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# Flames in the Shadows - The Marathwada Riots and the Struggle for Dalit Liberation

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# FLAMES IN THE SHADOWS

The Marathwada Riots and the Struggle for Dalit Liberation

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Advised by Professor Vijay Prashad

## ABSTRACT

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From July to September 1978, the Marathwada region experienced intense levels of violence following the decision to rename Marathwada University into Dr. Babasaheb Ambedkar University. In a crushing display of upper-caste power, thousands of dalits were killed, raped and made to flee their homes. Deep feelings of uncertainty and fear lingered on for several months after. The question of why a matter so ostensibly trivial as renaming a university incited so much violence is a perplexing one. It cannot be answered by merely reducing the violence to “an imposition of high caste authority.” The rise of dalit self-assertion movements – inspired by Ambedkar – had resulted in dalits demanding their rights, liberating themselves from their age-old oppression by making use of affirmative action schemes, and moving from rural to urban sectors in search of new jobs. The complex structural undercurrents of this issue lay in the severe underdevelopment of Marathwada, the concentration of wealth and ownership in the hands of the rural political elite, strained agrarian relations, opportunistic identity politics, and the overwhelming poverty faced by large sections of the population – all of which are as ubiquitous today as they were forty years ago.

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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Writing this thesis has been an extremely challenging undertaking, but one that I am eternally grateful for. This thesis would not be possible without the untiring help, support and love I have received over the past few months and through my time at Trinity College. Without the invaluable guidance from my professor and advisor, Vijay Prashad, this thesis would never have come to fruition. His wealth of knowledge, insightful feedback and radically inspiring outlook on life have been absolutely vital in shaping my thinking, for this thesis and for the rest of my life. I would like to thank Professors Seth Markle and Donna-Dale Marcano, whose advice and support has been instrumental in addressing the complexities of my thesis, and with whom I have had so many long, much-needed conversations that solidified my passion for and commitment to human rights.

I would like to thank my friends, Malhaar Shah, Arnav Patel, Trisha Iyengar, Chinmay Rayarikar, Andrew Eslich, Camryn Clarke, Seth Browner, Kabelo Motsoeneng, and Varun Ursekar, for engaging me in many thoughtful discussions, intellectual debates and candid criticisms, for as long as I have known you. I am honoured and truly thankful for all the endless patience, kindness and words of encouragement from them and countless others – James Ziv, Allen Rios, Aurora Bellard, Sheila Njau, Kirill Gudkon, Nicole Katav, Elizabeth Valenzuela, Jasmine Gentry, Mark Ferreira, Andrew Agard, and so many more. Finally, I would like to thank my parents and sister back in India for being my pillars of strength, my sources of unconditional love and support, and the wind beneath my wings.

## TABLE OF CONTENTS

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Abstract.....	i
Acknowledgments.....	ii
Preface.....	iv
Introduction: The Marathwada Riots.....	1
Chapter One: The Rising Tide of Ambedkarian Self-Assertion.....	9
Chapter Two: The (Re)Name Game.....	17
Movement to Rename Marathwada University .....	17
On the Other Side: Why Pass the Resolution? .....	24
The “Marathwada” Psyche.....	34
Chapter Three: Structures of Conflict .....	39
Compounded Underdevelopment in Marathwada.....	39
“Socially Unjust” Reservations? .....	45
Changes in the Agrarian Landscape .....	52
Agricultural Labour in the Era of Capitalism .....	56
Sugar Kings and their Irrigated Kingdoms .....	62
Chapter Four: Is Caste a Barrier to Class Unity? .....	74
Conclusion: The Revolution – Blue, Green and Red.....	80
Bibliography .....	86

## PREFACE

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I have lived most of my life in Mumbai, but I have never had the opportunity to engage in a serious, critical analysis of the many divisive problems that characterize Indian society and culture. I have experienced how incredibly normalized modern caste and class discrimination have become; one does not have to look very far to see the burning presence of deep-rooted inequality and injustice. Opportunistic identity politics and an inequitable concentration of wealth and power are perhaps inevitable in a country as diverse as India. This paper is a modest attempt at highlighting the extent and complexity of the most pressing issues of our time, placing at its center those that are most marginalized by society.

Conducting research for this thesis proved difficult and I had many limitations in the sources I could find and the amount of information I could present within this narrative. Although this paper centers the riots of 1978, it is far from being over and remains an ongoing intellectual endeavour. I was not able to conduct interviews of my own, but I use several secondary-source interviews and observations to synthesize my analysis. I researched extensively and read work from a variety of different perspectives, but the majority of sources have come from *Economic and Political Weekly*, a left-leaning editorial journal that mostly publishes in English. I have maintained a critical perspective on everything I have read, but it is important to note that this thesis does not claim to be nor does it try to remain neutral; it is on the side of those brutally oppressed by an inexcusable hegemonic system that seeks to preserve a violent status quo.

I came across this poem, written at the height of the “Dalit Renaissance.” It has stuck with me through the course of this research, and inspired me to push harder in the toughest moments of this process. It is the most poignant, brave and sincere articulation of everything that is at the heart of this thesis:

### **Mother**

*I have never seen you  
Wearing one of those gold-bordered saris  
With a gold necklace  
With gold bangles  
With fancy sandals  
Mother! I have seen you  
Burning the soles of your feet in the harsh summer sun  
Hanging your little ones in a cradle on an acacia tree  
Carrying barrels of tar  
Working on a road construction crew...*

*I have seen you  
With a basket of earth on your head  
Rags bound on your feet  
Giving a sweaty kiss to the naked child  
Who came tottering over to you  
Working for your daily wage, working, working...*

*I have seen you  
Turning back the tide of tears  
Trying to ignore your stomach's growl  
Suffering parched throat and lips  
Building a dam on a lake...*

*I have seen you  
For a dream of four mud walls  
Stepping carefully, pregnant  
On the scaffolding of a sky scraper  
Carrying a hod of wet cement on your head...*

*I have seen you  
In evening, untying the end of your sari  
For the coins to buy salt and oil,  
Putting a five paise coin  
On a little hand*

*Saying 'go eat candy'  
Taking the little bundle from the cradle to your breast  
Saying "Study, become an Ambedkar"  
And let the baskets fall from my hands...*

*I have seen you  
Sitting in front of the stove  
Burning your very bones  
To make coarse bread and a little something  
To feed everybody, but half-fed yourself  
So there would a bit in the morning...*

*I have seen you  
Washing clothes and cleaning pots  
In different households  
Rejecting the scraps of food offered to you  
With pride  
Covering yourself with a sari  
That had been mended so many times  
Saying "Don't you have a mother or a sister?"  
To anyone who looked at you with lust in his eyes...*

*I have seen you  
On a crowded street with a market basket on your head  
Trying always to keep your head covered with the end of your sari  
Chasing anyone who nudged you deliberately  
With your sandal in your hand...*

*I have seen you working until sunset  
Piercing the darkness to turn toward home,  
Then forcing from the door  
That man who staggered in from the hooch hut...*

*I have seen you  
At the front of the Long March  
The end of your sari tucked tightly at the waist  
Shouting "Change the name"  
Taking the blow of the police stick on your upraised hands  
Going to jail with head held high...*

*I have seen you  
Saying when your only son  
Fell martyr to police bullets  
"You died for Bhim, your death means something"  
saying boldly to the police  
"If I had two or three sons, I would be fortunate."*

*They would fight on."*

*I have seen you on your deathbed  
Giving that money you earned  
Rag-picking to the diksha bhumi  
Saying with your dying breath  
"Live in unity... fight for Baba... don't forget him...  
And with your very last breath  
"Jai Bhim."  
I have seen you...*

*I have never seen you  
Even wanting a new broad-bordered sari*

*Mother, I have seen you...*

By Jyoti Lanjewar

Translated by

Sylvie Martinez, Rujita Pathre, S. K. Thorat, Vimal Thorat, and Eleanor Zelliott<sup>1</sup>

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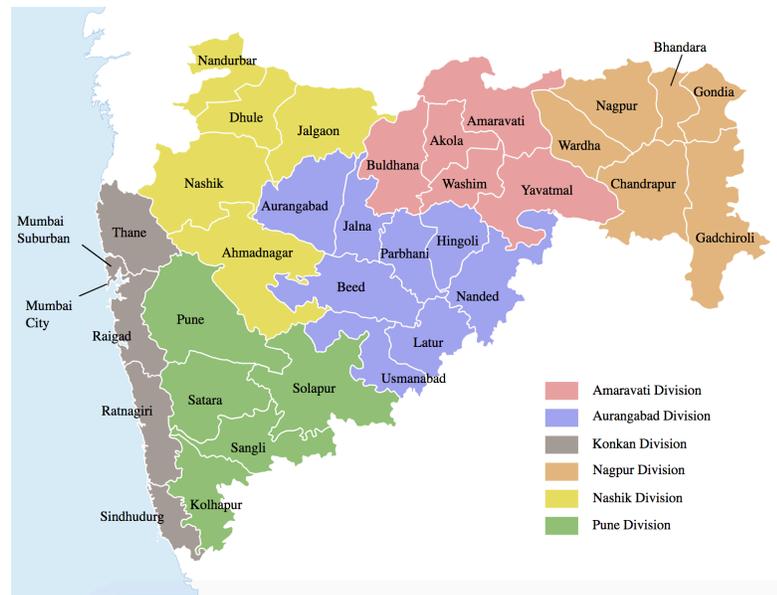
<sup>1</sup> Vankar, Ganpat, "Mother: Jyoti Lanjewar." *Marathi Dalit Poetry in English Translation* (blog), *Blogspot*, July 11, 2014, <http://marathidalitpoetry.blogspot.com/>

## INTRODUCTION

# The Marathwada Riots

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Smoke from the burning dalit *bastis* saturated the air. There was no clean water to be found in any well; they had been polluted by the bodies of slain children. Mutilated bodies of dalit women lay scattered at the edge of the jungles they had been fleeing to. Those that had managed to escape survived on rotting *sitaphals* found on the forest floor. Hundreds of dalits were murdered. Countless more were severely beaten. Dalit houses and belongings were razed to the ground. This was the picture of Marathwada in 1978: a systematic and ruthless onslaught against the dalit community by caste Hindus in the region, incited ostensibly by the decision to rename Marathwada University after Dr. B. R. Ambedkar.



