

# Caste as Social Power

## Sociological Trajectory of an Intermediate Caste

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Intermediate caste groups like the Marathas in Maharashtra, Patidars in Gujarat, Kapus in Andhra Pradesh, and Jats in Haryana have been up in arms against the state for not being inclusive enough and demanding Other Backward Class status, reservations in jobs, education, and politics, adequate financial allocations to respective caste corporations, and other economic incentives. It is important to understand the dynamics of intermediate castes in its specific context to explain the current moment of its mobilisation, militancy, and political positioning. The intricacies of an intermediate caste called Kapus in Andhra Pradesh are analysed based on several years of field research and doctoral work.

Like caste groups in Maharashtra, Gujarat, and Haryana, Kapus in Andhra Pradesh (AP) have been militantly agitating against the state. In February 2016, a meeting called by a powerful Kapu leader named Mudragada Padmanabham in Tuni—a small mofussil town which is an epicentre of the Kapu caste—to chalk out political action, turned violent. Protests led to the burning of the Ratnanchal Express train and a police station. Several people, including the police, were injured (Sankar 2016). Similarly, a Telugu film titled *Vangaveeti*, which typecast a Kapu leader in a particular way, raised a hue and cry among the Kapu caste, leading to protests (*NewsMinute* 2017). Repeated efforts by Padmanabham to undertake a padayatra (march) to AP's new capital city of Amaravati have been squashed by the state police by placing him under house arrest (*Hindu* 2017). These incidents evoke curiosity and raise the following questions: Who are the Kapus? Are they one caste or a cluster of castes? How do we understand them sociologically in terms of the existing caste structure in AP? What is the significance of their current mobilisation?

East Godavari, a district in AP, was selected as the primary field site for the purpose of this study because of the predominance of the Kapus. The Kapus are numerically strong in this district and control its economic resources. East Godavari district is part of coastal Andhra and plays a pivotal role in economic, social, and political spheres. In economic terms, the Godavari delta is considered prosperous for its large-scale production of paddy, horticulture, and aquaculture. In recent times, the pharmaceuticals industry, apart from petrochemicals and other natural resources, has also made the district economically vibrant. The social composition of the district is as diverse as the other districts in AP with different caste groups (upper, intermediary and lower), tribes, occupations, and rural–urban linkages.

In addition, fieldwork was carried out in Vijayawada city in Krishna district primarily to capture the Kapu caste politics under the duress of Vangaveeti Ranga. Fieldwork was also carried out in Hyderabad, since Hyderabad as the capital of the then undivided Andhra Pradesh is pivotal in the manoeuvring of Kapu political aspirations. The fieldwork in Hyderabad consisted of participating in caste-related activities, such as caste gatherings, caste association meetings, and numerous Kapu caste-related activities.

The caste dynamics and critical sensibilities of Kapus were unravelled using a combination of ethnographic, historical, and sociological methods. By devising a checklist and after

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snowball sampling, semi-structured and informal in-depth interviews were conducted with Kapus who were into diverse professions such as academics, as well as print and electronic media journalists. Fieldwork was carried out in East Godavari district in rural, urban, and peri-urban areas, including Kakinada and Rajahmundry. The researcher has been visiting the field site from 2010 onwards and has been witnessing many of the events that took place in the district. Fieldwork was carried out in three phases—between September–November 2010, February–April 2011 and in the months of April and June 2013. The last field visit was after the Tuni incident in February 2016.

### Situating Kapus Socially

This section attempts to analyse the social location/s of Kapus historically. In fact, the etymological roots of Kapus have been traced from three different political regimes—precolonial, colonial, and post-independence periods. In addition, how Kapu caste identity evolved in their everyday interactions with other caste groups is also discussed.

**Kapus during the precolonial period:** The social structure of AP is very complex, especially the category of Shudras. The four important peasant castes within the Shudra category are Reddy, Kamma, Velama and Kapus (Chennur and Prasad 2016: 577). Reddys were associated with the Rashtrakutas who ruled the Andhra region from the eighth century to the 10th century (753–982 CE). The etymological roots of the term Reddy can be traced back to the “rattadi,” “rattodi,” and “rashtrakuta,” and it is often attached with land. The Kammas are associated with the Kammarastram, founded by Jayapa Senani, but it was substantially expanded by the Musunuri Prolaya. Initially, they were scribes in the Kakatiya dynasty, but they later took on a martial role and established their own dynasties (Hanumantharao 1995: 77; Sharma 2001). The Velamas<sup>1</sup> have confined themselves to Rachakonda and Devarakonda, which are in Telangana (Hanumantharao 1995: 78). All these three castes took up agriculture more intensively after the collapse of the Roman Empire especially from the third century CE (Hanumantharao 1995: 73). These peasant castes cultivated state-owned land, and therefore were called “state farmers,” whereas the Kapus were engaged with village lands, and were called “squireens” (Hanumantharao 1995: 82).

