

André Béteille

The Backward Classes in Contemporary India



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I came to the Wissenschaftskolleg with a somewhat vague and ill-formed idea of working on a set of related topics. The empirical focus was to be on the Backward Classes in contemporary India and the theoretical focus on issues of equality and social justice. I had already spent a number of years working around these problems, and had brought with me the draft of a work on 'Positive discrimination and social justice' which was the text of

the Commonwealth Lectures delivered in the University of Cambridge a couple of years earlier. I had there entered into legal and philosophical questions, and expected to sharpen my focus on them in the course of my work. What I did in the event was very nearly the opposite, for I decided to broaden my approach instead of narrowing it, and to attempt a general sociological and historical account of the Backward Classes, taking as my point of departure the first paper I had published on the subject in 1965.

I spent the first couple of months at the Kolleg working out a plan for a comprehensive work on the Backward Classes that would take into account their present social situation as well as their historical antecedents and their prospects for change. The result was an elaborate outline of a book in 12 chapters. Having got the outline clear, I began to write the book chapter by chapter, and completed drafts of five chapters that deal successively with my approach to the problem; the structure of traditional Indian society and the place of the Backward Classes in it; tribe, civilization and state; untouchability and the Scheduled Castes; and castes of low and middle rank. The remaining chapters will deal with mobility along the axes of status and power; social and political movements among the Backward Classes; the constitutional and legal aspects of positive discrimination; and the impact of planning on education and employment among the Backward Classes.

Apart from the book on the Backward Classes on which I have started to work, I completed a number of essays on various subjects. I had brought with me the draft of a paper on the academic profession in India which was completed during the early part of my stay and published in the Spring 1990 issue of *Minerva*. I also revised for publication a paper entitled 'Race, caste and gender' which is to appear in the September 1990 issue of *Man*, as well as long essay on 'Equality and inequality' for an encyclopedia of anthropology to be published by Routledge and Kegan Paul in 1992.

Another aspect of the stay in the Kolleg was the opportunity it made available for extended reading and discussion. Particularly important was the stimulus this provided for consolidating a long-standing interest in comparative studies. I was associated with a small group of historians and anthropologists that met periodically after dinner, usually to discuss a paper circulated in advance. These discussions led me to write a paper on the comparative method which I chose as the subject of the inaugural Wertheim Lecture delivered in Amsterdam on 5 July 1990. *

The Kolleg provided an unusually stimulating atmosphere for study and reflection by allowing each Fellow to choose his own rhythm of work

* See pp. 165-179 in this volume.

and to withdraw himself or interact with others according to his own inclination. The historical events taking place in Berlin and outside added further to the quality of intellectual life at the Wissenschaftskolleg in the year 1989-90.