples at all. "I was born a Hindu," he said, "but I will not die a Hindu." It took Ambedkar many years of studying before he chose Buddhism, which he believed was the most egalitarian of the world's religions. Other virtues included the fact that Buddhism was Indian in origin, so he could not be accused of lack of patriotism, as might lower-caste converts to Islam and Christianity. And, importantly for Ambedkar, who rejected all forms of superstition and ritual, Buddhism was also the religion that came closest to atheism in his view. He based his sense of the religion on Buddha's original teachings—and not on subsequent interpretations—in which the philosopher had rejected the existence both of the soul and of the afterlife. Ambedkar converted to Buddhism in the town of Nagpur along with half a million fellow Mahars at what must have been one of the largest ceremonies of mass conversion in history. He died shortly afterward, a Buddhist.

Ambedkar's statue and likeness is visible all over Aurangabad and in countless other small towns across India. I visited Milind College, on the road that leads out of town toward the world-renowned Ellora Caves, which include some of the most enchanting and dramatic Hindu and Buddhist temple art in India. Ambedkar named the college after the legendary Greek king Milinda, who challenged any priest or scholar to beat him in philosophical debate. For years, nobody succeeded until a monk called Nagsen arrived on the scene. In their debate the Buddhist monk tied Milinda into knots. The king conceded defeat and gave up his throne to follow Nagsen for the remainder of his life. "For Ambedkar, King Milinda was a symbol of intellectual honesty, which was a virtue he felt was lacking in Hinduism," Indrajit Alte, the dean of Milind College, said to me.

Ambedkar was obsessed with education. A colonial survey in the early twentieth century found that only 0.13 percent of India's untouchables—about one in eight hundred—could read or write.⁷ There are no updated numbers for today's India because caste-specific surveys were banned from the census after independence. But it is estimated that at least a third of Dalits in today's India are now literate. It would be safe to guess that a majority of Ambedkar's Mahar community can read and write. As a result, the community has captured a far larger share of white-collar jobs and government sinecures than has any other Dalit group. There is a sizable Mahar middle class, much of them living in Aurangabad, and also a Mahar working class in the town's factories and assembly lines. Most Mahars have left their villages never to return.

As a child, Indrajit Alte sat outside the temple in his village hoping in vain to be permitted entry. Then his family converted to Buddhism and they moved to the city. "In Aurangabad, or Bombay, or any town, you are treated with respect. You can walk down the street and nobody knows your caste," said Professor Alte, about half of whose 3,600 students are Dalits. "But when I return to my family village, people of other castes who cannot even read and write will not allow me into their homes, or even to share a cup of tea. This is how they treat the head of a college from the city. You cannot escape your caste in the village even if you have changed your religion."

Professor Alte took me to a room overlooking Milind College where Ambedkar used to sleep and study after he had resigned as minister for law from Nehru's government in 1951. He resigned partly in protest at the delay in passing the Hindu Civil Code bill, which he viewed as essential to promoting gender equality (such as giving daughters inheritance rights). The legislation was broken up into four bills, which were enacted in the mid-1950s. The room, which stands alone on the college roof and is shaped like a snupa, the steeple of the Buddhist temple, contained some of Ambedkar's belongings, including a long bamboo staff with eight notches, which represented Buddha's Eightfold Path of righteousness. There were

faded black-and-white photographs of Ambedkar wearing his trademark horn-rimmed spectacles and Western suits and talking to various other statesmen. On the walls, garlands of flowers were hung over each of his monsoon-stained pictures. The professor told me a story of an educated Mahar village boy who had apparently humiliated a group of orthodox village Brahmins in the area. The local Brahmins hold an annual ritual to discover whether the coming monsoon will be a good one, which they divine by filling up a linga—a phallic representation of the god Shiva—with water. The boy used his scientific education to debunk the ritual. "This is what Ambedkar meant by fighting against caste," said the professor. "It was also a battle against superstition."

But the gulf between the lives of the Mahars who still live in villages and those who live in towns like Aurangabad is large. In the villages, Buddha has become just one more god to be placed alongside the popular Hindu deities in the Mahar household, such as Shiva, Krishna, Ram, and Vishnu. Some households even keep a small figurine of Ambedkar among their pantheon of gods. When the women are menstruating, they remove Ambedkar's likeness so as not to pollute him. It is hard to imagine the Dalit leader would have been flattered by this. By the same token, village Mahars greet Hindu villagers with the phrase "*Jai Bheem*" (Long Live Ambedkar), to indicate they should no longer be seen as untouchables. But when Mahars greet each other they say "*Ram Ram*," the traditional Hindu greeting.⁸ Many of the Brahmin households claim Buddha is an incarnation of the Hindu god Vishnu. Some of the Mahars appear to agree. Converting to Buddhism seems to have changed very little in the lives of village Mahars.

The city is a world apart. We visited the neighborhood of Amit Suddar, a young activist, in a Mahar area of Aurangabad. Although this was a poor area, I was immediately struck by the cleanliness of the streets compared to other parts of town. Everything was neatly swept and washed. Above each house fluttered the multicolored flag of international Buddhism and the blue flag depicting the Ashokan

wheel, named after the great Buddhist emperor of India's early history. Inside the homes there were pictures of film stars and cricketers. I did not see any gods: only small framed pictures of Ambedkar and Buddha. Like many urban Dalit neighborhoods in other parts of India, the Mahars lived next to a Muslim locality. "We get along much better with the Muslims than the caste Hindus because we look out for each other," said Sudarkar. "Before we converted to Buddhism we used to eat beef with the Muslims." I was in Aurangabad with Sohail Akbar, a Delhi-based photographer and friend, who has accompanied me on several trips. Both of us were struck by the self-confidence of the Mahars we met. Some of them were teachers, one owned her own beauty parlor, a third was a mechanic. These were literate people. Almost everyone we met was either the first or second generation of educated Mahars, and they radiated self-confidence. It is hard to overstate just how radical a change this represents for people whose parents, grandparents, and ancestors stretching back hundreds—perhaps thousands—of years were born to a lifetime of bowing and scraping.

A crowd gathered, as so often happens when outsiders are in the vicinity. They dragged us to their local temple. All it contained was blue walls and paintings of Buddha and Ambedkar. I was amused that Ambedkar's portrait always depicts him with rosy thick lips, much like those of Buddha. But there was no incense, no bells, and no candles. "We do not pray to Buddha, because we believe he was a human being—not a god," said Sudarkar. "We pray for peace, or else we just meditate. Sometimes we just come here to read." Then the people wanted to introduce us to the local dentist, whose office was nearby. He was also a Mahar. The dental clinic was air-conditioned and spotlessly clean. "People from other castes come to me regularly for treatment," the dentist told me. The others, wishing to make sure I understood the full import of the fact that upper castes were now routinely permitting an untouchable to stick his fingers in their mouths, muttered: "Imagine that?" "Very good dentist," "Mahar dentist." Most of them spoke some English in addition to Hindi and Marathi,

the principal language of Maharashtra. Sadarkar said: "There is still discrimination against us—we do not live in mixed communities and we go to our own schools. But we are free and we know our rights."

Once the proceedings were under way it was hard to resist the pressure to visit other sites that illustrated some accomplishment or other of these proud Mahars. Our tour was gathering a momentum of its own. The next stop was a museum devoted to Ambedkar's life. Half the books in the museum's library were about Malcolm X's Black Panthers in America. After Ambedkar died, his Republican Party of India broke up into squabbling factions. A group of Dalits inspired by Malcolm X set up the Dalit Panther movement, which still exists, although it never got very far. "We feel a lot of kinship with what blacks suffered in America before the civil rights movement and what blacks suffered in South Africa under apartheid," said the museum curator. But in some respects what untouchables have suffered—and still do—is worse. Even during apartheid, and in the deep recesses of the American South, white families would often employ black cooks and black wet nurses. "Upper-caste Hindus would rather have died than let an untouchable cook their food or suckle their babies," said the curator. "It would have been polluting." After the museum, we visited Ambedkar University, which until the early 1990s was called Aurangabad University. Even then, the change of name prompted riots by angry upper-caste Hindus, although they failed to overturn the decision.