**Caste articulations during colonial regime:** An extensive discussion on caste has taken place during the colonial rule in many ways, particularly with the improvement of communication facilities like roads, railway lines, cheap paper, or even the telegram (Srinivas 1957: 530). Bernard Cohn (1996: 8) goes further and classifies this knowledge system generated during the colonial regime into three thematic approaches, namely anthropological, administrative and theological/missionary.

The colonial administrators have defined Kapus in innumerable ways. Out of the many interesting definitions, three are considered for the purposes of my research. First, H A Stuart, a

census commissioner in Madras Presidency, defines the Kapus in his census report as “watchmen” (qtd in Thurston and Rangachari 1909: 223). Stuart considers the Kapus as people whose job is to watch, but unfortunately does not specify anything related to caste occupation. Also, Stuart does not mention for whom the Kapus were acting as watchmen, whether for people, or for the agricultural field, or for the forts. The second definition was given by Edgar Thurston (1909: 227), who defines Kapus, as a “common Telugu word for a ryot or cultivator.” He continues by saying that the “Kapus were attached either with cultivation, or with the land” (Thurston and Rangachari 1909: 227). Third, W Francis (qtd in Thurston and Rangachari 1909), another British administrator, defined the Kapus in relation to the other peasant castes, namely the Kammas, Reddys, and Velamas. Francis argues that the Kammas, Reddys and Velamas are all Kapus, and also adds that all of them closely resemble each other, especially in terms of their food habits, appearance, customs or even cultural practices.

The above three definitions together elucidate that the Kapus are either associated with land or land-related activities or farming. During the colonial period or even prior to it, Kapus were characterised in these three terms, as they are cultivators/farmers, specifically persons who oversee the farm, or protect it. Second, they were also recruited into the army primarily to protect the state. And third, they practised agriculture as well as served the army, especially during the Nayaka period. Thus, historians have opined that Kapus are “those people who are into cultivation, or farming, but who do not belong to Kammas, Reddys and Velamas” (Hanumantharao 1995: 82).

It was during 1871, when the colonial regime introduced caste census, that the social dynamics of India changed forever. In the 1871 Census, the British grouped several agricultural castes under the category called Kapus. The purpose of labelling these categories, supposedly, was to identify the extent of backwardness within and across the castes, so that the British could intervene by providing institutional support for the depressed classes. Kapus had started claiming the Kshatriya (warrior) status from late 1890s onwards (Kumar 2012; Ravichandra 2011), but by the 1910 caste census, they started demanding depressed class status, primarily to avail of the benefits of affirmative action, which the British also considered and brought them under the category of depressed classes.

Considering the dual claims of Kapus as upper caste as well as backward caste, the present study characterises Kapus as an intermediate agrarian caste.<sup>2</sup> Like the Kapus, we also find similar traits among some castes in India, who would like to retain their upper or dominant caste status, yet demand for institutional benefits. Castes such as Jats, Patidars, and Marathas are the classic examples to extend the intermediate agrarian caste category. With their dual nature, or with binary identities, these castes are posing challenges to the existing caste literature.

**Caste articulation during the post-independence period:** In the post-independence period, the Indian government reviewed and restricted institutional benefits of affirmative

action only to Scheduled Castes (scs) and Scheduled Tribes (sts), thus undermining the significance of earlier census classification which resulted in de-notifying the Kapus from the official category of reservations. Again, from the 1960s, the Kapus started demanding backward class status to avail of the benefits from the state, which was granted by the Kotla Vijayabhaskar Reddy government led by Congress in 1994. The backward class status was granted through an order citing that the Kapus are “socially and educationally backward classes of citizens for the purpose of reservation of seats in educational institutions and for recruitment to jobs in government, local bodies” (qtd in Shatrugna 1994: 2399). However, the court intervened and the order was nullified. As and when there is unrest and dissent among different caste groups, this historical dimension is invoked in demanding their reinclusion into the official list. This demand for reinclusion is the triggering point to unite several Kapu jatis<sup>3</sup> and, therefore, one could see from where this idea of Kapu homogenisation was germinated (Shatrugna 1994: 2397). One of the earlier attempts, during the 1980s, by the Kapus was to invoke “Kapu” as an overarching, umbrella term to mobilise several jatis within its fold. The Kapu caste associations put forward the proposition that all caste names having “Kapu” as a suffix be considered under one identity. This has been the logic by which caste associations wanted to unify jatis such as Kapu, Toorpu Kapu, Munnuru Kapu, along with Balija, Ontari, and Telaga to constitute into a political category called Kapus. However, each of these jatis have distinct regional identities, social hierarchies, and power structures.

