



Modern Maharashtra: Mapping Colonial Rule, Caste Relations and The Significance of Subaltern Movements

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Abstract

The geographical understanding of the Indian subcontinent can be learned in its entirety from the availability of Colonial registers. Before the colonial rule, territorial regions forming India were not marked by distinctive geographical boundaries. Availability of Colonial registers and its records happened to provide us with a peculiar documentation of not just India's regional/geographical boundaries, but its social and political formation/development as well. The introduction of colonial education policy within the subcontinent is another significant aspect that resulted in furthering socio-cultural, economic and political changes within the Indian society. Colonial education policy, in its effort to impart education to Indians majorly, helped Indian Upper-caste intelligentsia to emerge. With its liberal principles and educative measures, it could also help people from the lowest rungs of the social ladder to familiarise themselves with education. We could see social revolutionaries like Phule and Ambedkar (among others) hailing from the subaltern castes being introduced with colonial education, who revolted against the unjust socio-cultural practices and redefined the notion of freedom, human dignity, equality and democracy. It is this very moment where one could also witness the inception of modern and rational thinking shaping up the idea of India, and modern-day Maharashtra we see today is no exception to it. In this paper, an attempt is made to map colonial intervention into the Maharashtrian society and provide a critical commentary on the social and political conjuncture of colonial Maharashtra. While presenting the critical commentary, the paper emphasises on the formation of caste relations and subaltern/Dalit response as the most significant points of breaks in the making of modern Maharashtra.

Keywords: Colonial rule, Colonial Maharashtra, Caste system, Subalterns, Dalit, Religion

Introduction

According to Gail Omvedt, Maharashtra, a Marathi-speaking state in Western India stands midway between north and south. Its language has southernmost origin and is classified under Indo-European languages. In pre-British era, Maharashtra was socio-politically divided into four regions, such as Konkan (consisting of Thane, Ratnagiri, Kolaba and Mumbai), Deccan (including Pune, Kolhapur, Sangli, Solapur, Stara, Ahmednagar, Nasik, Dhule and Jalgaon), Marathwada (comprising Aurangabad, Nanded, Osmanabad and Parbhani) and Vidarbha (including, Akola, Nagpur, Chandrapur, Yeotmal, Buldhana and Bhandara). Under British rule, this Marathi-speaking area was divided into three political territories and eighteen princely states. Of them, Konkan and Deccan were part of Bombay province, Vidarbha was a part of the central province and Marathwada was part of the Muslim-dominated state of Hyderabad (Omvedt 1976, pp. 3-4). To put it simply,

Maharashtra consists of four different regions; the coastal strip of 'Konkan', 'Western Maharashtra', 'Vidarbha' and 'Marathwada'. Among these there is some regional variation - until the reorganisation of states in the Indian Union, Vidarbha was attached to Madhya Pradesh and Marathwada formed a part of the erstwhile state of Hyderabad under the Nizam. Economically and socially, these two regions have remained backwards compared to Western Maharashtra which came under British rule much earlier. Even though there are such variations, there exists considerable homogeneity in Maharashtra as a whole in the modern times. The availability of these details presented above is based on census figures and colonial records of that time. In order to trace the making of Modern Maharashtra, it becomes necessary to locate the context of colonial intervention, socio-political configuration of Maharashtrian society during the colonial rule with a special reference to subaltern movements - 'Non-Brahmin' and 'Dalit movement.' In this paper, an attempt is made to provide the context of the same along with the presentation of the critical commentary that shapes an idea of Modern Maharashtra.

Maharashtra and its Socio-political Configuration During Colonial Rule:

Having established the territorial notions of (colonial) Maharashtra, the major facet that needs immediate attention is its socio-political configuration during the colonial rule. In order to map the same, the question of caste within Hinduism and caste relations within the Maharashtrian society remains significant. The origin of caste in ancient India is still covered with mystery. Various scholars on Caste have stated that the confrontation of different ethnic groups, the clash between patriarchal and matriarchal societies, the hereditary occupation and guild restrictions, the ideas of purity and pollution, and the policies followed by different rulers, must have contributed to the growth of the caste system in this country. Hindu society, which developed over a period of more than two thousand years, although spread over different regions of India, had many common features – such as the supremacy of the Brahmins, the segregation of the lowest castes, hereditary occupation, caste solidarity, and lack of social intercourse among the different castes. Yet, the specific nature of political power, systems of revenue collection, and ideology of the dominant religious sects in each territory, influenced caste relations.