Then we were taken to a small Buddhist seminary that was situated under one of the rocky hills that encircle the town. The monks, who were mostly young men in their twenties and thirties, appeared sterner than the Mahars we had met in town that day. They all wore maroon robes. They talked to us about why Buddhism had virtually disappeared from India, the land of its birth, when it continued to thrive in so many other parts of Asia to which it had spread. The monks said the great Indian Buddhist centers of Taxila and Nalanda (in modern-day Pakistan and Bihar, respectively) had

been plundered by Brahmins, who feared that Buddha's egalitarian message would undermine their stranglehold on society.* "They destroyed Buddhism because it had no caste," said one militant young novice. "Where are the Brahmins without caste?" I asked why so few of India's other Dalit groups, such as the Chamars, who are the traditional leather workers, or the Valmikis, the scavenger caste who remove the excrement of other castes, had converted to Buddhism. The monks said that many of the other Dalit groups felt rivalry with the Mahars, though they still erect statues of Ambedkar. "The upper castes are experts at brainwashing and intimidating the lower castes into remaining within Hinduism," said the young novice. "Many lower-caste people do not understand that it is impossible to change Hinduism. Hinduism has no pope or Vatican. The Brahmins are too slippery."

It was an interesting diagnosis. And it was hard not to feel sympathy with their anger. My conversations with the monks and the other Mahars had also helped to clarify something that many foreigners, including me, find hard to understand: the fact that Dalits and other lower castes are often as bitterly divided against each other as they are against the Hindu upper castes. It was something Ambedkar had tried to overcome. Now, fifty years after his death, even his limited success in helping to unite some Dalit groups with each other and with other lower castes is open to question. India, as the writer V. S. Naipaul said, has become a land of a million mutinies: some are mutinies of lower orders against the upper orders; there are also mutinies of upper orders (and some lower orders) against Muslims; and there are mutinies of both lower orders against each other and upper orders against each other. But India is also a land of unexpected alliances: between enemies of enemies, between Muslims and lower castes, and between people who disdained each other yesterday and

*In fact, the great monastery of Nalanda was probably plundered by a Muslim dynasty. But there is plenty of evidence to show that Hindu dynasties in an earlier phase of India's history took steps to suppress Buddhism.

may tomorrow do so again. In one large Indian state there is even an alliance between Dalits and Brahmins (against almost everyone in between). Indian politics, like the shifting caste alliances below it, bubbles in a strange cauldron of its own, defying easy comparisons with anywhere else. And yet India's caste parties resemble each other in striking and important ways: they are centered on strong and charismatic leaders, who permit little internal party democracy or challenge to their authority; they defend a system of strong state regulation, since that enhances their ability to distribute jobs and contracts to their caste followers; and they are notably more efficient than other parties at organizing their supporters to turn out on polling day.

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I was in Patna, the capital of Bihar in India's north, to observe an important state assembly election that would choose the next government of India's third largest state. I had just come from the buzzing city of Hyderabad in the southern state of Andhra Pradesh, which is a magnet for much of India's software investment. The contrast between the two cities could not be greater. In Hyderabad there are as many five-star hotels as you would find in any Western city. Most of them offer a seamless "wifi" service so you can connect to the Internet by laptop from anywhere in the building. At Patna's best hotel the crackle on the internal phone system was so noisy you could not communicate with the receptionist. "Hello, hello, is this a long-distance call?" No, I am calling from room 212. "Hello, hello? Do you have a reservation?" Naturally, Internet access was unthinkable. Likewise, although often clogged with traffic, Hyderabad's roads are paved and smooth. Meanwhile in Patna, a city of three million people, there is not a single functioning traffic light. Such is the reigning inertia, the city has not even changed the colonial names of its streets. I got a kick out of driving up and down Boring Road. It was named after a British official.

Patna is actually a very interesting place. Many people used to refer to it as the capital of "Laluland," so named after India's most celebrated and witty lower-caste leader, Lalu Prasad Yadav. Lalu and his wife, Rabri Devi, had been ruling the state since 1990 courtesy of a powerful electoral formula known as "MY"—or Muslim-Yadav, an alliance between the state's Muslims and the caste of Yadavs, from whom the leader takes his last name. The Yadavs are one of India's largest "Other Backward Classes," a government term that covers most of India's Sudra castes. Yadavs are the traditional cowherd caste of north India and are relatively low down on the traditional pecking order, but not as low as untouchable Mahars or Chamars. In a state that is probably more bitterly divided by caste than any other in India, the MY combination had delivered an impregnable 30 per cent of the vote to Lalu in four successive elections. But in this election Lalu's alliance appeared to be fraying. Other caste alliances were beginning to pick off some of the wealthier Yadav and Muslim voters, who were getting tired of Lalu's caste-identity politics, which had come at the expense of economic growth and law and order.

The week I was visiting Patna, the news was dominated by the kidnapping of a young pupil from the town's elite English-language private school. It was the fifth kidnapping in as many months. Bihar's kidnapping industry is closely connected to the state's other large industry: politics. It is no coincidence that the number of kidnappings increases sharply when elections are on the horizon. Running an election in one of Bihar's 243 provincial constituencies costs between Rs 10 and Rs 50 million (\$200,000 to \$1 million), an absurdly large sum for a state with an annual income of less than Rs 15,000 per person (\$300). Apart from its annual output of succulent mangoes and lychees, which are exported to other parts of India, Bihar has virtually no industry. Bihar's principal sources of income are the grants it receives from New Delhi for its budget, and remittances from the millions of Bihari villagers who go to Delhi, Mumbai, or Punjab to do casual jobs in the informal sector. Most of Bihar's middle classes have fled.

"If I had known then what I know now I would never have returned to Bihar," said Dr. Ajay Kumar, who runs his own medical practice in Patna, and who had just stepped down as head of the Bihar Medical Council. Kumar had been working as a doctor in Britain's National Health Service in 1984 when he decided to return to Patna. It is a decision he bitterly regrets. Dressed in a blue boating jacket with gold buttons, Kumar looked out of place in a town where it is wise not to stand out. As a Bhumiya, the caste of traditional Bihari landowners, and a qualified doctor, Kumar is both upper caste and middle class (the two do not always coincide: there are many poor Brahmins living in the villages). In the eyes of the lower castes, Kumar is "feudal." And in the eyes of the kidnappers he is a primary target. "I sleep with a gun under my pillow," Kumar said, as we chatted over tea at his clinic, while he kept a wary eye on the black-and-white closed-circuit TV that overlooks the entrance to his surgery. "All the time I am getting threats of abduction or extortion. It is desperate here. Most of my colleagues have left. They won't come back."

Kumar alleged that the kidnappers and the police were often one and the same. He also said that the police, as one or two senior Bihari policemen also attested, behave as though they are the personal staff members of their political masters. Earlier in the visit I had talked to D. P. Ojha, who had been head of the police for the entire state of 75 million people before he was shunted into early retirement. One of Ojha's transgressions had been to arrest Mohammed Shahabuddin, a member of parliament for Lalu's party, who faces multiple charges of murder, kidnapping, and extortion. In an interview on national television, Shahabuddin had casually threatened D. P. Ojha's life. Almost 100 of India's 545 members of parliament in New Delhi have "criminal backgrounds,"¹⁰ which means they have been indicted for one or more crimes, but not convicted. Once they are elected, it is virtually impossible to convict them, which is one of their main incentives for entering politics in the first place. In turn, the wealth and muscle power of the mafia dons gives an incentive to

political leaders, such as Lalu, to adopt them as electoral candidates. Of the almost one hundred alleged parliamentary criminals, Bihar and Uttar Pradesh account for by far the largest share. Anyone who gets in their way, such as D. P. Ojha, risks the consequences. Like Kumar, Ojha said he was too old to think of leaving his home state. So he runs a one-man show to combat political corruption. "We have excellent laws, even in Bihar. Our problem is the people who are supposed to be upholding these laws," the retired police commissioner told me. "When the gamekeepers are poachers in disguise, why should anyone else take the law seriously?"