**Table 1: Region-wise Distribution of Kapu Castes in United Andhra Pradesh**

Region	Name of the Jati
Coastal Andhra	Kapus, Toorpu Kapus,* Telagas and Ontaris
Rayalaseema	Balija
Telangana	Munnuru Kapus*

\* Listed as backward castes in the Anantharaman Backward Commission Report.<sup>4</sup>

Table 1 indicates the four different types of Kapus in coastal Andhra, and one each in Rayalaseema and Telangana.<sup>5</sup> Toorpu Kapus are confined to the north coastal Andhra districts of Srikakulam, Vijayanagaram, and Visakhapatnam. They own land, but belong to the category of small and medium farmers and are officially recognised as an Other Backward Class (obc). Whereas Kapus are landowning castes in the agriculturally prosperous districts of East Godavari and West Godavari, Krishna and Guntur in south coastal Andhra, and they share social and economic statuses equal to that of other landowning castes like Kammas, Rajus, Reddys, and do not belong to the obc category. Telagas and Ontaris are scattered in Godavari and Krishna districts with insignificant population, therefore their presence in Kapu politics is limited. Most of the Telagas and Ontaris are engaged in small and medium wholesale businesses, and work as small and marginal farmers. Balijas are predominantly located in Rayalaseema districts (Chittoor, Kurnool, Cuddapah and Anantapur) and are engaged in urban petty commodity production and trading activities linked to iron scrap trade and municipal contracts. Thus, they are not categorised as obcs. Munnuru Kapus are

found in the present Telangana state. During the Nizam period, the Munnuru Kapus majorly worked with the Nizam's state protecting the state and its resources while in contemporary times, they are scattered occupationally and spatially due to lack of better opportunities.

This wide-ranging social and economic diversity of different jatis within the political construct of the Kapus demonstrates “social distinctions,” to use Bourdieu's (1984) concept. Conceptually, this attempt of forging alliances is nothing new, but is moving towards transcending themselves from jati to jati clusters (Manor 2012). This has been empirically explained by Carol Upadhyia (1988a, 1988b) in relation to jati distinctions within Kammas in south coastal Andhra. However, the puzzle here is why and how certain jatis are able to successfully forge alliances to reap the political benefits while it is complicated for other jatis. This requires a deeper sociological analysis, which is taken up in the next section through a study of the political economy of Kapus.

### Political Economy of the Kapus

In this section, we will examine the negotiations occurring at the economic realm of different Kapu jatis. The economic condition of the Kapus is not uniform. In fact, several jatis in each region and subregion in AP do not merely reflect geographical variations but also sociocultural and economic distinctiveness. The Kapus' economic conditions are, in many ways, determined by socio-spatial factors, which is discussed in the following section.

**Interaction between economy and region:** The spatial or geographical factors help us understand the rise of prosperity of actors or particular castes. This is evident if one looks at how particular landowning caste groups started claiming regions as their own through various factors (institutional and non-institutional) during both colonial and post-independence India, particularly after the 1980s (Koskimaki and Upadhyia 2017). Barbara Harriss-White (2017) has presented how different social identities like caste and gender produce regions eloquently and, in the same regard, Suhas Palshikar (2006) also has brought out the symbiotic relationship between region and caste. With reference to AP, historians attribute the prosperity of Kammas and Reddys not only to the green revolution, but also to several historical factors that contributed to the prosperity of these castes during the colonial and precolonial period (Hanumantharao 2012; Sharma 2001). There seemed to be a broad agreement among different scholars that social and spatial factors need to be seen in tandem to analyse the processes of wealth accumulation of these castes.

The writings on colonial period, particularly on the Madras Presidency, have indicated that the Godavari and Krishna rivers played a very important role for the development of agriculture and trade (Washbrook 1973; Baker 1976; Rao 1988). The Godavari delta was significant for its agriculture, whereas Machilipatnam (Krishna) enjoyed a good reputation in maritime trade. Caste accounts through administrative records reflect large variations because of the complex social structure

in concrete or respective situations or regions or time periods. The proportion of Brahmins was higher in the Krishna delta and hence they secured almost all the village Karanam's posts, and therefore were very influential. Compared to Krishna, in the Godavari delta, Brahmins had "less influence in religious and social matters over other castes" (Hemingway 1915: 53). This could be one of the reasons why non-Brahmins, particularly Kapus, occupied the Karanam posts in East Godavari district. The families that were collecting taxes under the Karanam, started adding the suffix "Naidu" to their names. In contemporary times, Naidu as a suffix has been commonly used by the Kapus across the state, which is part of the Kapu caste mobilisation strategy (Hanumantharao 1995) and also assertion of their caste identity as on par with dominant peasant caste Kammas.

A careful analysis of the post-independence period indicates that Kapus in East Godavari were able to gain and reap maximum benefits<sup>6</sup> due to a combination of factors, that is, the green revolution, the Yeleru reservoir,<sup>7</sup> and rise of a regional political party, the Telugu Desam Party (TDP).<sup>8</sup> The surplus gained from the green revolution was reinvested in various entrepreneurial activities by the Kapus within south coastal Andhra. The Kapus not only acquired lands, but ventured into agriculture-related businesses to eventually become propertied classes in both Rajahmundry and Kakinada, the two major commercial urban centres in East Godavari.