Pre-colonial Maharashtra was ruled by 'Peswai', which was the office of the chief minister to the Maratha rajas of Satara. Before Peshwa, it was Shivaji who led the expansion of Maratha power in the 17th century. According to Rosalind, Western India, that is Maharashtra under Peshwa rule, in religious terms, represented a closed society in contrast to a society that was developed under British rule. For example, during the Peshwa rule, Brahmins kept their caste hierarchy status as superiors intact and Bajirao II distributed money to the large community of Brahmin scholars, in the city of Pune to enable them to devote their time to religious scholarship. On the other hand, the onset of East India Company saw many changes in terms of religious practices, exploitation and education. Firstly, colonizers saw the end of Peshwa rule and the state's active support of Hindu religious values by acting as the executive power over Brahmin religious authorities. Schools and colleges were made for all. With the colonial establishment, protestant missionaries had also arrived within Bombay presidency and it saw the enlightenment of Sudra castes in the matters of religion and education (O'Hanlon 1985, pp. 35-8). Further, Rosalind O'Hanlon says, "for people like Phule who attended these missionary schools appeared to bring new opportunities for their own advancement and for a more fundamental change in attitude towards their status as Shudras" (O'Hanlon 1985, p. 78).

The emergence of colonial rule provided some advancement for administrative and political power for all. This gave rise to social radicals from lower castes to rise to the occasion. This resulted in projecting a new collective identity for lower castes in

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Maharashtra. The popular movements such as the Non-Brahmin movement, Dalit movement etc. resulted from their efforts and influenced the very structure of politics and political debates in Bombay presidency under colonialism. These movements affected the emerging nationalist movements in western India, providing both a considerable body of support and the ideological advantages that nationalists would have gained through their arguments with the British government. The study of these lower caste movements under colonialism helps to turn our attention to the much-neglected area of Indian politics in the 19th century and its socio-political configuration. An attempt in this paper is made to locate the significance of these movements; however, before that, it is important to trace the development of caste relations during the colonial rule.

Maharashtra forms the major part of the debate around the development of Maratha as a unique and complex caste structure. It starts with the focus on the individual castes and their changing fortunes under British rule and acted as a healthy counterbalance to the study of political change in the larger societies of region and presidency. According to Rosalind O'Hanlon, Maharashtra has a very large cluster of peasant castes, but there seems to be very little information about vital aspects of its social and religious life until the 19th century and that too during colonial rule (O'Hanlon 1985, p. 16). This is the Maratha-Kunbi cluster of caste. For the European colonizers, the term Maratha was not in any sense caste-specific. They assumed all Marathi-speakers whether Brahmins, soldiers, cultivators, artisans or tradesmen who lived through this age/era of Maratha power, might be called Marathas (O'Hanlon 1985, p. 97).

The Marathas are the largest peasant caste of Maharashtra. They form a sizeable majority in every region. Unlike the peasants in Karnataka or Andhra Pradesh, the peasants here are not divided into two or three major castes. Amongst the different regional religious sects in Maharashtra, the Varkari sect was the most influential and it continued to be popular till the seventeenth century. The morality and tolerance that this sect preached, the religious equality and brotherhood it fostered and the pride in Marathi language and culture which it generated are supposed to have reduced caste barriers and created something similar to a national consciousness in the Marathi speaking people. In this way, it prepared the background for the rise of Maratha power in the seventeenth century. Unlike the 'Jains' or the 'Lingayats', the Varkari sect never turned into a caste. Thus, this explains why, despite religious differences and political conflicts, the unity of the Maratha caste was never endangered. The dominance of one big peasant caste provides the basis for the enduring political stability in Maharashtra in the days of democratic politics.

At the lower end of the social scale, there were three main untouchable castes, of which the 'Mahars' formed the largest single group. It is said that the boundary of Maharashtra is coterminous with the spread of the Mahar caste. To pinpoint this, Dr. Anil Kathare, in his book describes:

The Mahar in the past usually was a 'Balutedar' and a petty government servant in the village. Due to the absence of any traditional occupation, the Mahars were ready to go in search of employment wherever it was available. Many of them were recruited in the armies of the 'Peshwas' and later into those of the 'East India Company'. The Company, in its effort to build a modern army, made education compulsory for its recruits and thus opened an avenue for the Mahars to enter the modern age. The superannuated Mahar officers and their children living in separate settlements and liberated from the shackles of the village economy, were the pioneers of the movement for the emancipation of untouchables in Maharashtra. (Kathare 2011, p. 49)

