

**NARRATIVES IN THE  
RE-CONSTITUTION OF  
COMMUNITIES**

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## SUMMARY

The entry and emergence of communities into the public domain of the nation is preceded by the re-constitution of communities. That is, alterations in the structure (economic and social), identity and orientations of communities and shifts in community-state relations account for such politicized public presence of communities as interest groups and political actors. The wider contextual bases and terms by which a number of communities are reconstituted can be discerned in the multiple narratives and varied strategies deployed by or at communities. This study draws on three case studies to delineate the narratives, either of the nation-state, capital or culture that are deployed in the re-constitution of communities.

The increasing presence and voice of communities in the public domain of the nation calls attention to the range of factors that account for the emergence of communities as interest groups with frequent encounters with the state or with other communities. Such trends, often identified as the growth of “politicized community identity “ (Feitag 1990), the emergence of communities as “political actors” in the nation (Das 1995), and the “aliveness” of poor communities in the nation (Chatterjee 1998) are linked to a range of conditions. The failure of the nation-state and its polity to engender and establish a civil society and or the incompatibility of modern institutions and rules to pre-modern social formations<sup>1</sup> have been the larger context in which such resurgence of community identities and politics are located. The need to retain cultural rights, the struggle against forms of domination (O’Hanlon 1997) and protests against alterations in state structures (Basu and Kohli 1997) have been presented as some factors that account for the entry of such communities into the public arena. While community-state interfaces indicate the increasing entrenchment of the state in the economic and social life of communities (and attempts by communities to challenge or demand such intervention), other factors that account for the increase in community-state and or community-community encounters need to be highlighted. Attention to the diverse contexts, forms and strategies by which communities are re-constituted will help understand the new identities and roles of communities as they emerge into the public domain of the nation.

A range of complex and contradictory conditions and trends in the nation provide the context in which the re-constitution of communities is taking place. Some trends impact on the re-constitution of communities are: the partial dissolution of pre-capitalistic economic and social forms; the complex and contradictory relationship between the state and capital; the absorption of pre-modern

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<sup>1</sup> The link between the establishment of a “civil society” and state-community relations for India remains debatable. While many see the persistence of pre-modern social institutions such as caste and religious organizations as thwarting the establishment of a “civil society”, others, such as

institutions, such as caste organizations, to cater to modern demands and orientations; and the entry and entrenchment of cultural demands on the political and economic agenda of the nation. But these complex and contradictory conditions can be traced to the differential orientations that emanate from a range of institutions and agents in the nation. Seen as narratives, four different and key orientations which direct the re-constitution of communities can be discerned<sup>2</sup>. Narratives of the nation-state emanate primarily from the state and its agencies and focus on the economic, political, and social goals that the state assigns to itself as a nation. Its rhetoric is concentrated on drawing its pluricultural/multiverse citizenry into its agenda of modernization, westernization, secularization and development. More recently, the nation-state, in alliance with national and international capital, disseminates narratives of liberalization, privatization, and globalization. And in times of a crisis of legitimization it is not unusual for the nation-state to resort to cultural narratives. Narratives of capital are drawn from institutions and actors associated with the market-economy. They largely privilege economic rationality over judicious distribution and cultural claims. And the presence of such narratives since the liberalization of the economy is more observable than ever before. Narratives of culture are drawn not only from the social institutions of the nation but also emanate from the nation-state and from capital. The new sources of cultural narratives are the state, consumer capitalism, the media and political organizations that draw on religious fundamentalism. Narratives of the community originate from both, specific identifiable communities and from broader mobilized groups of people that seek to constitute themselves into a community for a specific purpose or duration. The latter kind of narratives relate not only to their assertions for sustainable

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O'Hanlon (1997) see the emergence of caste in the public domain as characterizing a form of civil society itself.

2. I use the term "narrative" to indicate the links between the terms and discourses deployed by and relied on by agents, institutions and organizations as they seek to alter their position (economic, social, cultural) in the nation. In a broader perspective, narratives are programmatic statements that encapsulate the ideas, ideology, aspirations of any agent, agency or organization.

resources/livelihoods but also to their struggles for representation, autonomy, and identity.