But, by the late 1980s, one could observe two distinct types of migration that took place from East Godavari towards nearby cities Visakhapatnam and Vijayawada. The reasons for this migration can be attributed to the extreme economic disparities within the Kapus, particularly after the green revolution and land reforms. One form of migration took place among the upwardly mobile classes within the Kapus in order to reinvest and expand their economic interests. The second form of migration took place from among the middle or lower classes within the Kapus, in search of their day-to-day employment (Rao 1988).

A significant proportion of the lower classes among different castes in the region started migrating to Vijayawada from the 1850s onwards due to the construction of an anicut across the Krishna river. This migration has steadily escalated after independence (Rao and Rao 1984: 94; Parthasarathy 1997: 24). After the 1940s, Kammas started migrating to the city to reinvest their agrarian surplus contributing to the expansion of various economic activities in Vijayawada (Parthasarathy 1997: 42). Also, the city became a hub for transporting goods and services to various south and north Indian cities through road and rail networks because of its transit location. As a result, it provided employment to hundreds of workers in the transport sector.

**Vijayawada—a struggle to control economy and space:** Historically, Vijayawada was the epicentre for economic interests and also played a significant role in promoting progressive ideas both in the social and political realms, especially with regard to the non-Brahmin movement and communist politics (Parthasarathy 1997: 4; Keiko 2008: 357). If one were to trace

the history of Vijayawada, one needs to go back to the genesis of migration to the city. Initially, it was Brahmins who migrated to the city from the villages of Krishna and Godavari districts, largely during the late 19th and early 20th centuries, that is, after the construction of anicuts on both Krishna and Godavari rivers. Brahmins occupied most of the administrative, bureaucratic and teaching professions. Later, the Kammas started migrating to the city, as part of their upward social mobility, and started investing the surplus they accumulated over a period of time due to the anicuts and the green revolution. They invested primarily in agro-based retail chain shops, small and medium hotels and restaurants, schools, and, importantly, in the automobile industry. It was during the 1970s that lower-class Kapus also migrated to the city. In the first phase of migration, Kapus largely worked as manual labourers in construction, as *muta* (team) labour in the transport sector and in unskilled and semi-skilled jobs (Rao and Rao 1984). The second generation of Kapu in-migrants took up petty trading, skilled jobs and low-paid white colour jobs. They lived mainly in Krishna Lanka (which was once a suburban area, but is now one of the key economic and political centres in Vijayawada). With their late entry into the city, Kapus had to locate themselves in the periphery of the city's economic and political structure. For instance, Brahmins occupied the intellectual and bureaucratic space while Kammas became the entrepreneurs. It is this alienation from land, politics, and money that triggered the Kapus to manoeuvre their opportunities in different corners of the city.

### Politicising the Caste

This section presents two narratives, contradictory to each other, which took place within Kapu politics. The first narrative includes the first four subsections explaining how the Kapus portrayed themselves as upper caste and what kind of tools they have deployed to sustain their upper-caste status. The second narrative in three subsections presents the conditions in which they have shifted from their upper-caste social position to claiming OBC status and later on trying to be the champions of both OBCs and SCs.

**Symbolic imagery of the Kapus:** To begin with, Kapu associations through their journals and writings invoke certain symbolic representation of their caste affinity with Krishnadevaraya, the king of Vijayanagara empire (Ravichandra 2011). These claims and self-representations were quite evident during the fieldwork in East Godavari in parts of Vijayawada and Hyderabad.<sup>9</sup> By claiming their caste origin to Krishnadevaraya, the Kapus are trying to affirm Kshatriya (upper caste) status. It furthers their claim of being zamindars, their association with the dynasties, or even as chieftains. In fact, one of the Kapu writers echoed this saying that "the Kapus were rulers, always" (Ravichandra 2011: 45).

The symbolic imagery deployed by the Kapus according to their own accounts is primarily to enhance their social status, and in due course to achieve political power. This dialectics of symbolism can be traced in two ways. By tracing their origin

to a celebrated figure (here, the king), an attempt is being made to construct one's credible caste history. In addition, it is also an easily available platform to avail of the elite status by associating with a particular symbol—here, it is Krishnadevaraya—thus constructing an idiom for the caste.