One important feature of Maharashtra's caste structure is the absence of an indigenous trading caste of any significance except a small 'Vani' caste in some parts of 'Konkan'. The traders and money-lenders in this region were migrants from the neighbouring territories. In the eighteenth century, with the expansion of trade and finance as a result of Maratha conquests, the Maratha rulers invited traders from other areas to come and settle in important towns. To this day, the bourgeoisie in Maharashtra belongs to the same trading communities that control the economic life of other states of India. The elites in medieval Maharashtra were mainly from the 'Maratha', 'Brahmin', and 'Kayastha Prabhu' castes. The 'Deshmukhs' or the Zamindars in this part of the country were largely from the high-status Maratha families. Under the 'Adilshahi' and 'Nizamshahi' kingdoms, many Deshmukhs rose to the position of court noblemen and commanders. Some of those who distinguished themselves rose to be Jahgirdars and a few such as Shahaji or Jadhavrao could even be kingmakers. The Brahmins, in addition to being priests, were appointed as diplomats and administrative officers. The Kayasthas were commanders of forts. Their formal training enabled them to act both as civilian and military officers.

Shradha Kumbhojkar in her book says:

In the reign of Shivaji, a balance of power was maintained amongst the different castes at the court and in the administration. But when, Balaji Vishvanath was appointed Peshwa or Prime Minister by Shahu (grandson of Shivaji), this balance of power was disturbed. Within a few years, the Peshwas usurped all political power, and used it for caste aggrandisement. The Peshwas brought young 'Chitpavan Brahmin' boys from Ratnagiri to Pune, offered them educational facilities at State cost and absorbed them in the administration. Brahmins were now appointed army commanders. 'Jahgirs' and 'Inams' were bestowed upon them. The revenue on land owned by Brahmins and the customs duties on goods they imported were reduced. Considerable sums of money were distributed among learned and not-so-learned Brahmins as 'Dakshina' from the State treasury. (Kumbhojkar 2009, p. 77)

This concentration of religious, political and economic power in the hands of one small caste was bound to arouse the jealousy and resentment of other castes. The Maratha army commanders such as the 'Scindias', 'Gaikwads', and others, carved out independent States for themselves on the periphery of the Peshwa's kingdom. The 'Deshastha' and 'Saraswat Brahmins' and 'Kayastha Prabhus' migrated to these kingdoms which offered them opportunities for employment and promotion. The suspicion and antagonism bred by this narrow sectarian policy led to conflict between Brahmins and non-Brahmins in Maharashtra. Another important aspect that triggered the conflict between Brahmins and Non-Brahmins was the emergence of modern capitalist sector under the impact of the British rule. Different provinces in India were conquered by the British at different times, and this fact determined the nature of their economic development. Within each province, the opportunities for each individual for entering the modern sector were determined mainly by his caste. The old social order was characterised by the uneven economic and cultural development, and unequal life chances for different groups within the community. This inequality continued in the new system as well. However, the disarmament of India and suppression of local armies by the new rulers led to the decline of the old ruling classes. The Brahmin diplomats and administrators attached to different local princes lost their means of livelihood when the princes were subjugated by the British. However, their long well-established tradition of learning helped the Brahmins to avail themselves of the facilities afforded by new educational institutions set up by the British rulers. Within a few years, they could monopolise the avenues of employment opened out by government departments, educational

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institutions and commercial establishments. A few of them entered the new professions of lawyers, physicians, and journalists. With the spread of education, many of the non-Brahmin castes also obtained the requisite qualifications to enter these occupations. But they could not compete successfully with the Brahmins who were firmly entrenched in these fields for some decades before their entry. Even to this day, most of the posts at higher levels of administration in the public and private sectors are held by Brahmins. The Brahmins also continue to dominate the intellectual and cultural life of Maharashtra.

Unlike in Northern India, according to Gail Omvedt, the British introduced the 'Ryotwari' system of land revenue in Maharashtra and recognised the rights of the old cultivating classes in land (Omvedt 1976, p. 73). But the class relations in agriculture were bound to change under the rule of the new colonial State. With the introduction of private property in land, the growth of the money economy and the development of the means of communications, the beginnings of the process of transfer of land, from the hands of the cultivating classes to the hands of the traders and money-lenders, could be observed by about 1870. It was through this process that the money-lenders slowly turned into landlords. A very large percentage of these absentee landlords and traders came from the 'Marwari' trading communities; but the Brahmins were also conspicuous in their ranks. The setting up of the British courts of law, and the principle of 'sanctity of contract' which they were supposed to uphold, helped to inflate considerably the importance of village land records. The suppression of territorial armies had reduced the power of the village head-man who was generally one from amongst the Maratha peasants. On the other hand, the Brahmin village accountant, being a keeper for land records and the only literate person in the village community, found himself in a position of power that would enable him to grab the land of the cultivator. When disputes came to be settled in a court of law, the Brahmin lawyer, the Brahmin sub-judge and the Brahmin 'Mamlatdar' often ranged themselves on the side of the Brahmin money-lender, much to the detriment of the cultivator's interest (Omvedt 1976, p. 137). Thus, the concentration of power at the bureaucratic ladder, and its use for ignoble selfish ends, evoked resentment and anguish among the cultivators. If it did not assume the form of collective fury against the Brahmins, it resulted in the formation of a platform from where Brahmins could be challenged.