It was a good question, which I thought was worth putting to Lalu Prasad Yadav. Lalu, as everyone calls him, is also a member of parliament in New Delhi. He was indicted in the late 1990s for alleged corruption in a fodder subsidy scandal. He was briefly imprisoned so he stepped down as Bihar's chief minister in favor of his wife, Rabri Devi, who has presided over the state ever since. But the indictment did not prevent Lalu from becoming India's minister for railways in 2004, a senior cabinet position in the government headed by Manmohan Singh. The strength of Lalu's party in New Delhi made him the second largest partner of Singh's multiparty coalition government after the Congress Party. The resulting cabinet was a curious mix of urbane technocrats, such as Manmohan, and earthy rural leaders, such as Lalu. Some despaired of its incoherence. Others were more philosophical. At a party shortly after the election, one of Manmohan's colleagues said to me: "I think we should all be studying the history of how corrupt American politics was in the early twentieth century. It proves that you can still rise to become a great power." The analogy was not unreasonable: India's economy has continued to grow at 7 percent a year since 2004.

However, the economy of Bihar has gone from bad to worse. It is India's most rural state with more than 90 percent of the people living in villages. For most Biharis, the countryside is far from a rural idyll. Fewer than one in ten Bihar households has electricity. Only one Bihar in twenty can afford a scooter. Life expectancy is the low-

est in India. The average Bihari can expect to live fifteen fewer years than his counterpart in the state of Kerala, where most people have access to medicines, schooling, and electricity.¹¹ There are no real jobs in Bihar, and the economy is so anemic that it collects only 0.7 percent of India's national sales tax revenues, despite accounting for more than 7 percent of India's population. Fewer than one in forty Biharis possesses a television.¹² For entertainment, many rely on Lalu, whose public speeches can still draw crowds of several hundred thousand people. He can be very witty. During the election campaign, one reporter informed Lalu that Hema Malini, a glamorous Bollywood actress, had said she was a fan of his. "If she is my fan, then I'm her air-conditioner," Lalu shot back.

This was my second meeting with Lalu and I was a little nervous. After my first interview a couple of years earlier I had written an article that Lalu had publicly criticized. Lalu had been sitting in his garden with a large collection of cronies and it was nighttime. He was talking in a continuous banter that generated much laughter. I had written: "There was the unmistakable whiff of marijuana in the air."¹³ I stand by the offending sentence, since the smell was hard to confuse and the person accompanying me had agreed. But Lalu had not taken kindly to the remark.* He told the local media and anyone else who cared to listen that Western journalists such as I were out to defame him: "They are in league with the Brahmins," he said.

On this occasion getting into Lalu's compound was difficult, although not because of my article. His residence was surrounded by hundreds of people shouting slogans. It was a winter evening and the air was thick with fog. Our car had to crawl myopically for fear of hitting someone. It was hard to make out what they were shouting about. I found Lalu amid a thicket of microphones and cameras giving a press conference in his garden. Once he had dismissed the me-

*Marijuana is legal in most parts of India, and in many states, including Bihar, it is sold at licensed government outlets. It is supposedly only meant for use during holy festivals.

dia, I joined him and his wife around a fire on his verandah. Lalu was sprawled on a rattan chair with a blanket around his shoulders, occasionally warming his hands by the fire. Rabri Devi served lemon tea and Bihari sweets. I asked Lalu what he thought he had achieved for Bihar in the last fifteen years. "Our two biggest achievements are social justice and communal harmony," he said. "We have given courage to the downtrodden. Dalits can now hold their heads up high. They are no longer oppressed by the Brahmins and by the landowners. And Muslims are safe. We have defeated the Hindu nationalists." Much of this was true. But Bihar had no rule of law. Lalu said: "Whenever anyone writes about Bihar they talk about law and order problems or they talk about caste violence. That is because we have an upper-caste media in India. Even foreigners are fooled by these things." Then Lalu said that two years earlier a journalist from the *Financial Times* of London had written that marijuana had been smoked in his presence. That was me, I told him. "No no, it definitely wasn't you," said Lalu, looking a little flustered. "He didn't look at all like you, he was, he was. . . ." But it was me, I insisted. "Oh, it doesn't matter," said Lalu, looking genuinely uncomfortable. "I am sure it was a cultural misunderstanding. It can happen very easily." I confess I was charmed by Lalu's embarrassment. Here was a man who is celebrated up and down India for his perfect one-line insults. During the 2004 national election campaign, Lalu suggested the poll be resolved by a running race between the leaders of the two main parties, Sonia Gandhi, the fifty-nine-year-old Italian widow of Rajiv (with whom Lalu is allied, and whom we will meet in chapter five), and Atal Behari Vajpayee, the septuagenarian Hindu nationalist prime minister (whom we will meet in the next chapter). Vajpayee had recently had operations on both of his knees. The prime minister could barely walk let alone undertake a running contest. But even Vajpayee's friends had laughed at Lalu's joke. We asked Lalu about the noisy slogan shouting outside his residence. "They are my people and they are shouting pro-Lalu slogans," he said. The crowd, it turned out, was packed with aspiring

candidates for the Lalu party ticket in the forthcoming vote. "When I drive through the crowd," he said, to the merriment of those inside the compound, "I draw the window curtains so I don't have to look at their faces."

The interview then descended from banter into circus. Lalu insisted on showing me around his compound, which he had converted into a menagerie for his favorite animals, mostly cows, of which there were two hundred. There were also two white Arabian horses. During his spell in prison in the late 1990s, Lalu said he had a vision in which Lord Krishna, who is the god most beloved of Yadavs, had told him to become a vegetarian and to be kind to cows. Lalu had complied. "It sounds like you are trying to become a Brahmin," I said to him. Lalu was born into acute poverty in a Bihari village and spent his childhood in rags and without shoes tending the village herd. Lalu's nine children have all been educated at English-language schools. One of Lalu's daughters lives in Singapore and is married to a senior software executive. Lalu ignored my joke. We were inside the cow shelter and Lalu was introducing me to his favorites. Each had a name. Dozens of full-time attendants were assigned to look after the cows. "This is my favorite," said Lalu, patting its head lovingly. Then he put up both his hands in front of the cow's face and said: "This hand is for Lalu and this hand is for Ram Vilas Paswan [Lalu's fiercest electoral competitor]." The cow did not move when Lalu showed it the hand that represented Paswan. But then something peculiar happened. Lalu put his other hand up—the one that represented himself—and the cow slowly but emphatically nodded its head. I looked in vain for an attendant who might be pulling the cow's tail or tugging on a piece of string. But the trick was authentic. It must have taken Lalu hours and hours of practice.

A few months later Lalu's party was ejected from office in Bihar, although it retained its pivotal role in the national coalition. Lalu remained India's minister of railways. Many people hailed the 2005 election result as a vote for "good governance" following fifteen years of misrule by Lalu and his cronies. But the coalition of lower-

and upper-caste parties that defeated Lalu, which was led by Nitish Kumar, a former railway minister and a member of another lower caste called the Kurmis, was stitched together in much the same way and using much the same appeals to caste identity as Lalu had used. Lalu's opponents fielded a higher proportion of candidates with criminal backgrounds than Lalu did himself. Even in defeat, Lalu's logic lived on. I have little doubt that he will be back.