**Kapu consolidation after the formation of TDP:** The emergence of the TDP in 1982 under N T Rama Rao (NTR) provided a source of inspiration for the Kapus to mobilise along similar lines. It is evident that the Kammas have used political power to consolidate their caste capital, solidarity, and importantly, their economic base. As Parthasarathy (2001) rightly pointed out, prior to the formation of the TDP there was a void in Andhra politics and NTR capitalised on that void and consolidated the party quite significantly. In due course, caste identity became a prominent tool to mobilise the groups at the sociopolitical level. The Kapus of coastal Andhra, being landowners, were very active during the early days of the TDP. This active participation, according to Parthasarathy (2001: 118–19), was primarily

[t]o capitalise on the crisis to emerge powerful at the regional level. However, it soon became apparent that the section of the ruling classes responsible for the emergence of the TDP had no wish to share power with any other community. The calculated use of caste to form strategic alliances for power, however, showed the Kapu community their own route for power. Thus, with a couple of years after the TDP had come to power, the Kapus began their own movement for power. In a sense, therefore, the Kapunadu Movement presaged the current upsurge of different communities who have, as their major demand, reservations on the basis of populations of various castes and sub-castes.

**Caste hegemony of Kapunadu and Mahanadu:** Once the Kapus realised the differences in sharing the benefits with TDP (read the Kammas), they felt betrayed and very soon they started consolidating themselves on this plank through Kapunadu associations.<sup>10</sup> The term Kapunadu first emerged during the 1985 campaign for AP legislative elections. The different Kapu jatis had come under one umbrella by organising a meeting to decide to fight united for political power and for reservations. Incidentally, this meeting took place at the same venue of the Mahanadu<sup>11</sup> meeting held by the TDP on 10 July 1988 (Kumar 2012: 273–84).

**Upholding the upper caste status of the Kapus—the Ranga episode:** As Weber states, a movement, that could take any form, will have certain leaders, who draw much attention from the mass. According to Weber, it can be achieved through three types of authority: legal, rational and charismatic (Mills and Gerth 1991). Vangaveeti Mohana Ranga, popularly called Ranga, played a pivotal role in mobilising the Kapu caste not only in the delta region, but across the state through his charismatic and rebellious leadership (Balagopal 1989: 228). Ranga migrated from a small village to Vijayawada primarily to overcome the economic hardships back home. He began his political life in the city by being a member of the Communist Party of India (CPI) and its affiliated taxi drivers' union. But, he soon turned into a hoodlum under the leadership of his elder brother, the late Radha (Vangaveeti Radhakrishna) and started

mobilising all the Kapus. As Balagopal (1989: 228) succinctly puts it,

[Ranga] chose the Kapu caste as the appropriate identity, for the caste—or rather the castes which call themselves Kapu in the generic sense—has a wide presence among the peasantry and urban lower middle classes all over the state; and the fact that there is a substantial Kapu landowning and business elite in the Krishna and more so the Godavari deltas, which would also find the mobilisation in the name of the Kapus useful for the furtherance of their own interests, only helped them. He convened meetings at many places in the Godavari and Krishna deltas; each of these Kapunadu was attended by thousands of people, and soon other Kapu notables started identifying with it.

So far, through this section, I have explained how the Kapus tried to uphold their upper-caste identity by using symbolic imagery and also portraying Kammas and the TDP as their social and political rivals. But, gradually, there was a shift that took place in the Kapu political language. The following subsections present the second narrative which captures these shifts within their politics. Although there was a shift in their mobilisational strategy, they have never disowned their upper-caste identity. In other words, the Kapus tried to retain their upper-caste status and simultaneously mobilised different jatis for claiming backward class status from the state.

**Claims for reservations—Mudragada:** After the sudden demise of Ranga, there was a vacuum in Kapu politics which was concentrated in Vijayawada, but gradually it shifted to the East Godavari where the Kapus are economically and numerically dominant, unlike in Vijayawada. Mudragada Padmanabham took over the void created by Ranga in Kapu politics. The Mudragada family is from Prattipadu village and they are very influential in the district's politics. Padmanabham was a teacher, but became attracted to politics due to his family's background. After getting elected as the member of legislative assembly on Congress and TDP party tickets and forming a party called Telugunadu in May 1998, Mudragada realised the significance of having numbers. A close scrutiny of Mudragada's politics indicates that he has been consistently making efforts to mobilise Kapus, into a political formation to stake claim for state power like that of the Kammas and Reddys in AP. In due course, he has successfully shifted the epicentre of Kapu politics from Vijayawada to East Godavari.<sup>12</sup>

**Sociology of majorities—Kapus and their numerical strength:** Mudragada and other Kapus from the Godavari delta soon realised that the economic base that they have accumulated over a period of time may not be adequate to capture political power like that of the Reddys and Kammas. In competitive politics, Kapus realised that they cannot compete with other peasant castes having sheer economic power. Hence, they shifted their focus towards easily accessible and a significant element in the democratic space, that is, the game of numbers. More importantly, Kapus in a way started imitating the Dalits and the way they are deploying their numbers to mobilise or to resist the state and other apparatus.<sup>13</sup>

For Kapus, the plank for their political aspirations was to forge the required numerical strength. Hence, they started

mobilising different jatis and constructing a political identity in the name of Kapu. This strategy to mobilise diverse castes/jatis is primarily to gain access to the resources, both material (land, institutional power, money) and non-material (political power, control over resources, political agency). If one carefully analyses the mobilisation processes adopted by the Kapus, it can be seen going in two directions. First, articulating their upper-caste status and second, seeking a backward-class status.