The nature and impact of the colonial intervention in the sphere of education in Western India is another avenue that helps in analyzing caste questions and the emergence of Non-Brahmin and Dalit movements as well. English education threw open for the upper caste intellectuals in Maharashtra a window into the outer world. Their study of English constitutional history, classical political economy, the social philosophy of Bentham, Mill and Spencer, and the religious teachings of the rebel Protestant sects, developed in them an awareness of modern social values. They began to examine their society through Western eyes. The achievements of the Europeans in modern science, their religious tolerance and the freedom of the individual in social and economic affairs struck them as impressive enough to make them want to emulate them. The development of democratic political institutions and the superior techniques of production and economic organisations in the European countries made a strong appeal to them. Slowly, they came to realise that, unless feudal fetters were broken and new social values assimilated, no social progress was possible. M. G. Ranade, a judge, was the chief spokesman of this group of liberal social reformers. He defined social reform as "a change from constraint to freedom, from credulity to faith, from status to contract, from authority to reason, from unorganised to organised life, from bigotry to toleration, from blind fatalism to a sense of human dignity" (Goyal 1962, p. 265). With this end in view, he encouraged the establishment of different associations such as the 'Society for the Propagation of Widow Re-marriage', a school for women, the Sarvajanika Sabha (Public place), the social conference, etc. The programme which the social reformers

advocated covered such modest reforms as the prohibition of the tonsure of widows and of child marriage. They demanded that the age of consent for intercourse within or without marriage be increased, that widow remarriage be allowed, and female education encouraged. This programme amounted to a reform of the family system and better treatment of women rather than total social reform as such. But the educated middle class, and the commercial bourgeoisie from which these social reformers arose, could not accept even such limited reforms because their own status and privileges, as Brahmins, could have been challenged in future. Hence, by the end of the nineteenth century, the issue of social reform receded into the background, and the educated classes turned their attention to obtaining more political concessions from the British. Lower-class Non-Brahmins and Dalits were witnessing this and with the help of some kind of exposure to colonial education (which they had received to some extent) were able to rejuvenate the idea of social reform that could challenge Brahmin supremacy. Having mapped the socio-political conjuncture of the Maharashtrian society with the focus on its caste relations, the paper will move on to outline the significance of the Non-Brahmin and Dalit movements respectively.

Jyotiba Phule and The Non-Brahmin Movement (Satya Shodhak Samaj Movement):

The last quarter of the nineteenth century witnessed the emergence of an educated middle class and a petty bourgeoisie from the ranks of the Non-Brahmin castes in Maharashtra. Through English education, they also learnt the liberal social values and, having imbibed them, they proceeded to challenge the old social order. Many of the Non-Brahmin intellectuals who came forward in this period were educated in the English schools opened by the Protestant missionaries of the Free Church Society. Unlike the Jesuits and other Catholic missionaries who had come to India with the Portuguese and who compromised with the medieval caste system, the Protestant missionaries commenced their effort at conversion with an attack on the Hindu religion and the traditional social order. The special targets of their attack were the customs of sati and infanticide, the cruel treatment meted out to upper caste widows, the ideas of religious pollution, and untouchability. The Puritans had revolted against the religious bigotry and the church hierarchy in their own country. Their insistence on the right of each individual to have direct communion with the Almighty was a typical feature of that sect. It is no wonder, therefore, that the Indians who were deeply impressed by such a philosophy should express serious objections to the caste hierarchy and to Brahmin privileges.