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It has taken India's lower-caste leaders decades of practice to master the complexities of Indian democracy. Now they are better at it than anyone else. In Indian politics, lower-caste voters have an advantage that is of little help in other spheres of life: the sheer weight of numbers. About half of India's population is lower caste, in one form or other. If you add in India's 150 million Muslims and the tens of millions belonging to India's linguistic groups who are living outside their language area, more than half of India's population is officially classified as minority.¹⁴ Lower-caste parties have another advantage: their non-caste competitors have to pitch their message as widely as possible. The Congress Party aims to appeal to everyone by stressing a secular and inclusive Indian nationalism and a centrist view of the economy. The Hindu nationalist Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP; the India People's Party) tries to appeal to almost every voter except for Muslims and Christians. Hindus make up 85 percent of India's population. But the lower-caste parties can ruthlessly target their message at their own narrow slices of the population. It means they are more efficient at garnering their respective "vote banks." But their strategy limits their overall electoral tally to their own caste population. If all the lower castes were to make common cause with each other and merge into one large lower-caste party, the new party would probably govern India in perpetuity. What prevents them?

A small clue might lie in Lalu's constant references to Lord

Krishna. Lalu's unique personality has often prompted contrasts with rebel leaders in other parts of the world. Unlike Lalu, very few of them—whether we look at the great Italian nationalist rebels of the nineteenth century, the Chinese revolutionaries of the first half of the twentieth century, the agitators of early Victorian England, or the Jeffersons and Madisons of the American Revolution—consulted astrologers or soothsayers, or gave much license to religious imagery. They were modern history's levelers, who sought to unite the people against the monarchy, the church, the landed aristocracy, or foreign rule. Their rhetoric was universal and they promised equality. The rhetoric of Lalu and the leaders of India's other six or seven nationally significant lower-caste parties is aimed at a specific category of people. It excludes or ignores others who live in the same kind of poverty. Some foreign and Indian observers describe India's lower-caste parties as left-wing because they stand for the underprivileged. This might be to miss the trees for the forest—to reverse the aphorism. Each lower-caste party stands for only one section of the underprivileged. Lower-caste politicians do not unite the lower orders by stressing what they have in common. Instead, they slice them up by focusing on what divides them. It is much closer to ethnic politics than it is to class politics.

Lalu's numerous caste of Yadavs is also quite visible in other parts of India, particularly the large states of Uttar Pradesh and Madhya Pradesh. His counterpart in Uttar Pradesh is Mulayam Singh Yadav, whose key right-hand man, Amar Singh, we will meet later on. Like Lalu, Mulayam Singh Yadav's party relies on the support of an alliance between millions of Yadav and Muslim voters who are united in antipathy to Brahmins and increasingly to Dalits. Mulayam's party has also garnered the votes of many Rajputs, a subcaste of the traditional warrior Kshatriya caste, to which Amar Singh belongs. His Yadav party is one of India's newfangled caste alliances.

Lalu and Mulayam are both members and former presidents of the All-India Yadav Mahasabha (assembly). The Mahasabha has developed an interesting ideology. It claims all Yadavs are descended from

Lord Krishna, the god who was also depicted in the epics as a cowherd, the traditional caste function of the Yadavs. According to this view, the genes of Yadavs are as pure as or even purer than those of the Brahmins. The Mahasabha has also pronounced both Mulyam and Lalu to be incarnations of Krishna. But it left unsaid any view it may have on the bloodlines of other lower castes, who presumably remain as polluted as they were before. This is what one of the speakers said at the Mahasabha's annual conference: "We have assembled here from different parts of the country. We speak different languages . . . our habits and customs are different but we feel oneness and brotherhood because the same blood is running in our veins."¹⁵

Like the originators of other caste origin myths, the Yadavs say they were denied by trickery or historical injustice their rightful place in the upper layers of the caste hierarchy among the righteous and should not be grouped among the polluting castes. Almost all of India's larger subcastes have constructed similarly proud mythologies of an elevated ancestry that was taken from them in the mists of time by scheming Brahmins or thieving Kshatriyas. With the notable exception of the Mahars, whose outlook remains heavily influenced by Ambedkar, most of the other untouchable castes, including the Chamars, also claim descent from some god or great saint. Perhaps the most intriguing claim is that of the Bedias, a caste of prostitutes who are shunned by everyone, at least during daylight hours. Bedias women say that caste identity comes from the bloodline of the father, and since most of their clients are Rajput men, they argue that their true caste is Rajput, which is relatively high up on the scale. The Bedias even hired the services of a Brahmin priest who pronounced, somewhat elliptically, that it is the seed that is sown on the field that matters and not the soil of the field—the soil being female, the seed male.¹⁶ The Rajput men disagree. The opinion of their wives is not recorded.

In much of rural India caste discrimination is as rampant as ever and hundreds die every year from caste violence, some at the hands

of the police. According to the Indian government, violence by the police against Dalits whom they have falsely arrested is still routine in the villages of India: "During interrogation, injuries sustained by the arrested person are so great that he usually dies."¹⁷ Equally, Dalits are still often denied entry into temples. But what is more noteworthy is that so many Dalits want to enter the temples in the first place. Seventy years ago Ambedkar wrote: "Hindu society is a myth. The name *Hindu* is itself foreign. It was given by the Mohammedans to the natives for the purpose of distinguishing themselves. Each caste not only dines among itself and marries among itself but each caste also prescribes its own distinctive dress."¹⁸ This may have been accurate at the time. But in today's India it would be hard to distinguish people's caste by what they wear or where they eat.

Beneath the radar, there have been fairly dramatic changes in the lifestyles of the lower castes over the last few decades. Ordinary Yadavs may or may not believe they are descended from Lord Krishna. But Yadavs and other lower castes do increasingly behave in their private habits and beliefs as though they were upper caste. Indian scholars call this "Sanskritization,"¹⁹ in reference to the classical language that was the preserve of the Brahmins. The term describes a trend in which the lower orders are now copying the culture of the upper orders by following the same gods, attending the same temples, and celebrating the same festivals. In urban India, it is often only by the name that you can distinguish the caste of a person. Other attributes, such as dress or dietary habits, have become increasingly general to all castes. In their lifestyles, the wealthier among the lower castes—farmers who may have profited from the green revolution or those who have found secure jobs in the city—are reinventing themselves. If you enter an urban home in today's India, it would be hard to tell the caste of its occupants. The gods depicted in the small household shrine are the same. The people follow the same traditional upper-caste rituals.

But in the political world, India's lower castes move in the opposite direction from "Sanskritization," which many now follow in their

personal lives. Instead of seeking to emulate their Brahmin role models as they do in their cultural and religious behavior, the lower castes use politics to play out their revenge against the upper castes and to extract compensation for their low social status. Usually they get what they want. India's affirmative action program is the largest in the world. It is far larger and more extensive than that of America. In India, half of all government jobs are reserved for three separate categories of underdog: Adivasis, who are Indians of tribal origin, making up almost 10 percent of the population; Dalits officially accounting for 12.5 percent of the population; and "Other Backward Classes," which include castes such as the Yadavs, accounting for 27 percent of the population. Together, about 50 percent of India's public sector jobs are allocated to these groups. In addition, each state has its own system of set-asides. In some states, including Rajasthan and Tamil Nadu, the quota for provincial government jobs is as much as two-thirds. Few of these positions are allocated by competitive examination. In practice many of the jobs are dispensed by the relevant caste leaders and their networks of hangers-on. Or else they are up for sale to the highest bidders.* It is arguably the most extensive system of patronage in the democratic world.