It is in the articulation of these narratives that the re-constitution of communities takes place. The following three case studies of different communities will indicate the pattern by which communities re-constitute themselves. And as they re-constitute themselves or are re-constituted by larger political, economic or social forces, communities deploy a range of narratives.

### **I: Deploying Symbols: Lingayats Turn Cultural Images into Sectarian Icons**

Since the 1990's the Lingayats or Virashaivas of Karnataka have sought to challenge the state of Karnataka in a variety of ways. They have on two occasions demanded bans on books that are considered to be critical or derogatory of Basavanna, the founder of Virashaivism<sup>3</sup>. There has, further, been a movement to demand the re-naming of Gulbarga University as Basavanna University, thereby challenging the demand by the Dalits to have the university re-named as Ambedkar University. Such calls and demands have emanated primarily from the Lingayats organised under the umbrella of the Rashtriya Basava Dal (RBD, henceforth). Based in Gulbarga district and drawing its members primarily from villages and towns of Gulbarga and Bidar districts, the RBD is organised on lines similar to the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS), the mass-based organization that supports a fundamentalist Hindu cultural and political agenda. The RBD holds regular *shakas* that are imitations of the RSS drills, and has initiated and promoted household and neighbourhood festivals in which *Vachanas*, the sayings or aphorisms of Virashaivism are sung. The RBD is

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<sup>3</sup> Virashaivism is a religio-philosophical movement that was initiated in the twelfth century in north karnataka by Basavanna. Its objectives were primarily to critique the then caste society and to consolidate a non-caste society based on work, worship of a single god, and commensality.

also associated with the establishment of a monastery or *mutt* in Bidar, that seeks to imitate the role of the medieval *mutt* but which now has new political and economic roles. In reviving its medieval organizational pattern (that of the *mutt*) and in deploying cultural symbols, the community displays what is considered to be the classic case of boundary maintenance (Cohen 1990). As the structural base of the community is eroded or challenged, the community tries to consolidate its symbolic base. And in resuscitating its old symbols, the community seeks not only to re-gain its lost cultural and economic position and status but also to emerge as a political actor. But the entry of the community into the public arena also serves dual purposes. It not only challenges the dominance of the state over it but also attempts to counter the possible threats to its own dominance by other communities.

In seeking to re-constitute the Lingayat community with enhanced economic and political orientation, the RBD seeks a resurgence of its once dominant position. As Shivakumar Hattigudi (1997) elaborates, the establishment and activities of the RBD can be traced to the fact that the Lingayats have been losing their cultural, economic and political position in the region. Changes in land use patterns, land distribution by the state to land less caste groups, and the decrease in hereditary village posts, once enjoyed by Lingayats in the area, form the bases for threats to the once absolute dominance of Lingayats in the region. In addition, the rise of other middle-rank caste groups into the political foray and the new identity and consciousness of Dalits are seen as threats to the Lingayats.

There are several implications of such community re-constitution. For one, as the Kannada litterateur and theatre activist, K.V. Subbanna (1996), noted, the revival and deployment of such symbols are indicative of the ways in which “cultural symbols are turned into sectarian icons”. The sayings and, in fact, the whole of Virashaiva philosophy, was meant to be and has the possibility of being relevant

to a broad section of people. Yet, in claiming an exclusive cultural right over the symbols and heritage of a once broad-based, inclusivist religio-philosophical movement, a vigilantism has grown among the Virashaivas. A spate of new literature and speeches emphasize the need to safeguard the cultural importance of Virashaivism. At the same time, by activists of the RBD subject studies, literature, and plays, that a critical stance of either Basavanna, the founder, or of any dimensions or tenets of Virashaivism to condemnation and threaten the authors. Such vigilantism is an attempt by the community to represent itself in terms that align with the identity it seeks to develop and safe guard and reinforce such identity to a larger public. By challenging the state and acting as guardians of the cultural images of the community, key actors from the mobilized community consolidate their own political and economic legitimacy.