Phule opened a frontal attack on the caste system. According to O'Hanlon:

He asserted that the Vedas, Puranas, and other religious books of the Hindus, did not represent divine relations but were simply products of upper-caste intellectuals interested in upholding their caste privileges and in the exploitation of the common people. He tried to show, how-ever crudely, that the history of India is a history of the Brahmin upper castes trying to dominate by means fair and foul the common people, the 'Shudras', and the 'Ati-Shudras', that is, the untouchables. The shudras, he said, for the first time in Indian history now had an opportunity to overthrow the hated yoke of Brahmin domination. Divine dispensation had, as it were, bestowed on them the rulers who were sympathetic to their cause. They should now liberate themselves from the age-old traditions and superstitions and unitedly fight for their religious and social rights. With this end in view, in 1873, he established the 'Satyashodhak Samaj' and raised the banner of revolt. (O'Hanlon 1985, p. 167)

The Satyashodhak Samaj encouraged the Non-Brahmin castes to perform different religious rituals without the intervention of Brahmin priests. His supporters were mainly the urban Non-Brahmin traders, and contractors of which Telugu Malis formed a significant proportion

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of the same. Phule sympathised with the misery of the agriculturists and urged the British government to ameliorate their lot through the introduction of compulsory primary education, provision of credit, and other facilities. Lokhande, the editor of 'Deenbandhu' (daily newspaper), and the father of the Indian trade union movement, was a leader of the Satyashodhak movement in Bombay. However, in Phule's time, the Satyashodhak movement was confined to a few urban centres and had little impact on the Non-Brahmin peasantry in Maharashtra.

A new chapter opened in the history of the non-Brahmin movement in the first decade of the twentieth century when Shahu Chhatrapati, the ruler of Kolhapur and a descendent of Shivaji, became its acknowledged leader. According to Omvedt, Shahu's interest in social reform originated in a personal experience of the time when the Brahmin priest in the royal household had re-fused to perform the religious rituals according to Vedic rites on the ground that the ruler was not a Kshatriya (Omvedt 1976, p. 125). A heated dispute ensued between the Maratha landed gentry claiming Kshatriya status and the Brahmins who opposed them on the ground that after the annihilation of Kshatriyas by Lord Parshuram no Kshatriyas were left in Maharashtra. The extremist nationalists sided with the conservative Brahmins and fanned the flames of caste antagonism (Omvedt 1976, p. 87).

Chatrapati Shahu Maharaj was sympathetic to the aspirations of the untouchables and worked in his own way for the eradication of untouchability and the advancement of the scheduled castes. However, the main thrust of his effort was to encourage the formation of modern elite from among the Non-Brahmin peasant castes. He assisted students to get higher education, encouraged the educated people to settle in the higher professions, supported non-Brahmin journalists and encouraged promising candidates to participate in the politics of the then Bombay Presidency. Though sympathetic to social reform, he was personally more inclined towards the 'Arya Samaj', which believed in the sanctity of the Vedas and in the continuity of tradition, than towards the heretical teachings of the Satyashodhak Samaj. The non-Brahmin elite under Shahu defied the supremacy of the Brahmins in the religious and social fields. However, both when Phule and Chhatrapati Shahu were prominent on the political scene the non-Brahmin leaders remained loyal to the British government. They contended that only the Brahmins stood to benefit from political rights and political reforms. The acquisition of power by the Brahmin politicians would help perpetuate caste domination. The non-Brahmins, they said, should concentrate their energies on social reform where the foreign rulers would assist them. These conflicting attitudes to the problems of social and political reform reflect the caste and class interests of the Brahmin and Non-Brahmin elite in this period.

The scenario of the First World War helped to rouse political awareness among the wider strata of the Indian population. The British government had declared the progressive realisation of responsible government, as the aim of their policy in India. The growth of democratic institutions created new aspirations in the non-Brahmin elite that could envisage its majority in any elected legislative body. A non-Brahmin political party was formed. Satyashodhak propagandists went from village to village arousing the peasants to resist actively the Brahmin domination. Despite the Congress call for non-co-operation with the British Raj, the Non-Brahmin party contested the elections to the provincial legislative assemblies and a few of its leaders even held ministerial posts under diarchy. With political power in sight, however, the enthusiasm for social reforms diminished. Phule's dream of a united revolutionary movement of the Shudras and the untouchables proved to be ephemeral and the Non-Brahmin party gradually disassociated itself from the movement for the emancipation of the untouchables which was taking shape under the leadership of Ambedkar. With the emergence of Gandhi as a national leader, all-India politics was taking a new turn.

Gandhi tried to form a united front of different classes and castes under the leadership of the bourgeoisie against the British imperialist power. His satyagraha proved to be a more efficient technique for mobilising public opinion and for pressurising the British. His constant reference to the welfare of the down-trodden as the only justification for the demand for Swaraj endeared him to millions of his countrymen. He openly opposed caste inequality and untouchability. Upholding the dignity of labour, he induced scores of his devoted followers to work in the villages for constructive programmes. The new generation of Non-Brahmin elites, therefore, realised that their long-term interests lay in joining the Indian National Congress and, under the leadership of Keshavrao Jedhe, they took the plunge in 1930 by responding to the call of civil disobedience.