The total population of the Kapus is estimated at around 12% of which about 5% are listed as backward classes (Shatrugna 1994: 2399).<sup>14</sup> In other words, if reservations are extended to all Kapus, they form a formidable group and have the potential to tilt the electoral balance significantly. Politically they have the potential to become a strong group (Shatrugna 1994). Parthasarathy (2001) also substantiates this point by saying that the attempt of bringing them (other Kapu jatis) under one nomenclature was a political decision to increase their stronghold at the political level.

Post the 1980s, the nexus between caste and politics became much more prominent, and the caste-based mobilisations in the political space became intense not only in AP but across the country. In fact, OBCs in particular (Yadavs, Kurmis and Muslims) acquired new political status and their access to state power was evident in several states, particularly in North India (Jaffrelot 2000). In the process of accessing state power, many of them have used the numerical strength of their castes. This probably made the Kapus emulate the OBC model and innovate it in AP as they belong to a dominant peasant caste, but are removed from political power. One of the purposes to emulate the OBC model was to ascertain and compete with other dominant peasant castes such as the Kammas and Reddys in the political domain. Hence, they relied heavily on their numbers, which became a significant factor after the introduction of universal suffrage.

Once they realised the importance of numerical strength, they made it very clear in many ways, for instance, with slogans like “ye kulaniki yennivotlo, a kulaniki anniseatlu” (seats should be proportionate with the votes based on caste) that they aspire achieving political power.<sup>15</sup> Kammas were portrayed as enemies; the allegation was that the Kammas and the TDP betrayed the Kapus after using them for their own aspirations. So, the entire Kapunadu movement was built around opposing the Kammas who were seen as the dominant group. The Kammas themselves provided the terms for self-identification of the Kapus. Kapus, by a dialectical process, referred to themselves as an exploited or dominated community rather than simply as a backward class (Parthasarathy 2001: 116–17).

To strengthen their claim for backward-class status and also to compete with other dominant castes in AP, Kapus, largely the Godavari Kapus, started forging an alliance with similar jatis to develop as one homogeneous entity. In the process, they have evolved from jati to jati cluster. In Balagopal's (1989) words, they have attempted to transform from Kapu caste to Kapu castes.

Theoretically speaking, the political imagination of the Kapus from the Godavari delta is to construct a mega category

by forging several other jatis in its fold (Barnett 1977).<sup>16</sup> At one level, Godavari Kapus, a propertied class, wanted to pose a challenge to agrarian castes, like the Reddys and Kammas. However, political aspirations by Godavari Kapus did not take into consideration the social and economic heterogeneity among various jatis. Also, there was growing resentment among other jatis within the the Kapus.

It is also evident that social hierarchy prevails between Godavari Kapus and non-Godavari Kapus (Toorpu Kapus, Balijas, Telagas and Ontaris). Historically, various jatis in the Kapu cluster maintained their own ritual or cultural status, giving rise to inter-jati differences prominently. For instance, field respondents from East Godavari indicated that they do not marry or dine with other jatis due to their ritually inferior and lower social position. The field data also indicates that socially there is no intermixing, and the internal cohesion among the jatis is absolutely missing even within coastal Andhra region.

The Kapu jatis from within coastal Andhra, like the Telagas, Ontaris and Toorpu Kapus, always criticised the Godavari Kapus in that although they articulate that all Kapu jatis are politically equal, in their day-to-day life they were never treated equally by the Godavari Kapus. Thus, coastal jatis from within coastal Andhra have never trusted the economically and socially dominant Godavari Kapus. When it comes to Balijas in Rayalaseema, they equate or compare themselves with other agrarian castes in the region, such as the Reddys and Kammas in terms of their resources, but they have no cultural commonality either with the Godavari Kapus or non-Godavari Kapus (Toorpu Kapus, Ontaris, and Telagas). In brief, the social cleavages among different jatis in different regions are complex and quite evident.

Earlier instances of jati clusters, including the Vokkaligas (Manor 1977), K V (Barnett 1977), Chitrapur Saraswat Brahmins (Conlon 1974), Kammas (Upadhya 1988a, 1988b), Nadars (Hardgrave 1969), and Chettiars (Rudner 1995), are some of the examples where jati cluster formation took place, although there are lot of variations in each case. All the above castes have mobilised successfully by relying on economic, cultural, or religious factors. However, the Kapus gave more importance to political homogeneity rather than cultural, economic, and social complexities.