Expanding this system is the *only* serious item on the agenda of the lower-caste parties. None of the caste parties publishes manifestos at election times setting out policies on the economy, foreign policy, or defense. What the lower-caste parties offer their supporters is the ability to extract greater powers of patronage from the larger parties in exchange for making up the parliamentary numbers in multiparty coalitions. That is why Lahu, whose party helped bring Manmohan Singh's government to power in New Delhi, was given the ministry of railways, which oversees a workforce of almost 1.5 million people (second only to China's People's Liberation Army as the largest em-

*The *Financial Times* driver in Delhi once applied for a job as a government driver. He was told it would cost Rs 100,000 to get the position. Each job has a fixed price.

ployer in the world). Since they dispense few jobs, neither the foreign ministry nor the ministry of finance would have held the same appeal. Likewise, when Mulayam Singh Yadav's party helped prop up an earlier coalition government in New Delhi in the 1990s, he became minister of defense. Most of India's large defense industry is publicly owned. Neither Lahu nor Mulayam has submitted anything resembling a coherent plan on how to manage India's economy. But both are hostile to privatization of state enterprises since any reduction in the public sector would shrink their source of patronage. Both men also support extending the system of public job quotas to the private sector. This is still an unlikely prospect, in spite of anecdotal evidence that many of India's older private sector companies do practice caste and religious discrimination in their hiring policies. Mere mention of reserving jobs on grounds of caste rather than qualifications sends shudders of horror through India's company boardrooms.

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What can be said about Lahu and Mulayam is true many times over for Mayawati, who is leader of India's largest untouchable party, the Bahujan Samaj Party (BSP, meaning Majority of the People). Like many Dalits, Mayawati has only one name. But in recognition of her status as their "tallest leader," many Dalits refer to her as Behenji Mayawati, "honored sister." Mayawati has thrice been chief minister of Uttar Pradesh, India's largest state. When she first took power in 1996, she was both the first woman and the first untouchable in India's history to take charge of the state. She quickly gained a reputation as someone who delighted in causing great discomfort to her upper-caste civil servants. Within the first year of her administration she ordered 1,400 transfers of IAS officers, which was—and remains—a clear record. Some of the senior IAS officers whom she most disliked had to change jobs every few weeks at great cost to

their children's schooling. There was no logic to Mayawati's minirevolution other than to humiliate the Brahmins and also, according to some allegations, to raise money from IAS officers who were prepared to pay bribes to either stay put or move back to where they had been stationed before. "Mayawati likes to keep the Brahmins dancing," one of her advisers said to me. "Our people in the villages enjoy watching the spectacle very much." Other less sympathetic observers, including the World Bank, whose development projects in Uttar Pradesh were badly disrupted by Mayawati's game of musical chairs, were less amused.

Mayawati has never granted me an interview, since she has little interest in speaking to the English-language media, foreign or Indian. On one occasion I came close. There was a large Dalit rally in the north Indian town of Gaya near to the famous Bodhgaya temple, which was built on the spot where Buddha was reputed to have achieved enlightenment under a *peepul* tree. Her public meeting took place in a large *maidan*, or park, in the center of the town. It was attended by thousands of cheering supporters. After Mayawati had finished speaking she left the podium and moved toward a waiting Ambassador car, which would whisk her to a helicopter a couple of hundred yards away. Waving my press pass I managed to enter the enclosure and approach Mayawati. Before I could get any closer, I was barred by four men, whose standard-issue dark glasses and handguns identified them as political musclemen. I managed to shout my request to Mayawati, who glanced suspiciously at me for a couple of seconds before getting into the car. Then her cavalcade of vehicles proceeded for all of thirty seconds to the waiting helicopter, with her security men running alongside, brandishing their guns. Mayawati gave a brief imperious wave from the hovering chopper to the crowds below her. Then the helicopter nosed off into the distance to another rally at another *maidan* teeming with starstruck supporters.

Few, if any, leaders in today's India can bank on as much loyalty from their voters as Mayawati has. India's electoral analysts say

Mayawati's BSP party (not to be confused with the Hindu nationalist BJP) has the most disciplined vote bank of any party in India. Whatever the circumstances, and whatever her record in office, Mayawati's party can rely on the votes of one-fifth of the Uttar Pradesh electorate, which roughly corresponds to the proportion of Dalits among the state's 170 million people. Even after Mayawati was caught red-handed in 2003 awarding contracts to her favorite construction companies to build a large shopping complex around the resplendent and historic Taj Mahal, her voting tally did not fall. She was forced, however, to abandon her plans to bring Las Vegas to India's greatest monument.

Mayawati's overriding agenda is to bring more Dalits into government jobs. Her mentor, Kanshi Ram, founded the BSP in the 1980s after he had been refused a day's leave from his government job on the occasion of Ambedkar's birthday, a public holiday. The incident triggered a pent-up frustration. Ram said Dalit civil servants were routinely denied promotion and respect by their peers. His new party's agenda, said Ram, was to give Dalits self-respect and to create more government jobs for them: "Political power is the master-key with which you can open any lock," he said.²⁰ Mayawati uses power with a fury that makes Lalu and Mulayam seem like consensus politicians. Her campaign speeches often consist of a long list from which she reads out the caste origins of each of her candidates. She makes no attempt to present policies or opinions on more general subjects. In one closely studied campaign, Mayawati devoted 91 percent of her speeches to the issue of "social justice," which is code for government jobs for Dalits.²¹ In contrast to most of her competitors, Mayawati did not once refer to issues such as "good governance," "nationalism," "prices," or "corruption."

Dalits list most of these themes as major issues of concern in their lives. Yet when it comes to casting their votes, their choice seems to boil down to the caste of the candidate. Essential services, such as roads, electricity, and jobs, are in short supply in the rural economy of Uttar Pradesh. So the voter, especially the lower-caste voter, needs

access to the people who have control over them. Sharing a caste background with the politician helps. Evidence that you have voted for the politician helps even more. Kanchan Chandra, a scholar at MIT, who conducted these surveys, argues persuasively: "Elections in a patronage-based democracy [like India] are in essence covert auctions in which basic services, which should in principle be available to every citizen, are sold instead to the highest bidder."

Elections in Uttar Pradesh are also about muscle power. Both the Congress Party and the BJP have been virtually eclipsed in Uttar Pradesh, which is by far the most important among India's twenty-nine states, since, with 84 out of India's 543 constituencies, it is home to almost a sixth of India's parliamentary seats. Eight of India's thirteen prime ministers have come from Uttar Pradesh. Neither of the national parties can match the ruthlessness of the state's two principal lower-caste parties, or their ability to command such loyalty among their vote banks.

One of the most extraordinary pieces of Indian electioneering I have observed is the sight of Mulayam's Samajwadi (socialist) campaigners driving through the city of Allahabad in a cavalcade of about forty vehicles, consisting mostly of Mercedes and Toyota Safaris. Thickets of guns poked out of each vehicle. Doubtless voters were meant to be intimidated. But they would also have been impressed. The electioneering was for a by-election in Allahabad, a city of four million people that was an important metropolis for the Mughals and the British. Allahabad is an important north Indian city.

The election had been triggered by the assassination of Raju Pal, the BSP member of the legislative assembly who had been gunned down in the city's main commercial street opposite a car showroom at midday. The corpse was pumped with more than twenty bullets. Mayawati's party alleged that the murder had been carried out by Ashraf, the brother of Atiq Ahmed, who is the area's member of parliament in New Delhi for Mulayam's party. Ashraf was immediately imprisoned. But that did not stop him from standing in the by-

election from jail. His opposing candidate was Puja Pal, the pretty twenty-five-year-old widow of the murdered BSP legislative representative. The contest boiled down to a young widow battling her husband's alleged murderer. It had all the makings of a Shakespearean tragedy.

The first to grant me an interview was Puja Pal. We drove out on dirt tracks at night to a village on the outskirts of town. Pal was dressed in white, the color of mourning. She had been married only a few weeks earlier. Fifty or sixty of her supporters crowded round us in the courtyard of the house to observe the interview. Every time I asked Pal a question, someone else would answer it for her. I requested that Pal answer directly. The Samajwadi had claimed that the BSP was running an Islamophobic campaign, since her opposite number was a Muslim. They were also alleging that she was blaming the criminalization of politics in the city on the Muslims. Atiq Ahmed, the member of parliament who was campaigning against Pal on his imprisoned brother's behalf, was allegedly the most feared mafia don in Allahabad. Pal's late husband, according to the gossip, had been on Atiq's payroll many years earlier. But he had struck out alone.