Gandhi's non-cooperation movement, however, was anathema to a large section of the Brahmin-educated middle class of Maharashtra. The boycott of legislatures, government posts, educational institutions and courts of law could deprive them of their means of livelihood. They ridiculed Gandhi's ideas as irrational and impracticable. The growth of democratic politics was disturbing to them as it would lead to their subordination to the non-Brahmin majority. Gandhi's advocacy of social reform was too bitter a pill to swallow and so, at the time the non-Brahmins joined the Indian National Congress, the Brahmin-educated classes in Maharashtra left it to join the 'Hindu Mahasabha'. The rise of Fascist parties in Europe in the 1930s was a beacon light which they were only too eager to follow, and the 'Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh' (RSS) was formed with the brown shirt as uniform. After his release from detention, Savarkar became the leader of the Hindu Mahasabha and he pursued with vigour the policy of opposing the Congress, on the ground that it was pro-Muslim. The gulf between the non-Brahmin majority in the Congress and the Brahmin-dominated Hindu Mahasabha kept widening, producing great bitterness. When Gandhi was assassinated in 1948 by a Brahmin, this bitterness erupted into anti-Brahmin riots. To this day, the Brahmin middle class and petty-bourgeoisie have retained their fidelity to the Hindu communal forces in Maharashtra.

Not all Brahmins, of course, supported the communal parties. A sizeable minority with a liberal background continued their association with the Indian National Congress, and provided Gandhi with constructive workers devoted to work in the villages. They won for Congress the spontaneous support of the poor. The success of the Russian revolution fascinated the intellectuals in the undeveloped colonial countries and introduced socialist ideas. Going by Omvedt's presumption,

The Communist and the Congress Socialist parties came into existence. The leadership of these Leftist parties was drawn mainly from the upper-caste intellectuals and the party's following was drawn from the industrial proletariat. After Independence, the intellectuals of the Non-Brahmin castes also established a socialist party -namely, the Peasants and Workers party. But when the Indian National Congress accepted socialism as its credo, there was little to distinguish the other democratic parties from the Congress. The Leftist political parties have been functioning only in a few big towns and cities, with hardly any foothold in the rural areas. The Congress, since Independence, has been essentially in Maharashtra, a party of Maratha peasants, united by strong caste bonds. (Omvedt 1976, p. 198)

Under the leadership of Y. B. Chavan, it remained more or less liberal in outlook. It accommodated promising young men from other Non-Brahmin castes who could show some caste following. No opposition party was able to make any inroads into this Congress stronghold till the general election of 1977.

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After the establishment of the adult franchise, the Brahmins who formed an insignificant minority in the whole population were thrown out of the political field. The decline of Brahmin power has reduced the severity of the Brahmin versus Non-Brahmin conflict. The implementation of land reform drove out from the village the absentee landlord, many of whom were Brahmins. Owing to the growth of industry and the Indianisation of bureaucracy, many opportunities were opened for technicians and administrators most of which were seized by the Brahmins who invariably possessed the requisite technical qualifications. Some have even started their own business firms and have become entrepreneurs. All Brahmins, however, do not belong to the bourgeoisie. A large proportion of them belongs to the lower middle classes, working as clerks or primary and secondary teachers. Caste influences are still very deep-rooted, and educated Brahmins suffer from the complex that job reservations for the scheduled castes and the political leverage of the Marathas keep them away from those posts which they deserve to occupy on the basis of their qualifications. This feeling comes to the surface in times of crisis, such as the recent Marathwada riots. However, the Brahmins are not much of a political force today. The Jan Sangh could not win in Maharashtra any parliamentary seat in the general elections. The Hindu communal forces, however, have secured a new lease of life after the victory of the Janata Party in the elections of 1977 and 1978. Yet, the fact that the Janata party could form a ministry in Maharashtra only after the defection of Sharad Pawar bears testimony to its own feeble rural support.