*Google Images, 2017 [‘Aurangabad Division’ and ‘Marathwada’ are interchangeable]*

On July 27, 1978 – nine days after Sharad Pawar had taken office as the Chief Minister of Maharashtra – the Maharashtra Legislative Assembly unanimously passed a resolution to rename Marathwada University as Dr. Babasaheb Ambedkar University.<sup>2</sup> The university was located in Aurangabad, which formed one of five main districts in Marathwada (the other four being Parbhani, Nanded, Beed, and Osmanabad). Marathwada as a whole was, and remains to this day, designated as one of the most ‘backward’ regions of the state of Maharashtra. Spanning an area of around 65,000 km<sup>2</sup> with approximately 9,000 villages, the mostly-rural region was characterized by pervasive economic and industrial underdevelopment, with over a third of its population living below the poverty line and almost two-thirds illiterate. In the 1970s, the population of Marathwada was around 8 million. 16.25% of this population – or 1.3 million – were dalits. Of the dalits, 80% lived below the poverty line and only 19% were literate, against the 30% and 34% statewide statistic.<sup>3</sup> Aurangabad was Marathwada’s only “big” city, yet it was only moderately developed in the decades after Independence. By the late 1970s it still faced a high unemployment rate, with an increasingly large trend of educated youth leaving the region in search of jobs in Mumbai – by contrast, the wealthiest city in India – only a few hours away. There were only two state-sponsored universities in Aurangabad (today it has about seven), one of which was Marathwada University, which had two main campuses. Ninety percent of the student body in the 200-acre Nagasena Vana, or

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<sup>2</sup> Atyachar Virodh Samiti, “The Marathwada Riots: A Report,” *Economic and Political Weekly* Vol. 14, No. 19 (May 12, 1979): 845, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/4367590> (accessed May 7, 2017)

<sup>3</sup> A person was classified as “literate” by legal measurement in Census data if they were able write out their full name. (1971-2001 Census)

Milind Campus, were dalits. This campus was run by the People's Education Society, which Ambedkar himself had founded some decades earlier. Next to this 'dalit' campus stood the rest of the university, covering roughly 500 acres.<sup>4</sup>

On the day the renaming was declared, the Students Action Committee (SAC) of the university – a group comprising mainly middle class, high-caste students – successfully declared a *bandh*<sup>5</sup> against the renaming in Aurangabad and in the nearby towns of Nanded and Beed.<sup>6</sup> It was not long before violent demonstrations and attacks against public property in all major locations of these towns broke out. The cities and towns did not suffer any direct fatalities; however, several dalits were savagely beaten up. Those that spoke out in favour of the renaming or against the riots – mainly professors and academics from the university – were also subjected to intense assaults. In Aurangabad, bridges, buses and main traffic junctions were blown up, halting all social life. In Parbhani City, telephone lines were cut and dalit homes were attacked with rocks and pellets. In other urban towns, busts of Ambedkar were smashed or decorated with garlands made of shoes – a symbol of great disrespect. These incidents went on for a few days. The police rarely intervened to stop the rioters. In fact, in most cases, the police aided them and participated in the agitations enthusiastically. Dalit students were terrified, had nowhere to turn to, and did not return to school for several weeks. As the violence slowly subsided, the SAC announced that it would resume such agitations in September if the government failed to withdraw the proposal to rename the university.

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<sup>4</sup> Abraham, Amrita, "A Report from Marathwada," *Economic and Political Weekly* Vol. 13, No. 36 (September 9, 1978): 1538–1540, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/4366931> (accessed February 3, 2017)

<sup>5</sup> A *bandh*, meaning "closed," is a form of political protest where a political party or group declares a general strike of the entire city

<sup>6</sup> Ibid.

Meanwhile, the most alarming feature of these riots was actually their rapid spread to the surrounding villages. It was in the rural districts of Marathwada that the true devastation engendered by the riots was felt. Why student agitations for a matter so seemingly trivial – one that should have been a fairly contained university issue – gave way to such brutal violence even hundreds of kilometers away is a difficult and disconcerting question. In order to address it, the nature of the violence and the forces driving it need to be understood. The attacks on dalits here were nothing short of acts of terrorism, planned meticulously and executed with strategic intensity. The violence took many forms. In Sonkhed village, landlords set fire to forty-one dalit *bastis* and raped three female agricultural workers. In Sugaon, the dalit wells were poisoned with pesticide, which killed two people and caused over twenty to be hospitalized. In Bolsa, three women were raped and tortured before being killed. In Pongu, a new mother of a two-day old baby was raped and killed along with her child. In Yetala, two teachers were beaten to near-death in the *Gram Panchayat* office. In Temburni, two men were brutally murdered and their houses burnt to the ground. In Izzatgaon, five women running towards the forest were captured, raped and had their breasts cut off. In Pangri, mobs of men beat up women with *lathis*, burnt their houses and threw their children into the only well in the village.

These incidents were neither isolated events nor were they stories of only some villages. In almost every affected village in Marathwada, dalits were killed and dalit women were raped. Their houses were *gheraoed*,<sup>7</sup> pillaged and then set alight. Those houses that were not burnt to the ground were covered in bright blue paint and blue

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<sup>7</sup> *Gherao* means “encirclement.” Typically used as a tactic where a group of people surrounded a house or political office until their demands were met.

powder was sprayed everywhere – blue was the colour of dalit liberation. Dalit belongings were smashed with axes. They were forcefully shunted out of villages. Their wells were poisoned and their cattle were killed. This massacre ravaged on for *sixty-seven* days. In these two months, no help arrived for the dalits. Like in the urban sectors, in most villages the rioters were egged on and encouraged by the police *patils*.<sup>8</sup> In Pangri, all the atrocities were committed “with the blessings of the patils.” In Kushnoor, four women were caught and raped, and one of their children was burnt to death – by a police patil and a group of his *goondas*.<sup>9</sup> Those policemen that did feel morally obligated to intervene were threatened by their high-caste “benefactors” to stay out of it, while many others were simply bribed off. In Nanded, the district that saw the most – and most intense – violence, many of the policemen had conveniently “taken the night off” – for all sixty-seven nights, it seemed.<sup>10</sup>

Some time after the riots, the Parliamentary Committee was tasked with filing a report about the situation. They concluded that the police were, indeed, “mere spectators to the incidents,” and sometimes the “instigators.” Around 3000 people had been arrested, however, in the days following the end of the atrocities. But nearly all of them were released in order to instate “peace and harmony.” The Committee recommended opening judicial inquiries into the cases, a note that was promptly refused. The Committee also found that although compensation was given to some affected dalits, it

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<sup>8</sup> *Patil* means “head” or “chief.” It is a last name (derived from the *patil* jati), native to Maharashtra. Many *patils* were typically warriors for the Maratha army.

<sup>9</sup> A *goonda* a South Asian English word meaning “hired thug.” It is used colloquially and within legislature.

<sup>10</sup> Atyachar Virodhi Samiti, 1979

was not nearly sufficient to mitigate the damages incurred.<sup>11</sup> Neither was there any real effort to provide victims with emotional support, nor did the state attempt to foster any processes of truth and reconciliation.

In 1955, the Untouchability (Offenses) Act was passed, and “revamped” in 1976 as the Protection of Civil Rights Act (PCR). This act contained provisions to curb and prevent atrocities against scheduled castes and tribes. At the time of the riots, the PCR was in effect, and yet there was absolute silence from the government as dalits were being tortured and killed right under their noses. Weeks after the attacks stopped, the official government response to the problem of relocation and rehabilitation of displaced dalits was that it would “not always [be] possible” and if done too soon it would “exacerbate tensions.” This willfully apathetic response from the state persisted until many political parties and interest groups saw the riots as a political opportunity to expand their vote banks and consolidate local power. It was only when the next round of elections came around that these parties made big promises for reconciliation. But the damage had already been done, and no real reparations were ever made.

When the dust settled, the Parliamentary Committee found that 1200 out of the 9000 villages in Marathwada were affected. 5000 people from over 1000 villages were displaced without anywhere to take shelter, forced to flee their homes with nowhere to go. 2000 of them fled to either jungles or cities, where it was assumed they either perished out of starvation in the wild or lived out their lives in abject hunger and poverty on the streets. The terror that most dalits felt at the thought of returning prevented them from even considering it, despite being subject to starvation and abysmal living

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<sup>11</sup> Ibid.

conditions. According to the reports of the Atyachar Virodh Samiti (another fact-finding committee created to report the atrocities in the riots), 25,000 dalits said they were “reduced to a totally demoralized, helpless condition.”<sup>12</sup>

Breeding these feelings of helplessness and dejection among dalits was one of the primary goals of the caste Hindu agitators, both in the urban and rural sections of Marathwada. Caste tensions have deep roots in India’s sociopolitical and cultural landscape, and dalits are certainly no strangers to upper caste violence. The 1970s in particular saw a steady onslaught on dalits. During Indira Gandhi’s “decade of development” and the subsequent nineteen-month Janata Party rule, the *recorded* cases of atrocities against dalits totaled almost sixty thousand across India,<sup>13</sup> with presumably several thousands more that went unreported. Maharashtra was one of five states in the country where atrocities were the greatest. But to ascribe innate “caste conflict” as the sole cause of the Marathwada riots is perfunctory at best. Instead, it is useful to situate caste as an implicit force that determines social, cultural and political life and forms the undercurrent for a number of other developments and trends, which have less to do with traditional divisions of labour and more to do with political and economic power. One of these ‘trends’ was the emergence of dalit movements that had gained significant traction by the 1970s. They were fiercely spearheaded, and later inspired, by Ambedkar and his teachings.

The first part of this thesis explores the history and role of Ambedkar in shaping dalit consciousness and the subsequent dalit movements that underwrote dalit politics in the latter part of the twentieth century. The second zooms in on the issue of Namantar –

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<sup>12</sup> Ibid.

<sup>13</sup> Ibid.

or renaming – and discusses the factors that led up to the demand, how it was spearheaded by the Dalit Panthers, and what its implications were for campus culture. It then explores the other side of the renaming proposition: the political forces that resulted in the upper-caste government agreeing to meet the demand, and why there was such a forceful drive against removing the word “Marathwada” from the name. The third section – the core of this paper – analyzes the deep-rooted historical, geopolitical and economic structures that underwrite the entire renaming violence, including severe underdevelopment, contradictions arising from the implementation of reservations for dalits, agrarian land issues, agricultural labour, and the role of big industries and capitalist agriculture. Finally, the fourth and fifth sections offer some comments on the caste/class debate in the Marathwada context and the future of dalit liberation politics.

## CHAPTER ONE

# **The Rising Tide of Ambedkarian Self-Assertion**

----

To the upper caste Hindus of Marathwada, renaming the university after Ambedkar was a massive symbolic defeat. For dalits, it was a huge, unprecedented victory. Bhimrao Ramji Ambedkar (14 April 1891 – 6 December 1956), himself a dalit, was an accomplished jurist, scholar, economist, politician and activist. He was India's first law minister as well as the "chief architect" of India's Constitution, which is still in effect today. Built into his Constitution was a large set of legal protections for the nearly 1,000 "scheduled castes" living in India. Many of these protections took the form of affirmative action policies or "positive discrimination" laws like specific quotas and reservations for lower castes in educational institutes and major employment sectors; empirically, they often had a dual effect on the lives of dalits, a discussion that will be addressed later. Nonetheless, throughout his life, Ambedkar remained a strong, tireless advocate for the rights of dalits, women and workers on a public platform.

Although it was his predecessor, Jyotirao Phule – another critical thinker and social reformer who fought for peasant rights, women's education and the abolition of untouchability in the 1800s – who first used the term 'dalit' as a signifier of the oppression faced by lower castes, it was Ambedkar who popularized it into the evocative word it is today. It is important to understand that 'dalit' does not refer to a single endogamous unit, nor is it an undifferentiated homogenous group. While it was certainly

Ambedkar's hope and goal to have 'dalit' mean a unified and integrated community fighting against the oppression of the caste system, the word itself, meaning "broken people," refers to a constructed identity and is deeply political in nature. Unlike the inherently oppressive term "untouchable," or Gandhi's hypocritical and ultimately meaningless euphemism "harijan" (meaning "people of God"), 'dalit' is a widely used self-identifier, laden with a sentiment of empowerment, a symbol of change and revolution that rejects the subjugation and subhuman status imposed on dalits by the Hindu social order – interpretations that are largely credited to Ambedkar. While the term is frequently used interchangeably with "scheduled castes" or other such legal categorizations, just as I will use it in this paper along with "Untouchable" (with the acknowledgement of its history and significance), it cannot be assumed that every person who identifies as dalit shares a common revolutionary goal. Even within the dalit community there are hundreds of jatis<sup>14</sup>, operating within their own hierarchy whose internal divisions are similar to those of the upper castes. Certain dalit jatis are relatively privileged in comparison to their counterparts; for instance, the garodas ("gurus" or teachers) are on the top of the ladder whereas the bhangis (scavengers or rag pickers) are at the very bottom. Similarly, the different sub-castes within the dalit strata include those such as Mahars, Mangs or Matangs, Chamars and Senwas, each derived from a corresponding traditional occupation. Their status within the dalit community depends largely on their location and geopolitical history. In Maharashtra, the Mahars have always been a relatively "higher" jati amongst the Untouchables, but it was only after

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<sup>14</sup> A *jati*, unlike caste, is a single endogamous group of clans, tribes, communities or sub-communities, typically reflected by last name.