I asked Pal whether she was running an anti-Muslim campaign. "Look around at all these people," said Pal, having finally been permitted to answer for herself. "He is a Muslim, he is a Muslim, and he is a Muslim. Ask them." They all nodded happily. Pal then said she had not been allowed to see her husband's body, since it had been burned by the police the same day he was killed, ostensibly to forestall a potentially riotous funeral procession. She claimed that Mulayam Yadav, the chief minister, had ordered the police to dispose of the corpse this way. She also mentioned lavish sums of money that had allegedly changed hands to bring about the murder of her husband. None of this was possible to verify. But I could not help admiring the courage of this young widow. She narrowly lost the election, which took place in June 2005. As I and the photographer Sobail Akbar departed, Pal's supporters hung garlands around us, as if it were we who were the politicians. It would have caused offense to refuse.

tween two rival mafia gangs for control of the city. Politics was incidental. Ahmed looked surprised. Then he revealed a broad betel-stained smile. He seemed to appreciate the question. "Oh, that is all false propaganda spread by the Hindu nationalists," he said. "Pay them no attention. Such nonsense is talked." But what about all your guns? I asked. "They are not my private guns," he replied. "They belong to the intelligence agencies who have been assigned to protect me." I did not believe him. But there was no point in pursuing it. Then I said that people claimed he had done nothing to contribute to the development of his state. "It is very difficult to bring development to India," said Ahmed, looking suddenly thoughtful. "It is such a complicated and diverse country. If you drive in your car fifty miles south of Allahabad, you will find the customs change. Our customs are very diverse. We [the Samajwadi Party] are adding new castes to our political equation. We are not just Yadavs and Muslims but also Rajputs. The more castes we add the more we will be judged by voters on our performance and not on our identity."

Ahmed's prediction may or may not prove true in the coming years. Certainly, the tendency of lower-caste parties to woo one or another of the upper-caste groups is growing. It was an alliance such as this that proved to be Lalu's undoing in Bihar. In Uttar Pradesh, Mayawati is selecting Brahmin candidates in areas where upper castes are concentrated. But the logic behind her electoral arithmetic is unrelated to development. In their daily lives many Dalit farm laborers feel more oppressed by wealthy Yadav farmers than they do by distant Brahmin civil servants. Few Brahmins farm for a living: the caste's ancient dharma forbids the Brahmin to touch a plow. Most Yadavs continue to farm for a living. So Dalits and Brahmins both resent and fear Yadavs (Brahmins because they are losing their traditional domination of society). Any development agenda that might result from such an unholy alliance would be purely incidental.

But there was little time to probe Ahmed further and he seemed uninterested in the issue of economic development. He stood up and

Getting to see Atiq Ahmed was much trickier. Everybody wants to see him. He is a right-hand man of Mulayam in New Delhi. He can also get things done for you in Allahabad. Access is closely regulated. After persistent telephone calls, I was eventually allowed inside his heavily guarded compound, which was opposite the local mosque in the densely populated Muslim quarter of Allahabad. There was a fleet of tinted-glass cars parked in front of the entrance to his mansion. Once inside, the first thing I saw was the household armory, with row upon row of guns stacked against the wall. As I waited for the appointed time, Atiq's octogenarian father sat and chatted with me. His beard was dyed red with henna. He had just completed his third and final hadj (pilgrimage) to Mecca. Neither Atiq nor Ashraf had yet been on the hadj. "They are both still children," said the father about his middle-aged sons. We were interrupted by a young man who said our interview with Ahmed would have to be postponed because he had to rush to join Mulayam who had landed by helicopter in the center of town to address an election rally.

I finally got to see Ahmed at his party headquarters in town later in the day. He was seated in a tiny room on a plastic chair and was shouting at someone on his cell phone. I was a little anxious about questioning him. But he waved a friendly hand toward some chairs and ordered tea and sweets. His face was dominated by heavy jowls, a thick mustache, and bulging eyes. His teeth were stained red with *paan*, an addictive mix of betel nut, lime, and tobacco leaf that you chew for hours. He was quick to laugh. I asked why he had alleged that the Dalit party was running a Hindu nationalist campaign. "Dalits are very simple people," he said. "They are nice people also. But you know some of them think that if they fall sick they can cure themselves just by tying a yellow string around a tree. In politics, they follow one leader in the morning and another in the afternoon. They are very easily misled. Mayawati is wooing the Brahmins because the Brahmins don't like the Muslims or the Yadavs. So this is what has happened."

I said most people thought the election was really a contest be-

led us through his party headquarters to our waiting car outside. A hundred or more men who had been lounging outside Ahmed's small office immediately sprang to their feet. Many of them were armed. It felt like we were strolling through an army camp. Instead of a parliamentarian, it was a two-star general who was waving us off. I felt no surprise a few weeks later when I heard who had prevailed in the Allahabad campaign.

* * *

As a journalist, I had been inside the homes of very wealthy people before. But nothing compared to what I saw at 27 Lodhi Estate in central New Delhi. It was (and remains) the official residence of Amar Singh, a member of parliament for Mulayam Singh Yadav's Samajwadi Party. The airy bungalow, which is one of 204 similar residences in the capital allocated to the nation's most senior politicians and officials, is officially protected under New Delhi's heritage laws. It was designed, like much of the city, by the architect Edwin Lutyens. Amar Singh, who had agreed to allow me and a mutual acquaintance to look over the property, had generated controversy in the newspapers for having carried out extensive alterations to his bungalow. During our guided tour Amar Singh was keen to demonstrate that the changes he had made were in fact "improvements."

Although himself a Rajput, which is relatively high caste, Amar Singh is one of the two or three most powerful leaders among India's lower-caste parties. A portly man nearing fifty, and with the obligatory mustache, Amar Singh was accompanied by Jayaprada, a former Bollywood actress who had been recruited into politics in the 2004 election. In spite of being a member of parliament, Jayaprada at all times referred to Amar Singh as "sir." He said to us: "I was not very enthusiastic to show you my residence after what the media has been writing about me. They come here, eat my food and write what they like."

The same month, Mulayam Singh Yadav, the chief minister of Uttar Pradesh, had appointed as his chief secretary a person who had been voted by her colleagues (at an annual convention of civil servants) the second most corrupt civil servant in Uttar Pradesh. Her appointment caused a furor. Allegations against the Samajwadi Party include selling electoral tickets to the highest bidder, accepting bribes from civil servants to be moved to more comfortable postings, handing out industrial licenses in exchange for favors, and fixing supposedly blind lotteries to allocate prime urban land to friends.

Amar Singh is also the founder and head of the Uttar Pradesh Development Council, a group of politicians and businessmen whom the media has labeled "crony capitalist." Prominent members include Anil Ambani, who controls Reliance Infocomm and Reliance Energy, two of India's largest companies; and Subroto Roy, who owns the Sahara Group, a diversified private company with an airline, TV channels, and sprawling private residential estates. "If this is crony capitalism then we should all be crony capitalists," Singh said to me, pointing out that the Uttar Pradesh Development Council had brought in many new investments for his state. What about the corruption allegations against his party? "There might be a little corruption here and there," Singh said. "You cannot check everything."