## **II: Safeguarding Capital: The Case of Nadars of Tamil Nadu**

In January 1998, newspapers reported the organization of a protest by Nadars of Tamil Nadu against the possible take-over of the Tamil Nadu Merchantile Bank by the Essar Group. The “Nadar Mahajana Bank Share Investors Forum” urged the RBI not to allow bank shares to move out of the hands of Nadars<sup>4</sup>. The ability of a caste group to challenge the threats to its capital interests is indicative of the ability of a low-ranked caste community to enhance and consolidate its own social ranking and organization.

The use of capital in the late twentieth century by the Nadars to enhance and safeguard their social and economic position is a continuation of the strategies deployed by them to re-constitute their community in the late nineteenth century. A community ranked low in the ritual and occupational hierarchy of Tamil Nadu, the Nadars had, in the late nineteenth century, resorted to migration from the villages and shifted from their caste occupation of toddy-tapping to petty trading

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<sup>4</sup> (Indian Express, January 6<sup>th</sup> 1998.

in the newly established towns of Tamil Nadu. The occupational shift had been supported by the establishment of the *Uravinmirai*, associations that helped the new migrants build settlements and establish business enterprises. The establishment of the Nadar Mahajana Sangha, some years later, as an organization that catered to the credit and capital requirements of the community, furthered the entrepreneurial and social aspirations of the community. Many soon moved from being petty traders to becoming merchants and industrialists. The organizational capacity and orientation of the Nadar Mahajana Sangha which focussed primarily on safeguarding and promoting the interests of its own members, indicates the way in which capital is grounded in the social institutions of the community (Chatterjee 1998). Though communitarian studies often see capital as being inimical to the solidarity and collective orientations of community (Conway 1996), this is not applicable in the case of Nadars. Capital far from being inimical to the collective interests of the community has helped a community to forge an emergent new identity and to challenge the historical and culturally grounded ascription of low status. In addition, growth in capital base and entrepreneurial activities has led to a decline in internal differences and tensions within the community (Templeman 1996).

Nadars have then emerged in the belts of Tamil Nadu and in the larger economic arena of the nation as leading merchants and traders. In transforming themselves into a “corporate group”, they eschewed their caste-assigned occupation and overcame the stigma associated with it. And in strengthening their economic position they strengthened not only their status vis-à-vis other communities but also the coherence and new identity of the community. While the formal associations helped safeguard their economic interests, they have also used their collective caste presence to enhance their political clout. As a significant vote bank in the region, the community continues to be wooed by all political parties. This was made particularly evident when the issue of retaining the Nadar shareholders and trustees strength in the Tamilnadu Mercantile Bank was



supported by the ex-Chief Minister, Jayalalitha, and the group was successful in allaying the external threats to its banking interests.

Trends among the Nadar community are exemplary of the extent to which the need to safeguard their capital in even the larger economic arena is linked to their dependency on capital to develop a better social and political status. The need to control capital is to sustain their new identity and position as a significant merchant, trading and entrepreneurial community. As a community, it was inadequate to eschew ascribed low status by changing occupations. Instead, a consolidation of their collective, achieved financial strength by strategies to ensure their autonomy and interests have been made.

### **III: Colonizing An Agrarian Life-World: The Emergence of Farmers as a Community**

A spate of suicides by farmers in the north Karnataka and southern Andhra belt has called attention to the conditions of marginal farmers in the nation. Yet, in many ways the incidents and their increase and spread, begun around 1995, highlight the re-constitution of agrarian communities by narratives of the nation-state and capital<sup>5</sup>. Privileging norms of productivity over ecological sustenance, independent success over collective growth, income over equitable distribution of resources, the agencies of the nation-state and capital have altered the fundamental bases of a range of local agricultural forms and their concomitant agrarian cultures. The promotion of commercial agriculture is based on the utilization of external technology and know-how, capital, and the alteration of locally specific forms of agriculture. Such alterations, in the existing structures,

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<sup>5</sup> Suicides have been reported from the dry belts of north Karnataka and Andhra since the 1994-95 crisis related to sugarcane cultivation. Farmers who had reportedly gone into heavy debts in order to cultivate sugarcane, suffered severe set-backs when the procurement prices for sugar were lowered. In 1996, suicides were reported from Bijapur district also.

knowledge systems, and processes, and the induction of new forms of knowledge and inputs have implications for the reconstitution of agrarian communities.