Ambedkar's rise as a national leader that the Mahars garnered the political consciousness and social capital to become a dominant identity group.

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Ambedkar was born into a poor Mahar family at a time when Mahars were legally regarded as Untouchables, undifferentiated from other dalits in the Hindu perspective. In his childhood, Ambedkar was subjected to a great deal of social discrimination. As was the case in most of India, Untouchable children like himself were made to sit separately from the rest of the class in school – if they were able to go at all – and were often bullied by their peers and disregarded by the teachers. When they wanted to drink water, a higher-caste person had to pour it into their glass from a height, so as to not accidentally touch the water or the glass being held by the Untouchable child, lest the “pollution” spread. These were only some of the day-to-day manifestations of the cultural violence dalits faced.

Ambedkar's family moved to Bombay a few years later, where he became the first Untouchable to be enrolled in high school, and then college. Educated abroad in Columbia University and then the London School of Economics, Ambedkar used his education to try and inspire other dalits to follow a similar path. Eventually, those efforts turned into a full-fledged movement against untouchability, and from that many subsidiary factions arose. His first public struggle was to make public drinking water sources available to everyone, including dalits. In most villages almost until the end of the twentieth century, dalits were not allowed to use the main well or water tank of the village. They were either assigned one for themselves, or had to walk for hours to get water. In 1927, Ambedkar led the Mahad *satyagraha* against this practice, where a

number of Untouchables drank “high caste water” defiantly. It was in honour of this satyagraha’s fiftieth anniversary that the demand to rename the university was made. Ambedkar burnt copies of the ancient Manusmriti (Laws of Manu) – the “handbook” of Hindu caste system, so to speak – in a public conference with his followers in order to demand entry of dalits into Hindu temples. Needless to say, this outraged the broader Hindu community across the country. They saw in Ambedkar a belligerent and sacrilegious threat to the ‘natural’ order of Indian society, and opposed his ideology with the same ferocity that makes the caste system so hegemonic in the first place.

Eventually, Ambedkar stopped working within the Indian social system (which was essentially a Hindu system) and publicly declared his contempt for Hinduism and vowed to “never die a Hindu”, asserting that as a religion it perpetuated caste injustice and violence. Subsequently, he published his book, *The Annihilation of Caste*, in which he forcefully criticized prominent Hindu religious leaders like Mahatma Gandhi who were widely revered by the non-dalit population of the country. Ambedkar and Gandhi were strong adversaries when it came to the caste system. This is not surprising seeing as Gandhi’s views on caste were contradictory and extremely problematic given his title as the “Father of the Nation.” That is not to say his efforts in the fight for independence, his nonviolence movement, or even most of his other beliefs and teachings were not important; however, he was a man of many inconsistencies with immense power to shape discourse of the time. And power must always be held to account, especially when the mainstream narrative of history had conveniently brushed it aside. Gandhi proclaimed that caste was a necessary – and natural – means of control. This stood quite paradoxically against his writings and talks on *swaraj* (self rule), whereby he encouraged

people to live their lives guided by their own sense of morality rather than ascribing to any imposed rules. Even if one were to set aside his racist and imperialist beliefs during his time in South Africa – giving him the benefit of doubt as someone who may have become ‘enlightened’ after joining the Indian Freedom Movement – his reluctance to speak out explicitly against caste discrimination or Brahmin imperialism, instead veiling it in a weak plea to foster “dignity of labour” without ever addressing the very reasons why some labour was considered so undignified, was indicative of where his true loyalties lay.

Ambedkar unabashedly called him out on these beliefs. His criticisms were a huge source of anger for caste Hindus. He was anti-Hindu and specifically anti-Brahmin, which incited tensions across the country. Ambedkar asserted that the very idea of Brahminism – not necessarily the Brahmins themselves – was the actual problem. “Untouchable” in a sharply different sense, the *feeling* of Brahminism was one of entitlement, privilege and superiority that was *unattainable* to the rest of the people, one that everyone desired desperately but could never have. To compensate, people cherished their position in whichever social hierarchy they ascribed to – yielding power over whoever was beneath them. Ambedkar called this the “infection of imitation”: in the desire to *be* Brahmin, even the dalits at the bottom discriminated, humiliated and oppressed those who were just lower than them. “Each class being privileged, every class is interested in maintaining the system.”<sup>15</sup> By waging a war against this *idea* of Brahminism, Ambedkar had effectively alienated and invited heaps of backlash from Brahmins and other upper castes. Most importantly, he identified one aspect of the caste

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<sup>15</sup> Ambedkar, B. R. *Annihilation of Caste*. Introduction by Arundhati Roy, New York, Verso: 2016, 51

dimension – the infection of imitation – that illuminated in part the challenges to fostering caste and class unity, discussed later. The persistence of the caste system in contemporary India in large part is the unwillingness of Hinduism to evolve and adapt to a changing world. Ambedkar was far ahead of his time in his radical demands for reform. But it is now as it was then: Hinduism cannot function without its indispensable social order, or so it was adamantly professed. This was one of the pillars of Ambedkar's opposition to Hinduism as a whole.

In 1956, Ambedkar converted to Buddhism himself and inspired millions of his followers, 90% of whom were Mahars<sup>16</sup>, to do the same. Because of his untimely death only a few months after his conversion, the movement lost the momentum he had hoped for. Nonetheless, of the approximately eight million Buddhists in India today, nearly six million are Buddhists in Maharashtra. While Buddhists comprise 6% of the population of Maharashtra, they still total only 1% of the country's population. Buddhist revival – or the Dalit Buddhist Movement as it came to be known – only truly caught on in Maharashtra and Uttar Pradesh. Still, Ambedkar's legacy is ubiquitous and his efforts are prominently visible in most aspects of the Indian political and cultural system today. The culmination of Ambedkar's ideas, beliefs, writings, speeches, negotiations and acts of resistance shaped large-scale consciousness building into what is now called the dalit self-assertion movement. Even if the mass-conversion to Buddhism was not as successful as Ambedkar had imaged it to be, he had put onto the table something that had never been there before. Particularly in Maharashtra, dalits were emboldened to exercise their

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<sup>16</sup> Gupta, Dipankar. "Understanding the Marathwada Riots: A Repudiation of Eclectic Marxism." *Social Scientist* Vol. 7, No. 10 (May, 1979): 3–22, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/3516774> (accessed March 10, 2017)

agency; for the first time in history they rejected their internalized inferiority, demanded justice and allowed themselves to fight for their dreams. Oppression can only survive through silence, and finally the silence of a few millennia was being broken. Dalits began to use legal and political avenues to fight the subjugation they had experienced for generations. Mahars began to give up their “unclean” and “defiling” jobs, which only mildly inconvenienced their upper caste employers but still sparked an aggressive reaction.<sup>17</sup> The mood of self-assertiveness had reached almost all dalit communes, but the beating heart of the movement stayed predominantly with the Mahars. The Mangs and Chamars, who did not have even the slight advantage of being Mahars, often took up the degrading jobs that the Mahars were giving up and as a result inter-dalit divisions became inevitably more pronounced.

As the Indian economy improved, the dalits in traditional occupations – like the Mangs and Chamars – were able to achieve modest economic betterment within their own professions and skillsets. These improvements did not materially affect higher castes, and so the non-Mahar dalits faced little hostility from above. The Mahars, however, did not have a particular, traditionally ascribed occupation and so were typically holders of *gaonki* and *kotwalki* jobs, the duties of which included cleaning the village, removing animal carcasses and patrolling the town for security at night. These jobs and thus the Mahars were vital to the administrative apparatus of villages; they were given some watan lands<sup>18</sup> for self-cultivation and a rudimentary education in order for them to do their jobs with upper castes effectively. Along with some concession schemes

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<sup>17</sup> Ibid.

<sup>18</sup> A *watan* was a hereditary rent-free grant given to a village resident in lieu of services that the resident was expected to perform for the village on an ongoing basis. It was continued for as long as the holder had the confidence of the village community.

implemented by the British, the Mahars were exposed and socialized into the contemporary political order, allowing them to avail of affirmative action opportunities that arose later in a more efficient way than other dalit groups.<sup>19</sup> Once they began giving up these jobs, the only way to propel themselves out of their subjugation was through competing with the upper caste petty bourgeoisie for bureaucratic jobs, for which they had now been equipped. Upper caste Hindus as a result felt their “traditional way of life was being threatened by the ‘upstart’ and ‘lowly’ Mahar community.” Widespread unemployment and economic insecurity prompted this Mahar-caste Hindu conflict, which gradually turned into a long cultural war with a deep caste dimension, with ideological tension building up on both sides. The illustrious account of Ambedkar’s radically inspiring life and work is of crucial importance in understanding the *sentiment* behind the dalit campaign to rename the university after him. The self-assertion movements that arose through the post-Independent era had resulted in demands for changing the status quo of Hindu society, of liberating dalits from their modern-day feudal shackles. Ambedkar was a symbol of this radical dialectic. He and his ideas were perceived as direct threats to caste Hindus, who in turn responded with ferocity and aggression to squash all feelings of empowerment among the dalits, literally in the case of the Marathwada riots, but also structurally in the dominant, hegemonic upper caste Indian political system.

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<sup>19</sup> Gupta, 1979

## CHAPTER TWO

### **The (Re)Name Game**

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#### **Dalit Movement to Rename Marathwada University**

Ambedkar's powerful legacy and the emerging self-assertiveness of his followers makes clearer why dalit students at Marathwada University wanted the college renamed after their leader. Given the lack of development in the region, the student body in general had many qualms about the university administration. In 1974, progressive youth organizations on campus organized what came to be known as the Marathwada Vikas Andolan, a struggle for increased regional development and opportunities.<sup>20</sup> Renaming the university after Ambedkar was one of the group's demands, and both dalit and non-dalit students – including the SAC – were united in these protests, albeit for different reasons. The SAC's interests in the renaming lay not in any sympathy for the dalit struggle but rather to try and bring them into the general quota of students, in turn getting rid of dalit quotas and the affirmative action system altogether. Their main concerns involved the student body as a whole and as a result their efforts focused on demanding lower school fees, cheaper textbooks and affordable dorming facilities. For the dalit students, who comprised 26% of the total university's population, the renaming was an issue of symbolic importance. Since their educational expenses were often subsidized or

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<sup>20</sup> Sirsat, Prakash. "In Memoriam, Namavistar – Contours of the Namantar Struggle for Renaming of Marathwada University." *Sanhati*. January 13, 2015. <http://sanhati.com/excerpted/12585/>

covered by the government, they were indifferent to and rarely participated in the SAC-led campaigns.<sup>21</sup> The non-dalit students supported the renaming this time expecting a *quid pro quo* from the dalits who comprised over a quarter of the school. Had each group shown solidarity and empathy toward the other's causes, perhaps such a "transactional" civil society in the student body would not have been the norm. But be as it were, in the years leading up to the Marathwada riots the student body remained unified, strategically if not ideologically as they protested for common causes.

Several political student groups were active in Marathwada University at the time. The Dalit Yuvak Aghadi was one such group, whose politics remained independent from the university as well as the government. Their demands included the renaming but not as a primary demand; most political dalit groups that were active were organizing for other, more pressing concerns such as dalit access to *gairan* lands (village commons), shared public wells, and better-funded scholarships for students.<sup>22</sup> What really spurred the demand for renaming was the involvement of the Dalit Panthers – a revolutionary dalit organization founded in Bombay in 1972 – who spearheaded the call to action and led the protest through till 1978 and for some years after. There are conflicting narratives about the role and nature of the Dalit Panthers in this issue. According to Y.B. Damle, a professor of sociology and scholar on dalit politics, the renaming movement reflected the dalit students' "burning dissatisfaction and discontent with the state of affairs"<sup>23</sup> and was one that would have been tenacious even without Dalit Panthers' influence. Other scholars and fact-finding groups place the Dalit Panthers at least partially responsible –

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<sup>21</sup> Gupta, 1979

<sup>22</sup> Sirsat, 2015

<sup>23</sup> Damle, Y.B. "Holocaust in Marathwada: 1978." *ICSSR Research Abstracts Quarterly* Vol. 13, No. 1–2 (January-June 1994): 117–121.

advertently or not – for the onslaught of violence during the subsequent riots and its aftermath. The Dalit Panthers’ work, like the state government’s decision to rename the university, must be understood in context of its own history and conception and in its relationship to other political developments in Maharashtra and the country.