Dr Ambedkar and the Dalit Movement:

Maharashtra is known to be the land of the Dalit movement. In fact, the pan-Indian Dalit movement took its emergence in Maharashtra under the leadership of its iconic leader Dr Ambedkar. Lower castes, especially, Mahars, became conscious of their existence and socio-political emancipation. According to Kathare, unlike the Marathas, there was neither landed gentry nor any tradition of political power for the scheduled castes. They belong to the lowest strata of the rural population, being poor farmers and agricultural labourers. But the Ryotwari system has saved them from the abject servility from which their brethren suffered in the North of India. In medieval times, the Mahars were recruited to the Maratha armies and that tradition continued under the East India Company and the Crown (Kathare 2011, p. 88). The modern army gave Mahars the opportunity to enter the modern age. When Lord Kitchner became the Commander-in-Chief of the Indian army in the last decade of the nineteenth century, he discontinued the Mahar recruitment on the plea that the Mahars did not belong to the martial races of India. The Mahars reacted by sending a memorandum to the government requesting it to reconsider its view. Thus began a political movement which served as a precursor to the movement for the emancipation of the untouchables, which took a keen edge after the First World War.

The Dalit struggle for their religious and social rights started in 1923, when Ambedkar returned after completing his higher studies in England and the US and established the 'Bahishkrita Hitakarini Sabha'. In the first phases of the movement, the programme consisted of the assertion of the rights to public places and entry into Hindu temples. A satyagraha was organised in 1927 for drawing water from a public tank at 'Mahad' in Kolaba District, followed by satyagrahas for entry into temples in Pune and Nasik. The invitation given by the British government to Ambedkar and Rao Bahadur Raja to participate in the Round Table Conference in 1930 as representatives of the scheduled castes served to promote in them a consciousness of their political power and to bring the issue of scheduled castes to prominence in the political field.

Unlike Non-Brahmin leaders who gave precedence to social reform over political reform, the scheduled castes now decided to discontinue their movement for religious and

social equality and concentrate on the demand for political rights. The consideration which weighed with them was that a struggle for social and religious rights was bound to arouse the indignation of the caste Hindus and provoke them to hostile action. The scheduled caste people were too small in numbers and too weak and unorganised to withstand such an offensive. Secondly, the strategy that the caste Hindus adopted in the face of scheduled caste satyagraha was the obtaining of a stay order from the Court on the ground that the said places were private property and that the scheduled castes did not even have the customary right to their use. The untouchables in such cases could achieve their end by resorting to civil disobedience which would create a law-and-order problem and antagonise the British authorities. The scheduled caste leaders, therefore, turned their attention to the political field. However, they refused to make a common cause with the Indian National Congress. Instead, they relied on the British Government to provide them with the safeguards which they thought essential for protecting their interests from the caste Hindu majority in the emerging political setup.

At the Round Table Conference, Dr Ambedkar made a demand for separate electorates for the untouchables. The 'Communal Award', which followed, provoked Gandhi to declare a fast unto death and a compromise was reached on the basis of reserved seats and joint electorates. This failed to satisfy the scheduled caste leaders, and they continued to press for additional safeguards. The constant pressure from the scheduled castes worked as a counterweight to the conservative and revivalist forces in the Congress and helped the Congress leaders to take a secular and democratic stand. However, the reliance of the scheduled castes on the British government and their opposition to the Indian National Congress opened a gulf between them and the anti-imperialist progressive forces, which is difficult to bridge even thirty years after independence. The Mahar leaders indicted the Congress for being indifferent to the distressing conditions of the scheduled castes and advised their followers to beware of Gandhi. The Congress, in its turn, supported the 'Chamars' to capture the reserved seats and caused an estrangement between the two scheduled caste communities.

Ambedkar was educated in British and American universities in the heyday of Liberalism. Freedom of speech and expression, of faith and religion, equality before law and democracy, remained the basis of his social philosophy to the end of his life. Historically, Liberalism has evolved as the philosophy of the rising bourgeoisie. It cannot be a tool for the most downtrodden sections of society in their struggle against exploitation. The invisible hand of perfect competition cannot maximise the welfare of agricultural and industrial labourers, who need not the formal equality before the law but the actual equality of opportunity. Socialism is the natural creed for the exploited classes of the community, and Ambedkar slowly veered to some form of democratic socialism in the last years of his life. In his book published in 1947, he advocated the nationalisation of land and of basic industries as solutions to the problem of economic inequality. He also maintained that the nationalisation of land and basic industries should be made an integral part of the democratic constitution (Kathare 2011, p. 32). However, despite his secular outlook, he could not sever all his moorings in religion. In his search for an alternative to Hinduism based on inequality by birth and untouchability, he turned to Buddhism as an ideal religion. He embraced Buddhism in 1956, and encouraged thousands of his followers to do the same. His interpretation of Buddhist religious texts in *Buddh* and his *Dhamma* is on the lines of his liberal philosophy. Yet, it is no substitute for a radical ideology.