But, unlike the ability of the Nadar community to draw on and utilise the opportunities afforded by new occupations and capital, agrarian communities in general and marginal agrarian families in particular, become victims of the narratives of the nation-state and capital.

This is particularly important since state intervention in rural areas, especially its claims to alleviating food scarcity and enhancing the lives of the rural poor, has led to sharp contradictions. While state intervention has privileged capital and modern agriculture, it has displaced local agricultural and artisanal knowledge but largely retained the existing social structure. The result of such contradictions is that instead of alleviating poverty and promoting widespread development and growth, rural areas have become subject to pockets of affluence, most of it short-lived, with persisting poverty and deprivation. Given such contradictions, the emergence of farmers or agriculturists as an interest group that seeks to have their grievances redressed by the state has become a key form of community versus state altercations.

While the characteristics of the “community” bases of agrarian societies itself can be debated<sup>6</sup>, it is important to recognize the extent to which commercial agriculture leads to the separation of the economic base of agricultural production from its social and cultural base. In producing for the market, with inputs from the market and in terms dictated by the market, farmers become subject to the vicissitudes of market structures themselves. Though the entry and growth of markets in the life of a community increases the power asymmetry between community and market it also increases the asymmetry of power and social

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<sup>6</sup> The question of agrarian societies being represented as “communities” remains debatable. While many have questioned the social bases of community in rural India, given its caste-based hierarchy and differentiation, the sociological reality of rural communities has to be recognized. In addition, it may be important to note that these communities are aggregative communities even if there are not socially

relations within the community. But, the very engagement with the market is co-terminus with the disengagement of such farmers from their previous social and cultural ties with the larger village. Such conditions exemplify what Habermas (1987) noted to be the subordination of social and cultural reproduction to that of economic reproduction. More specifically, in an agrarian society in which sociality has been the mark of its production and reproduction system (Appadurai 1990), alterations that privilege individual choices and independent livelihoods have several implications for the community.

It is in such contexts that crises, such as loss of crops or indebtedness, become individually and singularly borne burdens. The construction and experience of crop-loss as an individual or household burden is a significant shift from the earlier construction of crop-loss within a divinity-nature-human paradigm<sup>7</sup> and its experience as a collectively shared phenomenon. It was this form of construction and experience of crop-loss that accounted for the fact that in a region with a history of frequent and prolonged periods of crop loss, from either droughts or pests, there has been no historical record of suicides.

Such conditions are summative expressions of the entrenchment of multiple crises in large parts of rural India. There is not only a production crisis but also an ecological crisis and a social crisis<sup>8</sup>. Growing crops that are ecologically unsuitable to the region leads not only to ecological stress but also to economic risks. Commercial production encourages the submission of producers to market

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integrative or unitarian communities. More specifically, the representation of these agrarian communities in substantivist terms is raised.

<sup>7</sup>Contextualised within a frame of divinity-nature-human continuum, calamities were often seen as retributive actions for recalcitrant human activities.

<sup>8</sup> A detailed report on the agrarian crisis as a triple crises is currently under completion and will be available from the author (A.R.Vasavi, National Institute of Advanced Studies, Indian Institute of Science Campus, Bangalore-560012).

and credit agencies and eschews established, socially derived and driven forms of production. The result under such conditions is that there is the constitution and experience of crop loss as an individual crisis. Suicides, then, are expressions of these multiple crises.

The situation highlights not only the extent to which narratives of the nation-state and capital can re-constitute communities, but also the inability of the nation-state to limit or control capital. The result of such subordination is that the state itself must face the emergence of communities as political actors, which, then, seek to be compensated for the depredations experienced by the invasion and impact of uncontrolled capital over them. The emergence of farmers as members of a larger “affiliative community” (Das 1995) and as “state seekers” with their demands for state-based compensation for crop loss and for deaths exemplifies this<sup>9</sup>. But, this also highlights a paradoxical situation, in that it is the destruction of local bases and identities of agricultural communities that also leads to the emergence of the agricultural community as an interest group with collective demands.