Shortly before Ambedkar’s death in 1956, he instructed his followers to form the Republican Party of India (RPI) as a class-based, liberal democratic political party. But within a year different factions began to break off from it. Without a “towering personality” like Ambedkar, the RPI could not attract followers from other castes outside of the Maharashtrian dalit Buddhist constituency. With the lingering fear of being swallowed up by a caste-Hindu majority, the RPI’s hold, like that of many other radical groups, eventually petered out.<sup>24</sup> The vacuum in dalit representation was then filled by the creation of the Dalit Panthers.

Inspired by and modeled after the Black Panther Party in the USA, the Dalit Panthers were a revolutionary socialist, anti-Brahmin, and anti-caste organization. They defined dalits as “all those who [were] exploited politically, economically and in the name of religion.” They fought fiercely for dalit liberation through the practice of “radical politics outside the framework of both parliamentary and Marxist-Leninist politics, fusing Ambedkar, Phule and Marx.”<sup>25</sup> Under their leadership, Dalit literature, painting and theatre that challenged traditional depictions of Hindu society flourished. This “renaissance of Marathi art” formed part of the organized struggle against the

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<sup>24</sup> Pandit, Nalini. “Caste and Class in Maharashtra.” *Economic and Political Weekly* Vol. 14, No. 7–8 (February 1979): 425–436, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/4367360> (accessed February 19, 2017)

<sup>25</sup> Dalit Panthers. “Dalit Panthers Manifesto.” *Raiot*. January 23, 2016. <http://raiot.in/dalit-panthers-manifesto>

“Hindu feudalist” state of modern India, alongside rallies, marches and, in particular, direct militant action against their upper-caste aggressors.

Dalits fighting to reform social structures are fighting an asymmetrical war. It is perhaps unsurprising that the Dalit Panthers took up arms and turned “militant.” In the words of Frantz Fanon: “colonization is violence in its natural state, and it will only yield when confronted with greater violence.”<sup>26</sup> The DP’s radical goals of overthrowing the state – putting the “people” in power, redistributing wealth, and ridding upper caste Hindus of their control over state machinery and means of production – quite naturally turned to the revolutionary violence that Fanon speaks of, and the DPs employed poetic and fiery language to mobilize their followers. Their manifesto boldly proclaimed that “[through] legalistic appeals, requests, demands for concessions, elections, [and] satyagraha, society will never change. Their ideas of social revolution and rebellion would be “too strong for paper-made vehicles of protest,” and would instead “sprout in the flower of the mind with the full force of steel-strong means.”<sup>27</sup>

In urban Marathwada, the Dalit Panthers had a relatively unwavering following through the 1970s. The second wave of demands for renaming Marathwada University was strictly the “dominion” of the Dalit Panthers; participation from others was minimal.<sup>28</sup> They spearheaded the demand for renaming the University, claiming it as the first major step in gaining political power.<sup>29</sup> Nonetheless, a march involving both dalits and non-dalits was planned by the “strategically unified” student body, independent of the DPs, to petition the university council for the change. . However, this procession ran

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<sup>26</sup> Fanon, Frantz, *Wretched of the Earth*, New York, Grove Press: 1963

<sup>27</sup> Dalit Panthers Manifesto

<sup>28</sup> Sirsat, 2015

<sup>29</sup> Damle, 1994

into a separate rally led by Gangadher Gadhe, one of the main leaders of the Dalit Panthers. Gadhe at this point went on a “vituperative tirade” full of caste abuses directed at the non-dalit majority present, insisting that all the credit for the name change go only to the dalits. He was backed by the Dean of the Law College, Sadhan Shiv, who was also a Mahar. The two men urged the dalit students to break away from the non-dalits. The non-dalits, meanwhile, were irritated by this treatment and did not hesitate to cut ties. This resulted in each side becoming more suspicious and antagonistic of the other. This is where the Dalit Panther-created rift begins, the one responsible for the inflammatory and “deep polarization” on the campus mentioned earlier. Dipankar Gupta emphasizes that this split was “not so much [initiated] by caste Hindu prejudices and reticence to support the renaming of the University, but rather by the splittist and sectarian position taken by Gadhe.”<sup>30</sup> He also states that Gadhe’s position likely came about due to the fear that the unity between non-dalits and dalits would reduce his following, which has been the case for past organizations built primarily on “ascriptive lines.”

Not only did Gadhe’s political stance create the preconditions for students “rushing headlong into a caste war”<sup>31</sup> in the coming months, but the Dalit Panthers as a whole were careless in their involvement in the issue. Although dalit resentment towards upper castes is certainly an inflammatory matter and dalits were by no means passive observers in their own struggle, the renaming issue begs the question of whether demanding a new name for the university was a strategic, opportunist endeavour by the Dalit Panthers or indeed a “burning” passion and grassroots effort by Mahar students. The Dalit Panthers’ demands to the Maharashtra Legislature and the University

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<sup>30</sup> Gupta, 1979, p.11

<sup>31</sup> Abraham, 1978

Executive Body to rename the university were not comprehensively planned; no effort was made to convince, or at least open up discourse with, opponents of the proposal. No attempts were made at anticipating consequences or long-term impact, although the magnitude of the riots and the meticulous nature with which they were carried out could not have been decisively envisaged. Nonetheless, once the riots broke out the Dalit Panthers did little to protect the lives of their dalit followers or mitigate the damage. Because their very existence as a political party was at stake, they were put in a “difficult position,” unable to send messages of support to the dalit masses or provide any help to resist the attacks.<sup>32</sup> In a show of the crushing power of upper caste unity, the rioters controlled the press, several high-level political officials, police officers, professors, academics, the public majority, and even the dalit leadership; everyone had to come out with a clear stand on the issue, and anyone not on the side of the rioters was severely punished.

The militant inclination of the DPs is understandable in context of the immensely aggressive and pervasive dominance of the upper castes, as manifested in the riots. The impassioned and galvanizing ideology of the DPs, evident in their manifesto, seemed like it could have provided sound roots upon which to build a strong and inclusive dalit social movement, violent or otherwise. But ideas alone don’t create change. The Dalit Panthers never had a spirited or even consistent leadership; for most of their existence as a Maharashtra-based party, they remained a largely disorganized and impetuous group without strategic long-term plans for making sustainable socioeconomic change. As a result they repeatedly garnered only a small fraction of the public support they required to

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<sup>32</sup> Atyachar Virodh Samiti, 1979

maintain a footing in regional politics. Their poor planning, lack of thoughtful leadership and power-hungry undertakings led them to assume “pseudo-radical postures [that] made symbolic demands which provoked rather than attracted the sympathetic or neutral elements from even the poorest strata of the caste Hindu population.”<sup>33</sup> While the tenets upon which they were based never sought to include caste Hindus within their ranks – which was antithetical to what Ambedkar had imagined as a class-based party but in keeping with their own stated radical beliefs – their actions reflected less a radical Leftist agenda meant to assert dalit rights and more an opportunistic quest for political power within the Indian political landscape. Their intense militancy had gained them reputations as “slum dadas” who failed to live up to their credo and instead used violence for their own gain, which in turn had cost them a significant part of their constituency and failed to bring their loudly proclaimed plans for change to the dalit population.<sup>34</sup>

Nonetheless, the demand to rename Marathwada University did not fall on deaf ears the way most dalit demands had in previous decades. A number of political processes were taking place concurrently within the Indian government, nationally as well as regionally, which ultimately culminated in the passing of the renaming resolution – but not the renaming itself, which took sixteen years and many more protests, to actually come into effect. Both sides of the coin in the renaming issue have been tainted by opportunistic politics, a fight for power and electoral tactics. The way in which the DPs organized the dalits raises the question of whether it was truly successful in inculcating the same ferocity and conviction of self-assertiveness that began with

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<sup>33</sup> Pandit, 1979

<sup>34</sup> Abraham, 1978

Ambedkar, and more pertinently, if the renaming of the university furthered dalit politics at all in a way that was productive for the community at large.

### **On the Other Side: Why Pass the Resolution?**

Given the sheer dominance of upper castes in the fabric of Indian society, the decision to rename Marathwada University seemed out of character. The fragmented mobilization of the DPs in the fight for renaming the university did not seem sufficient to cause the upper caste hegemony to acquiesce to dalit demands. An anti-dalit sentiment has always been rife among high caste Hindus, even if it did not always manifest itself as direct violence. Structural oppression of dalits and lower castes was apparent – and often deliberate – within state institutions, cultural traditions and political relations. That is not to say that Indian politics are *always* explicitly anti-dalit – after all the Indian Constitution was written by a dalit, abolished untouchability and offered many protections for subjugated communities – but the vested interests of the ruling caste-Hindu elite were often antithetical to those of the dalit masses. Particularly in the case of Marathwada University, renaming the university after Ambedkar would certainly send a message of betrayal to the upper-caste following of the upper-caste leaders of the region. To understand then why the government chose to rename the university and subsequently the reasons for its violent escalation, it is important to trace the background and events leading up to the renaming, including a brief history of politics in the country. The anti-dalit sensibility that was prevalent among the high caste majority in Marathwada, and more broadly in India, was controlled, curated and manipulated by the myriad of patronage-based political parties in the country, all engaged in a constant battle for

power. It is from these opportunistic politics inside the region and in the country that the decision to rename Marathwada University was made.

Sharad Pawar had become the Chief Minister of Maharashtra only a few days before the renaming resolution was passed. Under the mentorship of former CM Yashwantrao Balwantrao, or Y.B., Chavan, Pawar had joined the Maharashtra Legislative Assembly in 1967 as a member of the then-undivided Congress Party. Formed in 1885, Congress is credited as being the first “modern nationalist movement” against the British Raj. In the pre-Independence era, one of Ambedkar’s efforts to promote the dalit cause was to represent scheduled castes interests to the British Round Table Conferences, in order to gain them political traction. While Brahmins and high caste Hindus in Congress, such as Lokmanya Tilak, who were involved in the Independence struggle emphasized political unity before social reform, public pressure from the dalit and scheduled caste communities forced Congress to take a more democratic and secular stance.<sup>35</sup> Today the Congress is characterized as a “center-left, secular, democratic and socially liberal” party, but its regional leadership across India varies significantly in context of local circumstances and the political leanings of both the elected representatives themselves and their general constituencies.

In the 1930s, Congress had taken on a very Gandhian nature; they used his principles of satyagraha, swaraj and dignity of labour to create long-term “constructive programmes” that sought to abolish caste inequality and form a united front against British rule. As a result, they had attracted large numbers of non-Brahmins, including many lower castes. In response, educated Brahmin classes in Maharashtra left to join the

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<sup>35</sup> Pandit, 1979

Hindu Mahasabha and the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS), two Hindutva parties inspired by the rise of fascism in Europe.<sup>36</sup> Since Independence, Congress as a whole has taken shape as a broad-based political party with several different wings, factions and political positions and affiliations through its history.