### **Championing for OBCs and SCs—Chiranjeevi and the Praja Rajyam Party:**

The formation of the Praja Rajyam Party (PRP) in 2008 was yet another experiment for the upwardly mobile Kapus from Godavari districts to stake a claim for political power. In this instance, they expanded the scope of Kapu politics by trying to incorporate new vocabulary and new actors for their political aspirations. In Gramsci's (1971: 151) words, the “history of any given party can only emerge from the complex portrayal of the totality of society and State.” By following Gramsci, one can sum up that the reasons behind the formation of any party could be due to complex situations or relations that exist both at the macro (state) level as well as at the micro (caste) level, and these factors together created a space to form the party. The social and caste relations were

disturbed and distressed due to the undue and unequal power sharing by the ruling party and the ruling caste, and the rest of the castes who were deprived of power started questioning primarily to protect their rights and interests. This point is well explained once again by Gramsci (1996: 148),

[e]very party is the expression of a social group, and of one social group only, nevertheless in certain given conditions certain parties represent a single social group precisely in so far as they exercise a balancing and arbitrating function between the interests of their group and those of other groups, and succeed in securing the development of the group which they represent with the consent and assistance of the allied groups.

Just as Padmanabham launched his party in Tirupati in May 1989 and eventually merged it with the Congress, Chiranjeevi, the founder of PRP, launched his party in Tirupati and merged it with the Congress. Choosing Tirupati to launch the two political parties (PRP and Telugunadu) is not only an indication of having faith in religion, but also a politically motivated decision considering the due presence of the numerically dominant caste called Balijas, who are being politically crafted into the Kapu identity.

The PRP had promised in their election manifesto to provide alternative space for dissenting members particularly from different political parties and social groups (Kodandaram 2008). As one of my respondents stated, the “formation of PRP is a social need, because people got fed up with 35 years of Congress monopoly and 15 years of TDP and its disillusioned politics. They saw an alternative in PRP,<sup>17</sup> but it could not demonstrate its articulation of social justice in practice.” The Kapus tried to invoke both the identity politics and representative politics framework to attain political power by claiming upper-caste status on the one hand and OBC reservations on the other. The whole process, politically, to use Stephen Barnett’s (1977) words, is nothing but the “politics of hedging.”

To understand the Kapu mobilisation processes, the study uses Bierstedt’s (1959) concept of social power. Bierstedt, a post-Weberian sociologist, locates three important sources, which play a significant role in articulating social power: numbers (sociology of majorities as Bierstedt [1948] suggests), organisation, and resources. The Kapus, who have been attempting to assert or consolidate themselves at the political level, do so by using numerical strength. In studies on the nature of caste mobilisations, the studies on upper castes indicate that the economy played a significant role. In the case of lower castes, studies indicate that mobilisations were possible because they were able to project their victimhood. The Kapus initially deployed these two factors: economy and victimhood.

However, both these mobilisational strategies did not work to construct a Kapu jati cluster, and therefore, they have employed numerical strength by including several jatis into their fold. The important limitation within the Kapu mobilisation strategies is that they only emphasise acquiring political power by aligning with similar jatis to increase their numerical strength. While in the earlier instances the cultural and economic base was consolidated first and political factors were focused on at a

later date, the Kapus attempted political homogenisation without any effort in the cultural, economic, and social domains.

## Conclusions

After laying out the socio-economic and political dynamics of the Kapus, the paper attempts to make three broad comments on caste politics through the Kapus. First, it highlights the ways in which the Kapus engaged themselves with the concept of social justice. Second, it illuminates how they employed identity politics. Third, it attempts to understand how they have interpreted the category of caste.

First, the Kapus meddled with social justice through their PRP. The party claimed to be a champion for both OBCs and SCs. But, the ideology of social justice was not understood by many of the Kapus themselves. The Godavari Delta Kapus from East Godavari repeatedly displayed contrary images by seeking reservation benefits and displayed restlessness to be an ally with other OBC jatis, within the Kapu fold or outside it. There are two reasons for that. Most of the Kapus use the title “Naidu” consciously, and therefore it becomes a status problem for them to be associated with the OBCs. Also, the Kapus have problems with the Settibalijas, who are listed in the OBC category.

Historically and sociologically, these two castes have been at loggerheads with each other. Respondents in East Godavari indicated that Kapus violently resisted any effort of the Settibalijas’ upward social or economic mobilisation. Therefore, the Kapus in that region do not want to associate with the OBCs. In this context, one of my respondents summed up the issue saying that Kapus behave like upper castes but seek OBC reservation, which is undemocratic and unjustifiable. It is nothing but the petty-bourgeois attitude of the Kapus, which has cost them their electoral power.

Within the Kapu projection of social justice, Dalits could not associate with the PRP because of the contradictory positions taken by it. The major castes within the SC group from AP—the Madiga and Mala castes—distanced themselves from the PRP. Krishna Madiga, the founder-president of the Madiga Reservation Porata Samiti (MRPS) preferred to call the Praja Rajyam Party (People’s State) as Kapula Rajyam (Kapus’ State),

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whereas Katti Padmarao, another senior Mala leader who was active in the PRP for a short period, eventually distanced himself by saying that the party and the Kapus are still holding an upper-caste attitude (qtd in Sambaiah 2009: 55).