Ambedkar was a staunch believer in democratic values and practices. Yet he feared that, in the Indian society characterised by discrimination based on caste, democracy would in actual practise turn out to be domination of the scheduled castes by the caste Hindu

majority. Socialism is nothing but the extension of the democratic principle to the social and economic fields. It is defined as a government by the workers and the peasants. But, unless caste distinctions disappear, a government of the workers would also mean a rule of caste Hindu workers. The scheduled castes might not be allowed to participate in it. This view was strengthened by the indifference shown by Indian Marxists to the eradication of the evils of the caste system. It was further supported by the actual experience of the trade unions which not only tolerated but often insisted on discrimination in employment and division of work in the factories on the basis of untouchability. Similarly Marxism, to Ambedkar, appeared inconsistent with the tenets of democracy. It was based on violence. Ambedkar's writings do not display any close familiarity with Marxist classics. Nevertheless, after his conversion to Buddhism, he proclaimed that Buddhism was Marxism purged of violence (P. 93). Such juxtaposition of Buddhism and Marxism has produced a lot of confusion among Buddhist intellectual circles. And vested interests find in it a handy tool to check the spread of Marxist thinking among the Buddhists. The conversion to Buddhism has assisted the Mahars to liberate themselves mentally from the shackles of the old hated religion. It has, however, placed a wedge between the Buddhists and the other scheduled castes in Maharashtra.

Conclusion

With its history as a pre-colonial polity, the Marathi-speaking region provides a very interesting setting to study questions of political cohesion, cultural integration and the transition to modernity under colonial rule. With the same view, the present paper discussed the social and political configuration of colonial Maharashtra. Caste ideology remains an important value system on the Indian subcontinent, as it is the most relevant ideology ordering peoples' lives and its values are maintained in the modern era in an essentially new way. In fact, the total transformation of the economic and political basis of the system by colonialism has meant that it is primarily its cultural features that have survived. Going by the same, this paper, in its opening pages, talked about the social structure in the pre-British period, since the Caste system in this era was the chief marker of its society. With the coming of colonialism, there was generated new social and political patterns within Indian society. One of these was the eventual solidification of linguistic sub-nationalisms. In the early period, elites from one linguistic territory moved into other regions where they were more or less absorbed in localized socio-political systems. Under British rule, this elite movement continued, but the outside elites found themselves under a challenge from local groups and the linguistic territories began to emerge as major political arenas. This process culminated in the demand for a linguistic state after independence: Samukhya Maharashtra, the demand for a united state of Marathi-speaking people, was a major example of such a movement. More importantly, colonialism created new classes and a new solidification of major sections of society. Caste was a feature which helped to define these, but this was not the traditional caste system. The old village caste society was shaken up, members of artisan castes gave up or were driven out of their old professions, peasants migrated to great distances in search of work while maintaining their village ties and the result was the slow formation of a new and wider social consciousness among the lower classes. The challengers, emerging from the non-Brahmin revolutionary cultural movement used themes of cultural revolt drawn from past tradition, but unlike those of the past, refused to be absorbed into the normal processes of Brahmanic Hinduism. Their challenge had an entirely new social bias and understanding.

Further, the paper discussed the processes of Maharashtrian class structure, out of the elements of traditional Indian society, the position of various classes within it and the relation of this structure to the forms which nationalism and the non-Brahmin movement took. After the completion of the British conquest of Maharashtra in 1818, the class structure that developed was typical of colonialism. The general effects of the colonial land relations were to increase impoverishment, so as to worsen the effects of stratification and introduce new

fluidity into village society. And it was these developments that provide the foundation for the degree of unity among all non-Brahmin castes that was asserted in the concept of Bahujan Samaj. While peasants in the 19th century did not attain a consciousness of themselves as a class, they were universally reported to be conservative and bound to religion. It was nevertheless the 19th-century colonial society that led the basis for this consciousness, which was to come to the fore in the 20th century.

In the later part of the paper, I have looked at some of the important discourses and debates, such as Dalit movement and conversion to Buddhism. While discussing the Dalit movement, I have specifically traced how Ambedkar and his fellow Dalits interrogated the colonial policies in the social and political scenario. After Ambedkar's Yeola announcement, the political move towards the religious conversion took shape in tandem and this move was not only considered to be political but also socio-religious and spiritual. This move, in fact, gave the Dalits the courage to choose their religions accordingly across India. As far as Maharashtra is concerned, Dalits (specifically 'Mahars') embraced Buddhism and found a new socio-religious identity. Having made these observations, I would conclude by stating that the colonial rule and its intervention into Maharashtrian society, along with the emergence of subaltern movements – Non-Brahmin and Dalit movement – shaped an idea of modern-day Maharashtra.

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Bio-note

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