In the years after Independence, free India's first Prime Minister, Jawaharlal Nehru, governed Congress under similar political ideologies – mixed economy, secularism, socialist economic industrialization and global non-alignment. Succeeded by his daughter, Indira Gandhi, from 1966 onward the party underwent tumultuous changes. Having done poorly in the elections of 1967, Gandhi created her own faction of the Indian National Congress (known commonly as Congress (R), “R” for Reacquisition), which was supported by most Members of Parliament. The original Congress was renamed Congress (O), “O” for Organization. In the 1971 elections her party ran on a progressive “*Garibi Hatao*” (“Get Rid of Poverty”) platform and had a strong victory.<sup>37</sup> The party began to move further left and adopt socialism into their credo. The success of the Russian Revolution had influenced several liberal, mostly upper-caste, intellectuals to create Communist and Socialist parties whose following was drawn largely from the industrial proletariat. Non-Brahmin intellectuals also created Leftist parties, including the Peasants and Workers Party (PWP). But when faced with a dominant socialist Congress, the Indian Left's reach was not far enough and their following not wide enough – especially in rural Marathwada – to differentiate them as uniquely democratic parties, and so they became irrelevant against Congress's hegemonic rule.

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<sup>36</sup> Ibid.

<sup>37</sup> Opinion (Anonymous). “Back to garibi hatao.” *The Hindu*, October 12, 2006. <http://www.thehindu.com/todays-paper/tp-opinion/back-to-garibi-hatao/article3062083>

In the mid-1970s, however, popular support for Indira Gandhi's new Congress Party began to wane. Her government became increasingly more authoritarian and began attracting dissension from opposition forces, calling for her resignation. Instead, she crushed the opposition by ordering mass arrests of those participating in the unrest, in an attempt to restore order. In June of 1975, her government declared a State of Emergency that lasted twenty-one months. This was a period of draconian rule characterized by widespread oppression and abuse of power by members of her administration. Democracy was in effect suspended; a curfew was imposed, the media was largely suppressed and human rights abuses ran rampant. Finally, in January of 1977, mounting pressure against the suppression of civil liberties led Indira Gandhi to call for fresh elections and release all political prisoners. General voting took place in March 1977, and in those parliamentary elections the leading opposition Janata Party – essentially an amalgamation of all parties opposed to the Emergency – won a landslide victory over Congress. The first non-Congress government in the history of India, the Janata Party's leader Morarji Desai became the new Prime Minister of India. The Party won 295 seats in the Lok Sabha (Lower House) against the Congress' 153, and Indira Gandhi lost her seat in parliament. The end of the Emergency was also the end of the unchallenged thirty-year rule of the Indian National Congress in Independent India.

The political situation in Maharashtra was consonant with the big changes taking place at the national level. Before Sharad Pawar's first incumbency as CM in 1978, Congress had been the dominant party in the region since 1947. It was largely comprised of Maratha peasants united by "strong caste bonds."<sup>38</sup> "Maratha" referred to a group of

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<sup>38</sup> Pandit, 1979

dominant castes native to the Maharashtra region as early as the sixteenth century, traditionally known to be great Hindu warriors and rulers. The Maratha Empire saw many different rulers, of which Shivaji's reign in the late 1600s was perhaps the only time where a balance of power among castes existed.<sup>39</sup> Since then, the upper-caste status of the Marathas has underwritten caste relations and power dynamics in the region, up until today. Congress-leader Y.B. Chavan was the Chief Minister of the British-created Bombay State from 1956-1960, and later of independent Maharashtra from 1960-1962. He was instrumental in the separatist Samyukta Maharashtra Movement, a separatist movement demanding linguistic freedom of Maharashtra from the Bombay state, which gained traction as a movement "that embraced every section of society, [including] peasants, workers, white-collar workers and the middle classes."<sup>40</sup> Chavan publicly emphasized that Maharashtra would be governed by the *Marathi* not Maratha people, in an era of Bahujan Samaj rule, i.e. that of the "embraced" majority of the common masses and not just the Maratha elites.<sup>41</sup> However, in practice it became apparent that this appeal to the bahujan was only a display of "arrogance, opportunism and chicanery on part of the ruling Congress leadership," as Chavan's real motivations lay in establishing a dominant position of power for the Maratha caste-cluster that comprised 40% of Maharashtra. During his time as CM of Maharashtra, he set in motion a pervasive ideological system of Maratha-dominated politics under the guise of Bahujan rule,

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<sup>39</sup> Ibid.

<sup>40</sup> Kamat, A.R. "Politico-Economic Developments in Maharashtra: A Review of the Post-Independence Period." *Economic and Political Weekly* Vol. 15, No. 39 (September 27, 1980): 1627–1630, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/4369126> (accessed February 19, 2017)

<sup>41</sup> Palshikar, Suhas. "Politics in Maharashtra: Arrival of the 'Bahujan' Idiom." *The Indian Journal of Political Science* Vol. 55, No. 3 (July–September 1994): 271–284, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/41855699> (accessed January 29, 2017)

attracting many non-Maratha castes in the process that consolidated the region as a Maratha stronghold.

After her resounding loss in the 1977 General Elections, Indira Gandhi seceded from the Indian National Congress and formed an opposition party of her own, Congress (I), “I” for Indira. After Y.B. Chavan ended his term as Chief Minister in 1962, he remained with Indira Gandhi’s party as the Home Minister, Finance Minister and Foreign Minister consecutively – through the Emergency – until 1978 when Gandhi formed Congress (I) and Chavan chose to join her opposition rather than continue to align with her. Indira Gandhi’s post 1970-strategy was one of attracting lower castes/classes into Congress (I) so her campaign moved to appeal to dalit, tribal and Muslim vote banks in Maharashtra, but was unable to counter the Chavan-driven dominance of the Marathas even years after he had left office as CM.<sup>42</sup> She had been attempting to break this Maratha lobby from 1972, and one of her tactics was to install Shankarrao Bhavrao, or S. B., Chavan as the CM in 1975. He was a Maratha, but was strongly opposed to Y.B. Chavan and worked dutifully under her wing. This caused a great deal of resentment and backlash from the Y.B. Chavan loyalist Marathas, who were able to defeat him and other local leaders who were loyal to Congress (I), proving the strength of Maratha dominance over that of the national leadership. This retaliation by the Marathas contributed to the downfall and factionalization of Congress and further strengthened the cultural hegemony and political power of the Marathas.

Maratha opposition had led S.B. Chavan to be replaced as CM by “modern Maratha strongman” Vasantdada Patil in May 1977. He, too, was part of Congress but

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<sup>42</sup> Ibid.

had no ideological ties to Indira Gandhi. A controversial freedom fighter who had advocated for armed resistance, Patil was welcomed in Maharashtra but had many pending criminal cases filed against him during the British Raj. With the Janata Party's power on the rise nationally, the Congress had its eye on the dalit vote bank across the country. Patil, despite his reputation as a Maratha strongman, took an opportunistic position in light of national electoral trends. He saw in the longstanding demand by dalit constituencies to rename Marathwada University an easy way to fortify his own power as well as expand his following. He promised the renaming would occur that year – 1977 – to commemorate the fiftieth anniversary of Ambedkar's Mahad satyagraha. However, he faced severe resistance from his Maratha followers and was unable to make any headway with the renaming issue.

As a result of Patil's efforts, when Sharad Pawar took power, the renaming proposal had been in the works but put on hold. The same year, Pawar broke off from the Congress and formed an alliance with the Janata Party called the Progressive Democratic Front (PDF). After the Janata Party's sweeping victory in the elections, they started off strong with an agenda to reverse Emergency-era policies by promoting rural economic activity and expanding agricultural production.<sup>43</sup> During the Emergency, the Janata Party had formed as a coalition of various opposition groups – which included socialists and trade unionists as well as corporate businessmen and rich elite entrepreneurs. This made economic reforms particularly hard to achieve, especially in Maharashtra that comprised an already divided public. Under Sharad Pawar's Janata Party-allied PDF, more efforts were made in favour of the upper-caste elitist majority. As a result, across Maharashtra

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<sup>43</sup> Tharoor, Shashi, *India; From Midnight to the Millenium and Beyond*, New York, Arcade Publishing: 1997

the Janata Party had earned itself a bad reputation among the dalits for being “socially reactionary.”<sup>44</sup> In order to regain some of its lost dalit following, one of the Party’s first moves was to endorse and push for the renaming of the University. It was a tactical decision to regain the support of the region’s scheduled castes and refurbish its image. More importantly, it cost them no money at all and most of the logistical work had already been completed during Vasantdada Patil’s term. Some Janata Party members and some members of the University Council were hesitant to go forward with the renaming, but because they did not want to be deemed ‘reactionary’ once again, they said nothing.<sup>45</sup>

Once the resolution passed, neither Pawar’s government nor the Dalit Panthers could have anticipated the intensity of the violence. Even though Congress had lost its seat in national and state politics, by no means had the party lost its power. In 1978 Congress chose to align with the suvarnas and middle caste peasants in the PWP and even right-wing opposition parties like the Shiv Sena, not because they opposed the renaming on a fundamental level but because they wanted to get rid of Sharad Pawar after he cut ties with Vasantdada Patil and joined the Janata Party. Even in areas where local Congress leadership sympathized with the dalit cause, they did nothing in order to prevent jeopardizing their already-fragile caste Hindu vote banks.

After the dust settled, Sharad Pawar’s government continuously found excuses to actually implement the renaming. If just the proposal to do so had sparked such an acute reaction, then there was no telling what would happen if the university’s name was actually changed in effect. The damage to public property in Aurangabad had proved

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<sup>44</sup> Morkhandikar, R.S. “The Background.” *Economic and Political Weekly* Vol. 13, No. 34 (August 26, 1978): 1461–1462, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/4366882> (accessed February 3, 2017)

<sup>45</sup> Ibid.

costly to an already-backward and impoverished region; the government did not want to waste more money at the expense of the dalits. When the riots finally ended, many of the dalits did not want to return to their homes because of horrific memories they had of the violence. The more educated and relatively wealthier dalits in the cities, especially student leaders, youth and DP followers, were cynical towards the rural reaction. They showed an urge to retaliate. They put up poetic and emotional posters depicting the atrocities across the cities and towns, in an effort to press for retaliation against the “horror of caste frenzy” that had been unleashed upon them.<sup>46</sup> They restructured the campaign to rename the university as a social movement, called the Namantar Andolan (“Namantar” meaning “name change” and “andolan” meaning “social movement”). They used the now-world-famous slogan coined by Ambedkar, “*Educate, Agitate, Organize,*” to continue organizing rallies and demonstrations. They had to halt their efforts temporarily because of the extent of the violence in the rural areas, but resumed operations some months later. Growing tired of Pawar’s excuses, they organized a Long March from Deekshabhoomi, a sacred Buddhist monument and the site of Ambedkar’s conversion, all the way down to Aurangabad, set to end on December 6, 1979, the anniversary of Ambedkar’s death. Inspired by the Chinese Long March and attended by 300,000 dalits from all over the country, this 470 km march was one of the strongest protests against the lack of human rights and one of the most powerful shows of dalit solidarity and assertion in India’s modern history. The protesters clashed with the police almost every step of the way; tens of thousands were arrested, lathi charged, fired on with air guns and tear gas, and severely beaten up. Only a small percentage made it to

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<sup>46</sup> Atyachar Virodh Samiti, 1979

Aurangabad, but nonetheless the march was immensely successful. The entire Namantar Andolan lasted sixteen years – until the University was finally renamed in 1994.