Second, the intermediary agrarian castes have attempted to redefine the identity politics through their multiple identities. Prabhat Patnaik's (2014) classification of the nature of identity politics into three categories—resistance, bargaining, and fascist—may help us analyse the Kapus' political imaginations to some extent. The Kapus have used resistance as an important strategy in countering social and political hegemony of other agrarian castes in the 1980s and have also resisted tenants and agricultural workers' (Settibalija and Malas) assertions in East Godavari. They used bargaining as a strategy with the state to derive institutional resources and in their claims to achieve OBC status like that of the Marathas in Maharashtra and Jats in the North India. They also did not hesitate in using right-wing strategies in subordinating the Dalits. The Kapus have not deployed caste as a discriminatory category, but used caste as social power in terms of numbers, organisation, and resources.

However, it is a different story that due to social and economic cleavages, the unity in political space could not be effectively realised. Nevertheless, it helps us understand different mobilisational strategies used by intermediary agrarian castes in AP.

The study findings also indicate that the nexus between caste and politics in Indian society is much deeper in the socio-political and economic realm. When one looks at the rising aspirations of different social groups, caste is increasingly used as a mobilisational strategy. Mobilisational strategies differ among upper, lower, and intermediary castes, and vary across regions and subregions. It is a challenge for sociologists to understand these complexities in a changing rural and urban India, rather than denying caste as a reality. In the last two decades, neo-liberal market reforms, in fact, strengthened the role of caste in the economic and political sphere. The political class used caste, kinship and patronage as important elements in the reform process. It is through caste assertions that different social groups are able to gain access to the state and its institutional resources, and therefore, it becomes necessary to understand caste as social power.

## NOTES

- 1 The term Velamas is derived from a place called Velamanadu, comprising of Tenali, Repalle, and Bapatla in present Andhra Pradesh.
- 2 Satish Deshpande and Yogendra Yadav have defined intermediary castes as "non dwija and non-OBC castes" (Deshpande and Yadav 2006: 2422). The definition given by Deshpande and Yadav is generic; therefore the present study intends to emphasise the occupational status and calls the Kapus an intermediate agrarian caste.
- 3 Jatis are much smaller endogamous caste groups within which people marry their children (Manor 2012).
- 4 The Government of Andhra Pradesh has appointed three backward class commissions. The first one was by Anantharaman in 1968 which has rejected the claims by the Kapus based on a criterion determining the backwardness—poverty, low standard of living, place of habitation and inferiority of occupations. The second commission was headed by N K Muralidhar Rao in 1982 but the report never saw the light of day. The third one was formed recently in 2016 by the Telugu Desam Party (TDP) government after the violence in Tuni headed by Justice Manjunatha, which is yet to take a decision.
- 5 Due to consistent struggle by the people of Telangana for a separate statehood both during 1969–71 and 2001–14, Telangana has become the 29th state in India from 2 June 2014.
- 6 This is not to deny that Kamma and Reddy castes were not beneficiaries of the green revolution, but their growth has larger historical antecedents because of their access to the resources even during colonial and precolonial periods.
- 7 Yeleru canal works started in 1981. Along with it, there were several minor irrigation projects through which almost two lakh acres of land was brought under cultivation in the east Godavari district.
- 8 Interview with Kapu senior leader, Kakinada, 1 August 2013.
- 9 Fieldwork was conducted in 2011 and 2013.
- 10 Selig Harrison (1956) and Carolyn Elliot (1970) have discussed the conflict between the

- Congress and TDP vis-à-vis Reddys and Kammas, but not much work has been done on the conflict between the Kammas and Kapus, except for a few journalistic pieces documenting the 1988 Ranga murder and the riot after that in Vijayawada.
- 11 Mahanadu is an occasion to remember the formation of the TDP.
  - 12 Interview with a doctor practising in Ramachandrapuram, near Kakinada, East Godavari, 15 February 2012.
  - 13 Interview with senior journalist from *Times of India*, Hyderabad, 2014.
  - 14 There are different theories related to the Kapu population, as there is no official census. Most of the analyses on Kapus are based on the 1931 census. The total population of Kapus in the two states ranges from 12% to 28%.
  - 15 I observed many of these graffiti on the street in Vijayawada during my field visit in 2010.
  - 16 Stephen Barnett (1977) says that the attempt to form "mega categories" is a method to bring groups that are originally separate from each other and whose status identification was of the least possible kind together. This process of forging groups together can be called as substantialisation. These communities, therefore, resort to what Barnett terms as "hedging," that is, presenting contradictory identities in different contexts, but still try to be together. In Barnett's words, this is nothing but "holding action." The shifting identities keep moving between class and caste; their more sophisticated façade in urban areas belies their background as village power-holders and their readiness to even adopt the most feudal traits.
  - 17 Interview with Venugopal, editor, *Veekshanam* on 16 July 2010 at his office in Hyderabad.

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