Our guided tour began with the garden. Amar Singh took us along the outer perimeter, whose walls had been recast with white marble bas-reliefs of gamboling cherubs and nubile winged angels, a curious hybrid of classical Greek art and modern pornography. Next we entered a prefab annex Singh had erected, which contained a modern gym with the usual NordicTracks and cycle machines. In the adjoining room there was a large marble Jacuzzi with gold-plated taps. Singh then took us across to the main building, against the exterior of which he had constructed a sweeping *Gone With the Wind* staircase that took us up to the terrace of the bungalow, which had been converted into a roof garden with grass and rose beds. "Are you liking this?" asked Singh. Next we went inside. The main room was dominated by a vast portrait of Singh and his family. Next to it were

gold and jewelry-studded depictions of the god Krishna. No corner of the walls or the floors remained unadorned by some trophy item or other: a silver *Ravissant* receptacle here, a priceless antique vase there. In each of the main rooms, Singh had given pride of place to one of the most expensive items of home entertainment in the world: the 60-inch plasma screen Bang & Olufsen TV. Each would retail for as much as \$60,000.

But the grandest cut was reserved until last. Amar Singh, whose excitement had been mounting as the tour progressed, took us into the main dining room. At the side of the room he had demolished a portion of the wall to create a small alcove that jutted into the garden and was protected by a glass screen. Behind the screen was a small and illuminated marble basin out of which gurgled a soothing stream of water. Singh took out what looked to be a giant TV remote control and pointed it at the high ceiling above the dining table. I half expected another screen to pop out. He pressed the button and something started to happen to the heavy stone Lutyens ceiling. Slowly but noiselessly, it began to divide. It was impossible to guess what was about to be revealed. We were actually—I almost convinced myself—characters in one of those Bond films and Singh was about to feed us to birds of prey. After the ceiling had fully parted we were greeted with a dazzling view of the roof through the prism of a small glass pyramid that was clearly modeled on the structure that sits above the Louvre gallery in Paris. The shimmering glass refracted the verdant foliage of the terrace beyond. Everyone gasped, half of us in shock, the other half in admiration. “Now,” said Amar Singh, turning toward us, beaming from ear to ear, “do you think these are improvements or just alterations?”

Most of this chapter has focused on the deep caste divisions of north India and the corruption that often goes with them. A majority of Indians live in the north, which gives the region a correspondingly

larger impact on the character of national politics. Many who despair of the north's sometimes pathological caste relations glance longingly toward the south, for example, to the state of Tamil Nadu, which seems to have put the worst of caste conflict behind it. Caste still exists in Tamil Nadu. And much like in the north, Tamil Nadu's two principal political parties seem to sit up all night and day thinking of ways to break up their opponent's caste alliances. As in Uttar Pradesh, neither the Congress Party nor the BJP has much of a presence in Tamil Nadu, accounting for less than a fifth of its representation between them. Yet guns only very rarely spill over into Tamil Nadu politics and there are far fewer politicians with “criminal backgrounds” in its legislative assembly. The state provides basic services with a much higher degree of efficiency to most people. Things appear to function, at least to a minimum standard of acceptability. “We estimate that roughly 30 percent of public resources are diverted in Tamil Nadu compared to about 70 percent in the north,” the chief secretary of Tamil Nadu told me. As a result, the state has paved highways, large inflows of private investment both foreign and domestic, and an economy that generates jobs on a significant scale. It is no coincidence that Tamil Nadu is the most urbanized state in India, with almost half of its people living in towns. Bihar is the least urbanized state, with fewer than 10 percent of its people living in towns.

Tamil Nadu, which was among the first regions in India to be ruled directly by the British in the eighteenth century, has a much longer experience than the north with lower-caste political agitation. As long ago as the 1880s, when the British were starting to classify Indians by caste for a census, the city of Madras was already a hive of lower-caste radicalism. The government of Madras, as Tamil Nadu was then known, conceded public sector job quotas to lower castes in the 1920s, thirty years before India allocated quotas to Dalits and almost seventy years before New Delhi extended national set-asides to “Other Backward Classes.” Tamil Nadu holds the record in India for the highest proportion of set-asides, amounting to 69 per-

cent of its government jobs. This has good and bad consequences. The bad part is that it is very hard to reform the state's bloated bureaucracy or instill a system of meritocracy. Most quotas are supposed to be temporary. But as the saying goes: "There is nothing as permanent as a temporary government measure." The good side is that the state's upper castes have had many decades to get accustomed to "social justice" as a normal part of politics, even if they do not particularly like it.

Another positive aspect is that almost 90 percent of Tamil Nadu's sixty million people are literate, compared to just half of the people in Bihar. This owes something to the fact that lower-caste agitation began in Tamil Nadu long before India got democracy, which meant that after independence lower-caste leaders had to focus on other arenas to empower their followers. As a result, there was a much greater emphasis on educating the masses as the most obvious way of raising their social status. Other reasons could be that Tamil Nadu, like neighboring Kerala, had far more extensive experience than the north of Christian missionary activity in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, so there were many more opportunities for the lower castes to attend schools. Bihar and Uttar Pradesh are deep in India's landlocked interior. Tamil Nadu is a coastal state so it was always more open to foreign influences. Tamil Nadu also has a relatively low proportion of Brahmins, amounting to just 3 percent of its population, compared to between 15 and 20 percent in the northern states. The state's unusual caste demography meant it was easier for everyone else to unite against the upper orders and release their stranglehold on society. Finally, Tamil Nadu has a completely different language and script and so it is linguistically shielded from many of the less savory trends that are visible in the "Hindi belt," a term commonly used for India's north.

Tamil Nadu gave the rest of the world an impressive display of its efficiency after the devastating tsunami of December 2004 struck. India is no stranger to large natural disasters. Thousands died in the coastal state of Orissa in 1999 when it was hit by a large cyclone. Earthquakes claimed thousands of lives in the western Indian state of

Gujarat in 2001 and in Kashmir in 2005. But none of the other states responded with anything like the degree of alacrity of Tamil Nadu, whose disaster was as devastating as anything India has seen in recent decades. Between 15,000 and 20,000 people were killed by the giant wave that hit the state's coastline.

I visited the district of Cuddalore, which is about a hundred miles south of Chennai. The district had suffered several hundred deaths from tsunami, and tens of thousands of people had been made homeless. Within a year of the disaster, the government had rehabilitated almost all of Cuddalore's displaced people in pukka accommodation. By contrast, in Orissa there were still people living in camps in 2006, people who had been made homeless seven years earlier by the cyclone. Most of the victims I met in Cuddalore were lower caste. But they were fully aware of their rights. "In Orissa the women were too afraid to come out of their huts and talk to me," said Joseph Williams, a Tamil doctor who had assisted in both disasters. "In Tamil Nadu it is difficult to get the women to stop talking."

In one village that was particularly badly hit, I was taken to the temporary shelters in which many of the 3,000 villagers were now housed. Dozens of people gathered to answer my questions. The shelters were rudimentary. But they were more impressive than the makeshift contraptions in which millions live permanently in the slums of Mumbai, Delhi, or Kolkata. The refugees had the use of toilets that were cleaned daily. During our conversation the women frequently interrupted the men. This is rare in the north. Literacy can do wonders for people's self-confidence. Some of the women had been cross-checking the assistance and financial compensation they had received against what had been announced in the newspapers. "Where is the 3,000 crores [about \$750 million] that the World Bank pledged?" one woman asked me. Another said: "We have only been compensated for eighty-four boats but we lost ninety-six." I asked how many people who were present had lost a relative. Every one raised their hand. Then I asked how many had received the Rs 200,000 compensation for their dead. Everyone raised their hand.

All had been allocated free housing in the new township that was under construction a few hundred yards inland.

Inevitably, the village was divided along caste lines. My guides, who were working for Action Aid, a nongovernmental relief organization, told me there was a "greater fishermen's" caste and a "lesser fishermen's" caste and that these two castes had lived in different parts of the village. But the new village was providing mixed housing. Unusually, the caste least affected by the disaster were the Dalits who were too low down in the pecking order to live near the sea. Those who were affected the worst were the "greater fishermen" who lived on the edge of the sea in the prime spots. Amid the swaying palms was an endless stretch of rubble from the devastated housing set against the azure backdrop of a becalmed sea. I asked the women how quickly they had received aid. In the Gujarat earthquake of 2001, much of the assistance was held up, sometimes fatally, by the eagerness of national VIPs to be photographed visiting the disaster zones. Their private planes clogged up the small airstrips that were also being used by relief agencies to bring in supplies. In addition, the relief effort was compromised by an unseemly competition between different aid agencies to get to the scene. The government of Gujarat had clearly lost its grip on the situation. In Tamil Nadu, however, the state government allocated different villages to different aid agencies and retained an iron coordinating grasp on the effort. There were no epiphemics. "We got assistance quite quickly," the women agreed.