Narratives of capital, culture, community and nation state not only account for the re-constitution of communities, but the relationship between the communities and these agencies and sources of narratives accounts for variations in the conditions and position of communities vis-à-vis the state or other communities. Depending on whether the narratives are deployed by or at communities largely accounts for the type of altered positions of communities. Communities with stronger capital and social bases are able to engage with capital and nation state narratives in terms that are beneficial to them. While the case of the Nadars represents this, the condition of poor agrarian communities that become subject to such narratives but which experience an erosion of their very community and livelihood bases

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<sup>9</sup> Three major agricultural organizations have mobilized themselves and their activists against the state. These are the Karnataka Rajya Raitha Sangha (KRRS), Pratha Raitha Sangha, and the All-India Kisan Sabha. All three have mobilized agriculturists in different states and are seeking compensation for families

highlight the reverse results of such re-constitution. The ability of these communities to either challenge the dominance of state and or capital narratives and to emerge as interest groups or “political actors” is dependent on the class and caste position they occupy in the national stage. Those communities, located closer to the political and economic centres of the nation are able to galvanize and pit themselves into the public domain and challenge narratives and agencies that are inimical to their interests. Such communities, that are dominant, politically and economically, and which enjoy a high social and ritual position, are also able to deploy cultural and religious symbols to challenge state and other community dominance. The case of Sikhs in the Punjab, the Marathas in Maharashtra, and the Lingayats in Karnataka testify the viability of deploying cultural symbols for political and economic gains.

Other communities that lack high political, economic and social status remain marginal and silent despite significant re-constitution of their community structures and identities. That despite protracted struggles, communities of Adivasi, Dalits and other groups of economically and socially marginal peoples have not been beneficiaries of community-based mobilization validates this. Perhaps the most exemplary case of how bureaucratic re-constitution of poor communities devastates poor communities is that of the Gowaris of Maharashtra. In seeking the inclusion of their community in the schedule tribe list (as they had been de-notified through a technical error), they were subject to a state-led violence, in which they received death rather than inclusion<sup>10</sup>. Poor and marginalised communities are unable to counter the political and economic axes of the state and capital by asserting their own moral and cultural heritage.

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of those who committed suicide, crop insurance, regulation of pesticide and seed companies, and a moratorium on their agricultural debts.

<sup>10</sup> The attempt by the Gowaris to meet the Chief Minister in Nagpur resulted in them being lathi-charged, which led to a stampede and to the death of about 104 Gowaris.

While the ability and viability of communities to emerge as “political actors” or contesting agents in the public domain is predicated on their class and caste/social position, the differences in the experience of public and private domains account for variations in community consciousness and community-based networks. While the poor and marginalised have been subject to an erosion of their private domains, marked especially by the intrusion of the state into the reproductive capabilities, productive activities, and representation of poor communities, the rich are witnessing a retrieval and expansion of their own private domains. Inter-linked with such variations is the extent to which the public domain is also differently experienced and accessible to the poor and rich. While the public domain is more accessible to the rich, it is restricted and limited to claims by the poor. And it is this, the shrinkage of the private domain and the inaccessibility of the public domain, with its allocatory and restitutive power, to the poor that accounts for the “aliveness” (Chatterjee 1998) of community sensibilities and orientations among the poor. Marginalised, oppressed and deprived of essential life sustaining conditions, they struggle against and compensate for the inadequacies of the state and economy through the via media of community.

It is as a result of such trends that communities that were once endowed with “fuzzy” boundaries and “dynamic” fluidity in the pre-colonial period (Kaviraj 1995), have become susceptible to a further consolidation of their community identities and orientation.

And their emergence into the larger public domain has implications for the constitution of the larger civil society. As contestatory and exclusive rights and claims for specific communities gain ground, there is a failure to generate a larger, shared civic consciousness in which the rights and also responsibilities of a majority of people are ensured. And in the process of such dense involutions, communities are increasingly the sites and sources of both individual and state ambitions. And the links between the conditions of communities and the narratives that re-constitute them become more tenuous.

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