Chapter 4
Honor and Morality in Contemporary Rural India

Pamela Price

Introduction

There have been major shifts in relations of power and authority in rural society in many areas of India since independence in 1947. Millions of people among the approximately 70% of the population who live in villages have challenged the dominance of high caste and/or major landholding village lords. These challenges have contributed to what Yogendra Yadav has termed the two “democratic upsurges,” as expressed in the results of elections to state and national assemblies (Yadav 2000). In the first democratic upsurge in the 1960s, voter turnout increased and new political parties emerged to undermine the nation-wide dominance of the Congress Party. Increasingly persons from lower status castes entered electoral politics. The second democratic upsurge occurred in the 1990s with the dramatic expansion in political participation of those low in caste ranking and in economic class. New political parties in parts of India emerged campaigning with direct reference to the status and well-being of Scheduled Castes (SC)\(^1\) and/or Backward Castes (BC, also called OBC).\(^2\)

It is difficult, with the current state of knowledge, to gauge the democratic “deepening” (Corbridge and Harriss 2000, p. 202) in the transitions which have taken place. While changes in voting patterns and the emergence of new political parties have attracted considerable scholarly attention,\(^3\) there has been little ethnographic examination of upsurges in localities.\(^4\) There is little scholarly discussion of the meanings which former and new authorities, as well as ordinary citizens,

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\(^1\) Ex-untouchables, also known as Dalits, are commonly referred to as Scheduled because of their protection under the Indian Constitution.

\(^2\) States have created reservations in government employment and local elections for “Backward Caste” groups known as OBCs, Other Backward Classes, who are non-Scheduled Caste, low status groups.

\(^3\) I will just mention the regular electoral analyses that appear in the journal *Economic and Political Weekly*, Wallace and Roy (2003), Yadav (1997), Jaffrelot (2003), Inkinen (2003), and Pai (2002).

assign to social and political changes in their communities. Few researchers have explored the nature and extent of departures from former ideologies of dominance. I approach some of these challenges in the study here.

Over a period of six months in 2003–2004 I made periodic visits to a village in a south Indian state with the intent of learning about local ideas and values of authority. My interest in contemporary political culture in rural society followed an engagement in studies of indigenous institutions of rule during the colonial period (Price 1996a) and of discourses about authority and status at district and state levels following independence (Price 1996b, 1999, 2005). In a village community I planned to track the fate of political ideas and values which I had investigated for earlier times and in transactions of greater scale. In particular I wanted to explore the existence in local cosmologies of possibilities for persons to acquire status and authority independent of their caste position. My earlier research suggested that ideas and values of honor and respect were salient in expressions of superiority in political relations. They were not necessarily statements about caste status. Political cosmologies contained notions attributing positive meaning to personal achievement. I pursue this issue here, within the wider one of the meanings which villagers attach to political and social relationships in a context in which conventional relationships of clientage and domination have undergone considerable disintegration.

In semi-structured conversations in the village of Balapalle, respondents told of great and small changes which had taken place in relations of power and authority in their locality during the past 10–15 years. Low caste status informants spoke of experiencing independence in their lives. In their rendition individual moral and behavioral qualities gave possibilities for the acquisition of power and influence in the village. Strikingly, informants expressed norms for the achievement of power and influence in the conventional idiom of honor and respect. Informants’ notions of authority appeared to build on old ideas of (economic and political) protection which they adapted to new uncertainties in their environment. Yet, their comments about authority were infused with conceptions of individual moral behavior which have innovational qualities. The study below is a confirmation of the assertion of Richard Wilson: “Because reasoning about social issues inevitably involves the invocation of moral criteria, it is moral reasoning that especially influences the norms of political culture” (Wilson 2000, p. 261).

Earlier studies document that personal qualities and skills, apart from birth, could count in the attainment of political influence in Indian rural society in the decades immediately following independence (see, for example, Bailey 1966, p. 201; Dube 1967, pp. 161–167; Hiebert 1971, pp. 62–68; Wiser and Wiser 1971, p. 206) People of influence and trust in the informal management of community affairs did not come only from the highest ranking castes and/or from the dominant, landholder castes. The work of Bruce Tapper (1987), Marvin Davis (1983), and Srinivas (1976), among others, suggests that ideas of personal, as well as group,

5 A pseudonym.