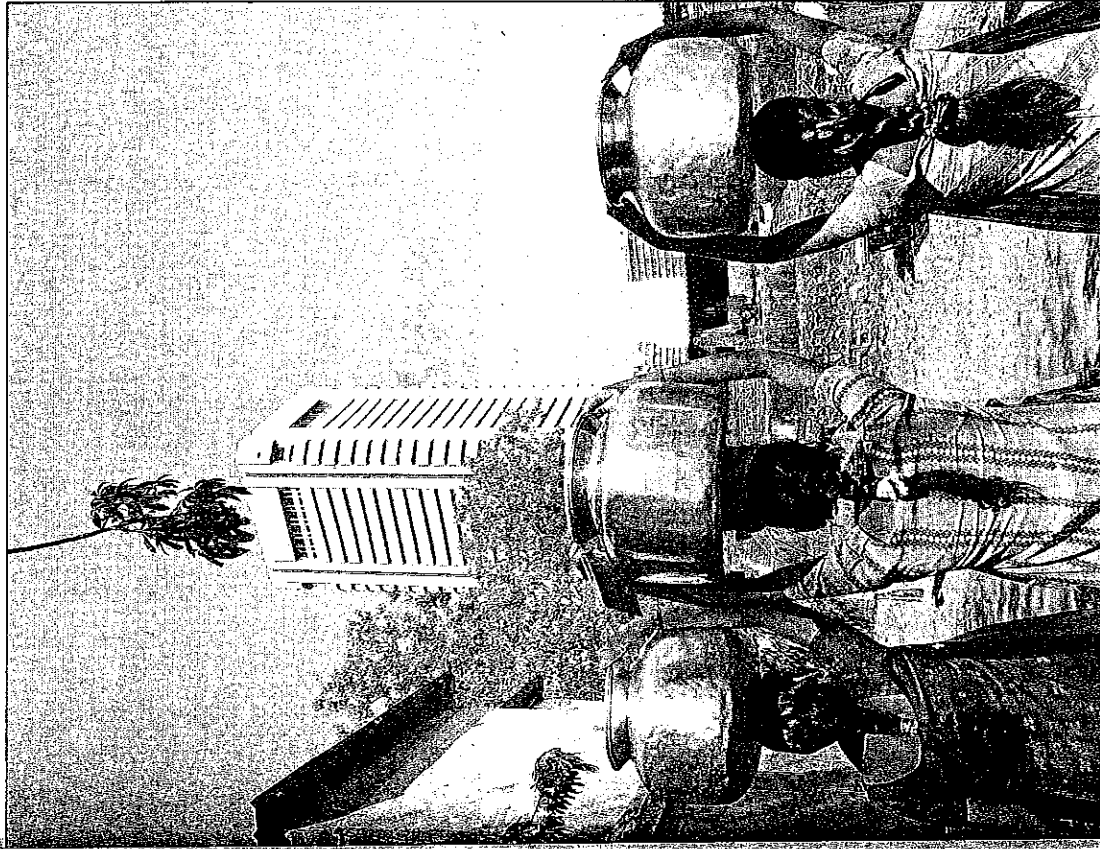
It is not just Tamil Nadu's disaster response system that is relatively efficient. The state also has one of the best records for delivering everyday services to the poor. One of the most important is the "mid-day meals" program, in which children are given an incentive to attend school by the availability of free cooked food. Mostly it works. In many other parts of India midday meals rarely arrive, partly because education is valued less highly than in the south but also because upper-caste families will not permit their children to eat food they suspect has been prepared by lower-caste cooks. In Tamil Nadu this no longer appears to be a problem. Marrying within your caste is

still normal. But the majority of people, except for some among Tamil Nadu's small enclave of Brahmins, who have a reputation for being even more finicky about caste rules than others, have overcome the more offensive aspects of caste pollution rules. Much the same contrast applies to health centers. This is what Jean Dréze, one of India's leading economists (of Belgian origin), said in a survey of Tamil Nadu's rural clinics: "They were clean, lively, and well staffed. Patients streamed in and out, evidently at ease with the system. It was a joy to see this, in contrast with the bare, deserted, gloomy, hostile premises that pass for health centers in north India."²²

It is not my aim to glorify Tamil Nadu. The state suffers from chronic problems, such as poor water supply in its cities and abysmal irrigation for its farmers. It also has a militant civil service that refuses to be reformed. It took the state's police more than twenty years to apprehend and then shoot Veerappan, Tamil Nadu's most celebrated criminal. Veerappan, whom some saw as a Tamil "Robin Hood," had plundered the state's beautiful tropical parks of wild elephants and sandalwood. His gang was alleged to have killed hundreds of innocent people over the years. He was reputed to have many police officers and local politicians on his payroll, which would explain why he eluded the law with such ease for so long. Eventually, in 2004 Veerappan was cornered and shot. Jayalalithaa, Tamil Nadu's chief minister and a politician who is as intimidating as Mayawati, handed out rewards to 752 policemen. After Veerappan was dispatched, each of the policemen was given Rs 300,000 rupees (about \$7,000), a plot of land, and a promotion. More than 10,000 police in the neighboring state of Karnataka also claimed to have played a role in Veerappan's killing and demanded similar consideration, in spite of having "just missed" Veerappan on numerous occasions. In turning down their request, B. N. Alburquerque, Karnataka's chief of police, was the only senior figure in either state to show a sense of humor about this absurd demand. "If the operation had been botched up, no one would have claimed responsibility," said Alburquerque. "Success has many fathers, while failure is an orphan."²³

But Tamil Nadu's problems pale in comparison to those of most of north India. Although the state has yet to confront the issues of a large administrative service that lacks accountability, it possesses something very valuable that is not evident in most of the north: a civic society. It is much more difficult to hijack public space in Tamil Nadu. Its large urbanized middle class accepts the need for rules that everyone should follow, even if they are not followed all of the time. At a trivial level it is evident in Chennai's enforcement of basic everyday regulations such as no-smoking zones, which in cities like New Delhi are honored mostly in the breach. More important, as we have seen, it is also evident in the routine provision of basic public services to people from all backgrounds. Tamil Nadu's civic culture may be hard to measure. But it is an invaluable asset that gives it a decisive economic edge over most of the north.

Many Indian modernizers hope that Tamil Nadu points the way that the north is heading—toward a more moderated and civilized clash between the castes in the field of politics and elsewhere. Tamil Nadu proves that caste sentiments can be diluted, especially in urban settings. But caste has far from disappeared in urban India. In a very detailed nationwide poll conducted in January 2006,²⁴ 74 percent of respondents said they did not approve of intercaste marriages. Among the educated—and overwhelmingly urban—respondents, 56 percent of graduates also disapproved of such marriages. Likewise, 72 percent of all respondents agreed that parents should have the final say in their children's choice of marriage partners. Among urban respondents, 59 percent agreed. Certainly in an urban setting it is easier to escape the traditional caste functions and taboos that are still likely to govern life in the villages. It is easier to be anonymous in the city. But that does not necessarily mean you transcend your caste. You are still likely to vote for your caste party, marry within your caste, and live in residential areas where your caste is congregated. It is true that you are much less likely to be born into a particular job or caste function, as would still be the case for most villagers. But in other respects—not least in the world of politics—caste in India shows few signs of withering away.



Slum residents fetch water in today's Mumbai (Getty Images)