

The Saraswats—The cracks within

KONKANAPURANA



Tensing Rodrigues is engaged in research on Konkani language and people

TENSING RODRIGUES

By the beginning of the 20th century, the Saraswats (Gaud Saraswat Brahmins) - by now better known as 'GSB's) realised that the majestic edifice that they had constructed on the foundation of 'Sahyadrikhand' was crumbling; the community stood divided. What brought this realisation was their fate in the face of insecurities of urban middle class life; and the possibility of obtaining the benefits of caste unity for themselves and their families by re-integrating into a single structurally unified group. Thereafter they could mobilise their rural kin, belonging to the same caste, in the quest for progress, and create a force to reckon with. This happened largely in major cities like Mumbai and Mangaluru. Increasing influx into the cities only added momentum to the unification. [Conlon, 1974: 'The Gauda Sarasvata Brahmana Unification Movement', in Journal of Asian Studies, Vol. XXXIII, No. 3; Conlon, 2002: 'A Caste In A Changing World - Chitrapur Saraswat Brahmins' - 1700 To 1935] But it failed to achieve a long-term success; efforts to structurally amalgamate the Saraswat splinters through intermarriage and related ritual acts proved fruitless. The Gaud Saraswat Brahman Parishad did stimulate development of educational and economic institutions which supported their middle-class aspirations. But there existed considerable social and economic disparities among the GSB. The picture presented by those holding elite positions in public affairs was clearly misleading. The Parishad ultimately atrophied after 1917; however, its related institutions survived. Although structural unity of caste was not obtained, a sense of GSB corporate identity did develop which passed on to all members the achievement-oriented virtues of adaptivity and excellence. Although the ancestors of the GSB



Chitrapur Saraswats

appear to have been recognised as bramhans in Goa, their dispersal brought them into contact with other bramhans who questioned the immigrants' ritual and social standing. The GSB were traditionally classified as northern (pancha gauda) bramhans while their neighbouring Maharashtra and Karnataka bramhans were considered southern (pancha dravida) bramhans. On this basis, the GSB were regarded as outsiders. Upon the basis of their 'dietary' predilection for fish they were considered as being of lower ritual purity and status. The common experience of status devaluation at the hands of other bramhans provided an im-

petus to the GSB subgroups to unite under a common banner in Mumbai. As the city continued to absorb increasing migrants from various GSB subgroups, the concerns with ritual status relations with other bramhanas could not conceal marked social and economic disparities that existed between the new GSB migrants and the older established families. Twelve GSB families had been in the city for nearly two centuries and regarded themselves as the true GSB community of Bombay. This conception found expression in the management of several temples and charities. With few exceptions, members of other families were excluded from formal

participation in temple management. After sporadic agitations between sides that seemed to be defined as much by conceptions of orthodoxy and reform as by the "old-timer-new-comer" distinction, a suit was brought in the Bombay High Court to open the temple management to all GSBs. In 1898 Justice Tyabji held that while there was sufficient evidence that the 12 families had enjoyed special precedence in caste affairs, there was also evidence that in caste meetings and financial contributions of the GSB community of Bombay, participants had included members of virtually every subcaste. He ordered that a new arrangement be made to redraw the temple trust charter so that members of any GSB subcaste would be eligible for membership. Tyabji emphasised that his decision dealt only with the issue of trusteeship and temple management, but the parties to the litigation drew a further logical conclusion: there was a single GSB community in Bombay city. They accepted the admonition of Justice Tyabji to reconcile and integrate the formerly hostile elements. An all-GSB social club was begun as a complement to the reconstituted temple trust.

In the competitive arena of Bombay city, a sense of a GSB corporate identity was thus emerging. But subgroup identities continued to raise their ugly head from time to time. Members of the cosmopolitan elite such as Dr. Bhau Daji and Sir Ramakrishna Bhandarkar appear to have continued using their old subcaste name, shennavi; less influential men championed the GSB name. When in 1900, Justice Mahadeo Ranade was preparing his introductory notes on the Peshwa Daftar for publication after reading them at the Royal Asiatic Society, he was urged by some young clerical employees to modify his references to shennavis and replace it by "gaud saraswat"; not wishing to give offence, Ranade agreed to alter the references. [Conlon, 1974: 355]

The principle of breaking down barriers between sub-castes received support from an unexpected source; two of the swamis, Sri Atmananda Sarasvati of Kavle mattha and Sri Indrakanta Tirtha of Gokarna-Partal mattha, attempted to diminish the significance of subcaste identities among their respective disciples. As it was, swamis of Kashi mattha and Chitrapur mattha each drew their disciples from within a single subcaste. Neither manifested an inclination to banish subcaste distinctions which reinforced the group identities of their respective adherents. The idea of GSB unity which had begun to develop among the immigrants to the city, did not flourish equally well in the countryside. Where two or more subcastes were found within a single district or state, indifference, if not hostility, characterised their relations.

During the first decade of the 20th century a dispute known as Eki-Beki erupted among the endogamous subgroups (castes) of Konkani-speaking Bramhans on the western coast of India. The more prominent among these were Shenvi, Sashtikar, Bardeshkar, Konkane, Pednekar, Kudaldeshkar, and Shenvipalki (or Chitrapur Saraswat). A faction of young, urban, and educated men from these castes argued that all these Brahman castes were originally one caste called the Gauda Sarasvata Brahmana - GSB) which had gotten split. They further argued that the time had come to unite all these castes into one unified GSB caste. This faction of people came to be known as the Eki faction, which meant the unity-faction; but the unification was opposed by the majority of the members of the above-mentioned castes; this opposing faction came to be known as the Beki-faction. The Eki-faction published a supposedly historical caste chronicle, the Konkannakhanya which supported their argument of unification (Dakshinatyā Saraswat Brahmanakhyan).