But even in 1994, when the name of the university was officially changed, it was done so with one fundamental compromise; instead of Dr. Babasaheb Ambedkar University as originally demanded, the university was renamed Dr. Babasaheb Ambedkar *Marathwada* University. Ostensibly, this was a minor adjustment, but the sub-regional identity associated with Marathwada was deep-rooted and formed part of the reason for the violence in 1978, and will be explained later. Sharad Pawar was once again the Chief Minister of Maharashtra, serving a third term from 1993-95. Progressive elements in his coalition MLA pushed to resolve the renaming issue, and the compromise in the name was approved unanimously by both sides within the government. However, the “tacit approval” by progressive forces within Pawar’s administration was given only because it was expected that the Dalit Panthers would reject the compromise, considering their history and reputation as resistant hardliners, and as a result the government would have time and space to “maneuver” the issue further.<sup>47</sup> However, the DPs publicly accepted this compromise almost instantly, causing the pro-renaming elements to recant their position. In the words of Dalit Yuvak Aghadi leader Prakash Sirsat, the “Panthers did not possess the political acumen to understand their haste in making the announcement and eagerness to dialogue relatively early would change the power dynamics [of the issue]. They were not well versed in the drama of politics.”<sup>48</sup> The acceptance of this compromise is what was said to have fueled another set of riots, less vicious than the ones in 1978 but nonetheless an indicator that the charged nature of this conflict was far from over. In

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<sup>47</sup> Sirsat, 2015

<sup>48</sup> Ibid.

some sense, this rhetoric puts the blame for the violence on the Dalit Panthers because they acquiesced to a compromise rather than continued the fight. While the DPs were certainly not faultless in the issue, to blame the dalits for their own oppression is unacceptable. The blame for such intense violence falls squarely on the shoulders of none other than the people that participated in it, in large part constructed by the aforementioned dominating sub-regional identity.

### **The “Marathwada” Psyche**

The politics of how exactly the renaming came about are clearer. The push to keep “Marathwada” in the name, however, points to a deeper issue that shaped the dominant ideology of the upper castes: the emergence of the ‘Marathwada psyche,’ a consciousness movement and a form of strong sub-regional identity that united the suvarnas and regional elites but intentionally excluded the dalits. This was not surprising given Marathwada’s political and linguistic history.

Despite shared religious beliefs or cultural traditions, in a country as vast and diverse as India, different sub-regions naturally develop their own unique identities as a reflection of different histories, languages, social structures, political cultures and demographic features.<sup>49</sup> In the social sciences, the concept of a “region” moves beyond physical geography to a more fundamental understanding of social and cultural linkage. At the root of regionalism, however, is the “region” as a purely territorial entity. The

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<sup>49</sup> Datye, Sunil. “Marathwada Sub-Regionalism: A Factor in Maharashtra Politics.” *The Indian Journal of Political Science* Vol. 48, No. 4 (October – December 1987): 512–525, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/41855335> (accessed February 3, 2017)

feeling of belonging to a region as such, identifying with it and being loyal to it is what “regionalism” essentially means.

When the decision to rename the university was announced, Govindbhai Shroff issued a report titled “Why Marathwada University Alone?” Shroff was one of the main forces of the regionalism movement. He was instrumental in the struggle against the Nizam of Hyderabad and was widely regarded as a “freedom fighter” in Marathwada. Under the title “social worker,” he served as the chairman of a trust that ran many educational institutions, comprised primarily of upper caste students. He was an avid supporter of the SAC and was one of the main leaders of the agitation against the renaming, according to a fact-finding report by the Parliamentary Committee. It was later claimed that he urged his followers to accept the name with nonviolence despite being opposed to it, while simultaneously petitioning to have the Prevention of Atrocities Act withdrawn in the early 1990s.<sup>50</sup> In his report, Shroff argued that the dalits would not stop at the university and sought “hegemony over all aspects of life.” He said it was “utterly preposterous” to suggest that opposition to the renaming was because Ambedkar was a Mahar, yet he refused to accept the proposed compromise: Dr. Ambedkar Marathwada University. He then asserted that the renaming campaign was an “attempt to deny and efface the identity of Marathwada, deride and abuse its people, its history and culture and its struggles and achievements.”<sup>51</sup> These statements are rather extreme, almost fanatical. They beg the obvious question: are the dalits living in the region not also the “people of Marathwada”? Shroff’s tirade conveniently and conspicuously leaves out any mention of Ambedkar, Buddhism, Untouchability or the dalit struggle as part of the region’s history

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<sup>50</sup> Abraham, 1979

<sup>51</sup> Ibid.

and culture. During the freedom movement against the Nizam of Hyderabad, many dalits in Marathwada aligned themselves with the Nizam “simply because they saw nothing to benefit from this independence.”<sup>52</sup> Under his tutelage, the dalits were given repatriated land from the upper caste Hindus in exchange for their loyalty to the Hyderabad state. After independence, this land would be reclaimed by the Hindus. Ambedkar urged the dalits to give their loyalty to the liberation of India, but they did not follow his advice. The short-sighted opportunism of dalits was also responsible for exacerbating caste tensions instead of working towards unity. As a vanguard of the anti-Nizam struggle, Shroff had no interest in including the “disloyal” dalits in the cultural ethos of Marathwada. He was not unaware that dalits comprise nearly a fifth of the population, their exclusion was intentional and carried historical bitterness. Like the RSS, Shroff evoked in the majority Suvarna population a calculated image of a “golden age” where caste oppression flourished.

According to D. N. Sandanshiv, Dean of the Law College in Marathwada University and comrade of Gangadher Gadhe, the atrocities only proved that it was the “unchallenged supremacy of the Manusmriti” which allowed such perceptions to even be seriously entertained. He argues that Shroff’s proclamations are simply “an exercise in self-justification” and the evocation of the Marathwada psyche is merely “old regionalism against modern nationalism.”<sup>53</sup> This is an important claim; not only does it clarify how sub-regional identity was evoked by regional elites as a smokescreen for

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<sup>52</sup> Omvedt, Gail. “Marathwada: Reply to Dipankar Gupta.” *Social Scientist* Vol. 8, No. 2 (September 1979): 51–58, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/pdf/3516700> (accessed March 10, 2017)

<sup>53</sup> Abraham, Amrita. “Importance of Renaming Marathwada University.” *Economic and Political Weekly* Vol. 14, No. 29 (July 21, 1979): 1190–1191, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/4367800> (accessed February 3, 2017)

caste prejudice, but it also brings into question if/how sub-regionalism can/should exist concurrently with the processes of modernism and nationalism. It is interesting to note that while nationalism seems like an obvious opponent to sub-regionalism, the two are not always mutually exclusive and it is not helpful to view the two as a stark dichotomy. In fact, from the 1960s until today, the Shiv Sena's staunch Maharashtrianism always "coexisted with a strong Hindu nationalist undercurrent."<sup>54</sup> After Congress's longstanding "secular government" was weakened in 1977, the "problem" with nationalism and nationalist politics in India was that it invariably became affixed to Hinduism. Ambedkar's movement of mass conversion to Buddhism was in part because of his realization that Hinduism was an inherently violent religion. Hinduism formed the fetters that kept dalits subjugated for millennia. The development of intense sub-regionalist ideology in Marathwada that pointedly excluded dalits was just as oppressive. The dalits were up – then and now – against an overwhelming caste Hindu majority that fought violently to preserve the status quo, occasionally under the guise of harmony. Shroff's report went on to say that he found it "difficult to understand how an offensive, abusive and provocative approach [by the Dalits toward Suvarna 'cultural heroes'] would help in the process of assimilation."<sup>55</sup> 'Assimilation' here is nothing but a euphemism for 'subservience.' Dalits, particularly Mahars and neo-Buddhists, rejected Shroff's "cultural heroes" and instead "were torn, as Ambedkar was, between notions of separate nationhood (Dalitisthans) and reconstructed social institutions."<sup>56</sup>

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<sup>54</sup> Lele, Jayant, "Saffronisation of Shiv Sena: Political Economy of the City, State and Nation," *Economic Political Weekly* Vol. 30, No. 25 (June 24, 1995): 1520–1528, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/4402914>

<sup>55</sup> Abraham, 1979

<sup>56</sup> Ibid.

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The campaign to rename Marathwada University, and its ‘strategic’ approval within the framework of the state, posed a fundamental contradiction to the dalit movements. Given the complicity and opportunism that surrounded its politics, the important question then is whether the renaming issue was actually successful in furthering the dalit struggle. Some scholars have argued that in effect, the way the renaming was undertaken gave way to the “ghettoization” of the dalits and was in fact a regression of dalit politics. The leaders of the renaming struggle could not claim the victory as their own; it was not solely the demand that resulted in “success,” and there was by no means a change-of-heart or a genuine acceptance of and agreement with the dalit cause. On the other hand, for the average dalit, this was a small victory in what would always be an ongoing struggle. Jyoti Lanjewar’s poem to her mother evokes this sentiment perfectly: *“At the front of the Long March / The end of your sari tucked tightly at the waist / Shouting ‘Change the name’ / Taking the blow of the police stick on your upraised hands / Going to jail with head held high.”*

The Marathwada riots were a symptom that should not be mistaken for the disease.<sup>57</sup> The struggle to “cure the disease” – or reform the structures that instigated such levels of caste violence in Marathwada – requires, first, an understanding of what these structures are and how they manifested differently in the urban and rural spheres of the region.

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<sup>57</sup> Morkhandikar, 1978

## CHAPTER THREE

# Structures of Conflict

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### **Compounded Underdevelopment in Marathwada**

The state of Maharashtra is the second most populous state in the country (with over 112 million inhabitants currently). It is geographically divided into five major regions: Konkan, Paschim (Western) Maharashtra, Khandesh, Vidarbha and Marathwada. The state holds the distinction of having within its borders Mumbai – the wealthiest city in India, and the one with the highest GDP of any city in South, Central or West Asia – on the one hand, and Marathwada on the other. As mentioned earlier, Marathwada was characterized in the late 1970s by extremely high unemployment and illiteracy rates. Very little of the region was developed vis-à-vis infrastructure and institutional apparatus. The region's mostly-rural population and economy depended excessively on agriculture, despite only 4% of its cultivatable land being irrigated, with sugarcane, cotton and sorghum as its main crops.

For years the people of Marathwada had been resentful and frustrated at how each new elected representative for the region “was sorely out of touch with his rural constituency”<sup>58</sup> and not doing anything to address the problem of underdevelopment that so deeply characterized life in Marathwada. The region had seen a chain of MLAs (Members of Legislative Assembly) drawn from some rural elite, their eyes set on

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<sup>58</sup> Morkhandikar, 1978

Bombay and therefore having little inclination to be in the cities of Marathwada, and no opportunity or attempt to “feel the pulse of the people.” Only two of Maharashtra’s Chief Ministers had been from Marathwada, resulting in a great lack of representation on the state and national levels.

Furthermore, the urban upper/middle class was extremely resentful of Bombay because of the “favourable treatment” it continually received from the national government – in terms of public funds, infrastructure contracts, commercial trade and general development projects. When the resolution was passed to change the name of Marathwada University rather than any one of the several universities in Bombay, Nagpur or Pune, the urban bourgeoisie was furious. This issue once again proved to the people of Marathwada the persistent insensitivity towards regional consciousness from the leaders at the very top.<sup>59</sup> In the 1970s there had been a large exodus of educated youth from the Konkan and Western Maharashtra regions moving to Bombay in search of jobs. For even the most well-educated students in Marathwada, going to Bombay was a distant dream. It was far, expensive and difficult to get to, and rarely did they have jobs waiting for people coming from Marathwada. This further fueled the anger at the lack of development, which in turn egged on the riots with more force. To understand why Marathwada remains stuck in a rut of “compounded backwardness,” it is useful to trace its illustrious history back a few centuries, explained only briefly here.

Maharashtra was part of the great Maratha Empire across the eighteenth century, after the Marathas ended Mughal rule. By the early 1800s, the East India Trading Company took over, and the British government began to rule western Maharashtra as

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<sup>59</sup> Ibid.

part of the Bombay presidency. The rest of the Maratha region was divided into princely states that could retain their autonomy in exchange for acknowledging British rule.

Marathwada was part of the princely state of Hyderabad, ruled by its Nizam, for nearly two hundred years before Independence. It was linguistically and socio-culturally different from the rest of the Nizam's dominion, and as a result there was mounting public pressure for the linguistic reorganization of the states, particularly by the Marathi-speaking *Samyukta Maharashtra Movement*. After a series of separatist movements that employed strikes, bandhs, hartals and street clashes, the central government gave into the pressure and in 1960 declared Maharashtra an independent state.

