

Shalini Randeria

## Two Kinds of Fieldwork



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Freed from a heavy teaching load and the grind of university routine, I spent a most enjoyable and fruitful year at the Wissenschaftskolleg. I came with the intention of writing up my material on the "untouchable castes" of western India but gave in to the temptations of further reading at the risk of abandoning deadlines. Paradoxically two of the attractions of the Kolleg — the excellent library services and the intellectually stimulating, and often unsettling discussions with my co-fellows — proved to be my undoing. My only consolation in the face of an unfinished manuscript is that the writing which I managed to do profited from both these luxuries.

The year turned out to be a turbulent one intellectually and also politically. It saw the unification of Germany, the disintegration of Yugoslavia and the Soviet Union and breathtaking changes in eastern Europe. Thanks to an *Arbeitsschwerpunkt* on these transformations and the presence of very many Fellows from these countries, I had a unique opportunity to deepen my understanding of European history and politics. Midway through the year the shock of the Gulf war brought my work to a temporary standstill. As I pondered about circumstances which may justify violent conflict resolution, I wrote two pieces on the violence against minorities (Muslims and "Untouchables") in India.

In a short article entitled "India: a modern state and its enemies", I analysed the problems posed by the rise of ethnic movements, casteism,

communalism with their rejection of the universalising and homogenising project of the modern state. Rather than expressions of religious sentiments, these developments reflect conflicts over the distribution of scarce resources and are part of the arithmetic of political mobilisation along particularistic loyalties in a modern parliamentary democracy.

In a long paper "Equality of opportunity vs. social justice: caste quotas and student protest in India" (to be published in D. L. Sheth (ed.): *Castes, Classes and Reservations*, 1992), I examined the controversy surrounding the extension of caste based quotas in public employment and university admissions to a number of so-called "backward castes". How meaningful are quotas as an administrative corrective in the absence of structural change? Do quotas necessarily reduce the efficiency of institutions? Are caste based quotas likely to lead to a strengthening of caste-consciousness and a politicisation of castes rather than reducing the caste-linked inequality of life-chances? These are some of the issues addressed in the article, an abridged version of which appeared in German in the "Dokumentation" section of the *Frankfurter Rundschau*.

Of the eight chapters I had wanted to write on the "Politics of exchange among the 'untouchable castes' of Gujarat", I completed only five. In a general chapter on my experiences of living and working among members of these groups, I argued against comparing the process of fieldwork to a 'second childhood' as if it were the passage from childhood to maturity and the anthropologist the hero of a *Bildungsroman*.

The remaining chapters dealt with the relationships of ritual economic exchange binding the "untouchable castes" to the local ruler in the past and the dominant caste of the village today; the organising principles structuring the relations among the various "untouchable castes" themselves; the myths concerning the origin of "untouchable castes" and the functioning of caste councils as administrative, legislative and judicial bodies controlling the lives of their members.

Some of the main arguments on caste identity and the contested meanings of untouchability as well as on hierarchy, dominance and equality as structuring principles according to context and level were summarised in the evening talk I gave at the Kolleg.\* The lively discussion, especially the controversy with Maurice Godelier, on that occasion led me to a much more precise formulation of the way in which the relationship between caste and territory (in particular the local chiefdoms in the past) is articulated. I presented some of these ideas in my paper to the Tuesday Collo-

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\* A revised version of this paper appears under the title "Brahmans, Kings, Pariahs: Castes, Exchange and Untouchability in Western India Today" in this volume, pp. 294-312.

quium on "Kingdoms, Councils and Constitutions: Fission and Reunification of 'untouchable castes' in Gujarat".

Confirmation that the subjects I was dealing with were far from exotic was provided by my fieldwork at the Kolleg. As a participant observer I was able to do preliminary research on the rules of exchange among Euro-American natives at rituals like the Colloquium or the construction of an academic community through compulsory commensality. Equally memorable were the deliberations of the council without a constitution (also known as the 'Politbüro') which organised the Fellow's farewell party on the Havel. But at least another year of fieldwork at the Kolleg would be necessary before these results could be published.