The early 1960s saw the rise of state-sponsored private capitalist development in Maharashtra – but conspicuously not in Marathwada – that gave way to a number of “underworld” activities, including extortion, smuggling, trafficking and contraband peddling particularly in urban centers.<sup>60</sup> In response to changes in the Indian economy, in 1966 the Shiv Sena emerged with a simple agenda of reserving jobs and new economic opportunities for Maharashtrians. Migrants from other regions to Maharashtra, particularly South Indians, were attributed as the reasons for lack of employment for “natives,” and over time the Shiv Sena's mission became explicitly a regional identity project, seeking to have a powerful Marathi-speaking empire. Under the leadership of Bal Thackeray and based in Bombay, the Shiv Sena took a strong populist stance against the “gangsterdom” that capitalism had created and as a result created a powerful and loyal following among middle class white collar workers. Interestingly, the Shiv Sena were also intensely anti-communist and later anti-Muslim; they used this rhetoric against any

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<sup>60</sup> Lele, 1995

public party or politician that criticized or disagreed with Thackeray. With Chavan having established a strong Maratha sentiment in the state, the Shiv Sena – although not very politically active in the 1970s – were able to take firm root ideologically, including in Marathwada.

India faced an acute recession from 1965-70 – the country faced “dramatic price increases, raw material shortage, low demand and slow national growth” and saw several workers strikes, public protests and occasional instances of violence.<sup>61</sup> The Shiv Sena diverted attention from the recession’s socioeconomic fallout on the people and instead scapegoated the South Indians who had moved to Maharashtra; this fuelled the “speculative, ruthless and crime-linked casino capitalism” instead. This was an apparent reversal of the Shiv Sena’s initial public stance against unchecked capitalism. Their political volatility carried forward for many years to come. Like almost all parties in Maharashtra and India, the Shiv Sena “made it clear that, under conditions of pluralistic competition, they [would] exploit electoral politics to secure their own support base.”<sup>62</sup> They had a complicated relationship with not just the Dalit Panthers but dalit constituencies and communities in Maharashtra as a whole, until they conclusively adopted far-right Hindutva politics in the late 1980s.

Through all of these movements and changes in political leadership, one thing that was common to the Marathwada region was the lack of any serious development initiatives within it specifically. The Nizam of Hyderabad was not at all interested in making any changes to the area, and it is from then onwards that Marathwada has suffered “stagnation of every kind; acceptance of existing reality has been the habit of the

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<sup>61</sup> Ibid.

<sup>62</sup> Ibid.

people.”<sup>63</sup> The people of Marathwada did, however, wage the liberation struggle against the Nizam (alongside government forces) to have the region join the rest of Maharashtra. They later petitioned the government of Maharashtra to address their socioeconomic grievances. Y. B. Chavan, made several Five-Year Plans that consistently failed to deliver – only 6% of funds were allocated to the region, and after a while they were simply written off.<sup>64</sup> The failures of the Shiv Sena in bringing equal development to Maharashtra were written off xenophobically as the fault of outsiders. This constant neglect of Marathwada continued well into the 1970s, and left people feeling angry and frustrated; they were looking for an outlet to unleash their pent up resentments since their efforts to demand change were in vain. The renaming issue provided the perfect scapegoat; it gave the underdevelopment issue something to go on with.<sup>65</sup> This was by no means as physically repressive as the violence in the rural parts of Marathwada, but at its core the frustrations were the same.

The needs and demands of the people for increased socioeconomic development to the region fell on deaf ears; even if development was not possible because of the political gridlock of India, there was no one to listen to the people or provide redress to their many grievances. As a result, unemployment rates continued to skyrocket, prices for goods, supplies or services increased steadily and there were fewer and fewer educational opportunities for students. The irrefutable basis of most of India’s problems – today and historically – is that of inequality, injustice and exploitation.<sup>66</sup> While development and economic growth can certainly bring some desired changes to a state as a whole, the

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<sup>63</sup> Damle, 1994

<sup>64</sup> Datye, 1987

<sup>65</sup> Ibid.

<sup>66</sup> Damle, 1994

process itself is inherently asymmetrical and “tardy,” and as such, will never benefit all sections of people equally. In other words, the rich got richer and the poor were left to dry. This was the magic of capitalism that still pervades global consciousness today.

The longstanding sentiments of neglect, the lack of substantial development, the limitations of existing political structures in addressing people’s grievances and elsewhere in Maharashtra the simmering of pro-Maratha sentiment by the Shiv Sena and other parties culminated into a movement of political assertion and regional identity. Among other things, it led to the creation of a “permanent pressure group” called the Marathwada Janata Vikas Parishad (JVP) that worked to address problems of economic development without becoming a political party itself.<sup>67</sup> Led in the late 1970s by Govindbhai Shroff, the work of the JVP began to have some visible effects after 1980 with the government’s introduction of small-scale development programs. The riots did provide a small opportunity to strengthen the case for bringing development to Marathwada when the JVP and Anantrao Bhalerao submitted numerous forms to the government petitioning for increased irrigation, manufacture plans, agricultural production and service sector industries as a direct way to mitigate class/caste antagonisms. One MP (Member of Parliament) even introduced a bill to establish a separate board for the development of ‘backward’ regions in Maharashtra.<sup>68</sup> Still, for years to come, there was little that changed tangibly, and Marathwada still lacked significant – or any – political clout.

It is important, then, to pose these questions: what did the people of Marathwada mean when they asked for “development”? More jobs? More disposable income?

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<sup>67</sup> Datye, 1987

<sup>68</sup> Abraham, 1978

Improved standards of living? More access to education? These are modest aspirations, but they invite their own set of fundamental questions: Did these demands to the government include increased opportunities to the dalits as well? Would it have changed the nature of caste relations that were seemingly so fragile? Would it have solved the ‘problem’ of reservations that had sparked so much controversy and antagonism in the rural middle class?

### **“Socially Unjust” Reservations?**

In the days of the urban agitations, even schoolchildren from some *morchas* were shouting “Down with concessions! Stop reservations!” It was these slogans that brought all the non-dalits onto the streets, and the resounding “Marathwada Murdabad!” coming from the dalit counter-protests that made the non-dalits violent. More than half the students at the University got concessions and affirmative action-type protections under the Scheduled Castes legal scheme. The prevailing belief among caste Hindus was fairly simplistic: the dalits had benefited for years from the many affirmative action policies of the government. Almost any dalit that wanted to get into a university or school could, most government jobs were required to reserve 34% of their positions for dalit workers, and the state subsidized almost every additional expense that dalit families incurred. Against a difficult socioeconomic landscape and the severe lack of opportunities in underdeveloped regions like Marathwada, being dalit seemed like the dream, one that dalits did not deserve. If one were to look at it through the lens of a disillusioned twenty-something unable to make ends meet or pursue any personal goals, this view of affirmative action might be understandable, if only to evoke sympathy. However, this is

too reductionist a portrayal of something that is quite complex, and is blatantly discarding a deep history of caste oppression that continues to produce draconian material realities for millions of dalits today.

The dalits as a whole are – by virtue of their status in Hindu society – on the lowest rungs of the caste ladder. Not only do they face daily discrimination, vis-à-vis education, health, and employment, among many other social sectors, but they are also often subjected to acts of vicious direct violence. A 2010 report by the National Human Rights Commission (NHRC) provided the following evidence that illuminates the extent and intensity of the ‘dalit condition’ in contemporary India:

A crime is committed against a Dalit every 18 minutes. Every day, on average, three Dalit women are raped, two Dalits murdered, and two Dalit houses burnt. 37 per cent of Dalits live below the poverty line. 54 per cent are undernourished. 83 out of every 1,000 children born in a Dalit household die before their first birthday and 12 per cent before their fifth birthday. 45 per cent remain illiterate. The data also shows that Dalits are prevented from entering the police station [to lodge complaints and report atrocities] in 28 per cent of Indian villages. Dalit children have been made to sit separately while eating in 39 per cent government schools. Dalits do not get mail delivered to their homes in 24 per cent of villages. And they are denied access to water sources in 48 per cent of our villages because untouchability remains a stark reality even though it was abolished in 1955.<sup>69</sup>

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<sup>69</sup> Jha, Ajit Kumar. “The Dalits: Still Untouchable.” *India Today*, February 3, 2016. <http://indiatoday.intoday.in/story/dalits-untouchable-rohith-vemula-caste-discrimination/1/587100>

In 1977, 70% of India's entire dalit population was living in poverty (compared to the 56% national statistic, which too was inflated because it included the dalits). The standard measure of poverty was whether a person had an income sufficient enough to consume a base number of food calories per day – 2400 for rural inhabitants and 2100 for urban.<sup>70</sup> This is not a comprehensive and holistic measure of living conditions, which ought to include overall nutrition, health, housing, general consumption and education. But even in studies that account for all of these categories, dalits were the overwhelming majority. Dalit poverty stemmed primarily from the relationship of dalits to agriculture and land, which will be analyzed later. Given this context of dalit subjugation, the many affirmative actions schemes implemented in Ambedkar's Constitution are warranted and in fact incredibly necessary and long overdue. But the violence still faced by dalits, as exemplified in the riots, exhibits how despite legal successes in establishing protections and some reparations for the nearly 200 million dalits in India, social reforms in attitudes and actions of the Indian population have barely taken place. The reservation system also does little to address the endogamy, patrimony and other social "traditions" that continue to oppress millions of people. The legal rhetoric on caste in post-independence India has become a rallying point for opportunistic politicians to capitalize on vote banks, acknowledging the power of caste in mobilizing the masses. "It is not politics that gets caste-ridden; it is caste that gets politicized."

There were many reactions to the renaming vis-à-vis the reservation issue, some more legitimate than others. To the religiously inclined or otherwise pro-Hindu/pro-

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<sup>70</sup> Mendelsohn, Oliver, and Vicziány, Marika. *The Untouchables: Subordination, poverty and the state in modern India*. UK, Cambridge University Press: 1998, 30

Brahmin students, the renaming was a slap in the face; it seemed blasphemous and disrespectful for the “ashuddhs” (impure, untouchables) to challenge the authority of their superiors. To the general masses, it was a matter of “equality” and “fairness” – why should a dalit student who had gotten 40% in an exam get an essentially free seat at a prestigious university whereas a caste Hindu that slogged to earn a 90% was left without a higher education? On the one hand, these were valid questions, and legitimate frustrations. The Indian education system at the time was in dire need of logistical reform in their allocation of seats and delineation of grade requirements, and in regions like Marathwada, in need of more/bigger universities. But on the other hand – as is the case in many countries that have to tackle with “affirmative action backlash” – the targeted blaming of dalits for these problems was not always evidenced with well-researched criticisms. They were often baseless assumptions or rumours that were stubbornly buried under layers of self-serving falsehoods that were naturally more easily digestible. However, unlike in other parts of the world where affirmative action usually has to do with relatively clear-cut issues like class, race, or gender, the caste dimension in India makes the line between who is “deserving” and who is not murky.

The most logical case against these “socially unjust” reservations was presented by the well-informed leaders of caste Hindu student groups. The argument was not simply that dalits did not deserve them by nature of their social status as dalits, or even that their educational merits were insufficient – but rather that there was a significant population of well-to-do dalits who earned far more than any other group of EBCs, OBCs or other classes of impoverished people, but still availed themselves of the economic concessions and reservations they did not really need financially. The income limit to qualify was Rs. 1,200

per annum in the mid-1960s to around Rs. 4,800 by the 1980s. Today, this limit is an astonishing Rs. 600,000 per year. In Marathwada as well as in most universities in India, there was widespread corruption in acquiring these income certificates. A handful of rich dalits, as well as a number of rich upper-caste children, benefited from the OBC reservations by forging income certificates. While the issue brought up by the rioters is quite pertinent, a more comprehensive way to reform the quota system is needed. More importantly, the question to be asked is whether the number of people that cheat the system – dalit or not – are significantly higher than those who benefit from it, and if it is a fair trade off.

Given the overwhelming statistics, the answer to this question is a resounding no. Even with quotas, 25.5% of upper castes held 69% of all government jobs and 90% of all Class I jobs in Maharashtra, when they comprised only about a third of the state's population.<sup>71</sup> The vast majority of dalits had few assets to their name and even fewer resources with which to challenge their subjugation. Faced with a hostile state apparatus rather than a sympathetic welfare state, the Indian poor – which mainly comprised dalits – had no discretionary power to do anything, let alone join the increasing trends of consumption, largely because of the occupational immobility of the caste system. The only way out of their traditional occupation or bonded agricultural labour was to join the government through a reservation or quota, which, contrary to popular belief, was only available to a small number of dalits – namely the Mahars. All of the relatively high-ranking government jobs open to the dalit quota – the only ones that gave dalits the opportunity to propel their families to a higher economic status – were taken up almost

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<sup>71</sup> Omvedt, Gail. *Reinventing Revolution: New Social Movements and the Socialist Tradition in India*. New York, M. E. Sharpe, Inc.: 1993

entirely by the Mahars. History had tipped slightly in their favour, and the reaction was savage.

For the rest of the dalits, job quotas merely meant exchanging one form of misery for another. The addition of educational quotas helped the overall situation some more, although not nearly enough. Literacy “bestows confidence and expands mental horizons, which can lead to a more assertive, less compliant community.”<sup>72</sup> The dalits – Mahars and others alike – that were able to enroll in schools and colleges were educated in more ways than one. Some were able to develop skill sets that allowed them to get jobs outside of their traditional occupations without the help of the quotas, while others, particularly women, were educated on reproductive health, domestic abuse, and feminism, allowing them to exercise their agency.

While it is true that there are many people, both within the dalit community and outside of it, that take advantage of the system meant to repair old wounds and reverse millennia of oppression, there is unlikely to be a way to measure “how much oppression” someone has gone through in order to be eligible. Even in the case of those dalits who are financially better off than other scheduled castes, socioeconomic success is not always equivalent to caste liberation. The system of reservations and quotas – despite being around for many decades – is itself only illusory in its protection of dalits. As is exemplified by the Marathwada riots, the government does little to truly understand the needs of its most vulnerable people. It also does not explain the system and the reasons for its existence to the students who violently protest it – the history taught in classrooms is largely and horribly inadequate. Or perhaps intentionally so.

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<sup>72</sup> Mendelsohn, 1998

Regardless, the non-dalits that participated in the urban agitations were not all upper-caste Hindus nor were they all from higher classes. Many of them came from middle peasant castes and came from equally if not poorer backgrounds than the dalits who attended the University through the quota system. There was naturally resentment there, one that is worth paying attention to. Another common argument against the system of reservations was that of all seats in a college or all positions in a workplace, 34% of them were required to be given to scheduled castes and tribes. According to then-recently added directive, any unfulfilled quota carried forward to the next year, as a way to compensate for any backlog. Because this provision was not added until the 1970s, there was confusion about its implications. In theory, this could mean that it was possible to have a dalit quota reach 100%. This sparked outrage and fear of its own kind. However, the directive also mentioned that the backlog at any point cannot exceed 50%. In general, all of the reservation schemes were to be implemented empirically “accounting for local sentiment,”<sup>73</sup> but it was unclear who made those decisions and on whose discretion they could be carried out. In 1974 in Maharashtra, 34% of all police patils were supposed to be dalit. However, due to the Maratha preserves and strongholds, that did not happen and all the policemen were caste Hindus. Until the riots in 1978, this did not pose a problem. The riots brought back to stage the issue of reservations that had left mainstream political discourse for a while. In 1980, the issue was to be reopened in Parliament, the “battle lines” for which were being drawn in Marathwada.

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<sup>73</sup> Abraham, 1978

## Changes in the Agrarian Landscape

In the rural sector, the underlying structures that fueled the Marathwada riots were very distinct. Underdevelopment, sub-regionalism and even the quota system were prominent even in the villages, but what was unique was how the violence worked its way into the prevailing structures of agricultural labour, sugar and cotton co-operatives and land cultivation, ownership and reallocation. The levels of poverty faced by dalits historically and contemporarily come from their relationship with agricultural land. In general, the dalits are an “agrarian people without strong land assets.”<sup>74</sup> In the late 1970s, 81% of the dalit population lived rurally, against the 74% Indian average (which included dalits). Agriculture comprises the primary sector of the Indian economy; therefore the rural landscape of the country was characterized by the agricultural industry. About 50% of dalits in India were agricultural labourers and another 25% were cultivators and sharecroppers<sup>75</sup>. It is worth noting that not all landless persons were necessarily poor (many Brahmins served as priests in temples instead of owning farmland, and were immensely wealthy) and not all poverty in India was rural (migration flows to the urban sphere and other politico-economic factors resulted in a significant population of urban poor). The rural poor and working peasantry of India faced several hardships, but the dalits in particular faced a distinct, historical form of violence that manifested in the rural agrarian economy. Marathwada, to this day, experiences among the highest rates of farmer suicide, starvation and poverty.

The population of poor dalits in Maharashtra was 66% in 1971, which was high for an otherwise prosperous state. Most of these poor dalits lived rurally. A significant

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<sup>74</sup> Mendelsohn, 1998

<sup>75</sup> Ibid.

driver of agrarian conflict in the state was the sharp socioeconomic divide among the rural population, especially in Marathwada. On the one hand were rich zamindars (landowners) that typically owned 200-300 acres of land. On the other were the dalits and poor peasants, who were mostly landless labourers. Those that did possess land had small holdings (1-2 acres) of usually uncultivable land.<sup>76</sup> These small holdings comprised around 24% of all landholdings in Marathwada. Unlike other parts of Maharashtra, in Marathwada 31.6% of rural households owned 77.5% of the region's land in holdings of 10 acres or more. In other words, a small group of wealthy regional elites – the zamindars – owned three quarters of all available land, whereas the remaining quarter was divided into small plots of land to be owned by a number of dalits.

This land came to be owned by dalits generally in one of three ways: “(1) Mahar watan lands<sup>77</sup>, (2) individual purchase, or (3) ‘land for the landless’ government schemes.”<sup>78</sup> The watan lands at first seemed like a viable solution to historical landlessness. However the conditions and hours under which the dalits, prominently Mahars, worked were nothing short of slave labour, an issue tackled at length later. Ambedkar successfully organized several agitations against the Mahar Watan proposal, asserting that the result of such schemes was that the Mahars “lost self-respect, their ambition and their abilities [became] tied down to their trifling menial jobs,” and as a community they were enslaved and deteriorated.<sup>79</sup> Instead, Ambedkar advocated for thorough land reforms and emphasized that the value of an agricultural holding could not

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<sup>76</sup> Atyachar Virodh Samiti, 1978

<sup>77</sup> See footnote #16

<sup>78</sup> Abraham, 1978

<sup>79</sup> Ray, Ishita Aditya, Ray, Sarbapriya. “B.R. Ambedkar and his philosophy of Land Reform: An evaluation.” *Afro-Asian Journal of Social Sciences* Vol. 2, No. 2.1 (2001): 1–19, <http://www.onlineresearchjournals.com/aajoss/art/60.pdf>

be determined solely by its physical area but also by the quality of the land, its capacity to be cultivated and the availability of other agricultural inputs including irrigation and labour. The right to own and control land was a crucial demand in the dalit struggle because it elevated dignity, social status and autonomy for its holders as well as made available economic opportunities that landlessness had fervently prevented. The unequal distribution and ownership of land formed a primary obstacle to broad-based rural development, in Marathwada as much as in the rest of India.

During the 1940s and the 1950s, there was a strong agrarian struggle against the dominance of landowners. But within this struggle were two distinct movements: that of the kisans (the shudra peasants) and that of the mazdurs (dalit field servants). The kisans' fight was an anti-zamindar struggle, fighting for the abolition of landlordism in all its forms, affecting dalits only nominally. The mazdur struggle, on the other hand, was more "revolutionary" because of their specific and additional goals, which included fighting the vethbegar – "feudal forced labour" – and the distinct menial and degrading caste duties of dalits. This struggle only peripherally affected the kisans, whose demands were satisfied by the abolition of zamindari.<sup>80</sup> Many parts of Marathwada followed the British-created ryotwari system, which, unlike the zamindari system, meant the taxes and revenues on the land was collected directly from the cultivators of the land. While workers in ryotwari areas were not slave to their zamindar's discretion, they were often in huge amounts of debt to money-lenders. The elimination of landlordism did not solve the

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<sup>80</sup> Omvedt, Gail. "Caste, Agrarian Relations and Agrarian Conflicts." *Sociological Bulletin* Vol. 29, No. 2 (September 1980): 142–170, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/23619174> (accessed February 1, 2017)

problems of the ryots, and so equivalent demands had to be made in the mazdur movements for the freedom from debt and oppressive taxation.

There were many compelling economic and political arguments for land reform, from the kisans as well as the mazdurs, and in the years after Independence it had been a nationally-mandated priority of state governments. The land reforms that Ambedkar proposed included the redistribution of land and land rights from big landholders to the rural poor, ones that provided the latter with more “equitable and secure access” to land.<sup>81</sup> This invariably implied a degree of confiscation from landowners, who were bound to lose a number of their privileges; land reform therefore was a deeply political process. Ambedkar’s memorandum proposed “state ownership in agriculture with a collectivized method of cultivation.”<sup>82</sup> In other words, land would belong to the state and could be let out to villagers regardless of caste or creed; after the abolition of landlordism the “natural” alternative should be collective or co-operative farming. However, the rise of capitalist farming and development techniques proved as much a barrier to this vision of unity as the deep underpinnings of caste did. Nonetheless, a number of tenancy and land-ceiling laws were enacted from the 1950s onwards. Small plots of land were to be given to dalits to own and cultivate themselves, including leftover or waste lands of the government. Often these plots were too small or too far from the village to be properly cultivated by the dalits and as a result were often swallowed by rich farmers, rendering the reform schemes useless. The issue of land ownership was a historical sore, one that had been festering for decades. Starting in 1974, the issue returned to the forefront of life in Marathwada.

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<sup>81</sup> Ray, 2001

<sup>82</sup> Ibid.

Four years before the Marathwada riots of 1978, a land-ceiling law was passed that allowed farmers to hold only 18 acres of irrigated land, or 27 acres of land that has no assured perennial supply of irrigation water for more than one crop.<sup>83</sup> Any lands in excess to these limits would be redistributed; at least 60%<sup>84</sup> of this surplus was to be given to the dalit mazdurs. Even though the implementation of this law was staggered and uneven across Maharashtra, it came as a shock to the landed elites of the region. It gave economic agency to the landless agricultural workers, the majority of whom were dalits. The relationship between land ownership and agricultural waged labour, set against the background of capitalist development, is pivotal in understanding the nature of the agitations in 1978.

### **Agricultural Labour in the Era of Capitalism**

Over three quarters of the dalit population in Maharashtra worked in the agricultural sector. According to the 1971 Census, there were 6.5 million cultivators (including owner-cultivators, tenants and sharecroppers; these categories overlapped) and 5.4 million agricultural labourers. For every 100 cultivators, there were 82 agricultural labourers. The proportion of agricultural labourers in the total worker population was 29.8% in Maharashtra, against the 25.8% proportion in the country. In 1961, these figures were 23.8% and 16.7% respectively. The increase in 10 years demonstrated that surplus manpower was not being siphoned away from agriculture to other sectors of the economy

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<sup>83</sup> Marpakwari, Prafulla. "Maharashtra no to Centre plan to cut agricultural land ceiling." *The Times of India*, August 6, 2013, <http://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/city/mumbai/Maharashtra-no-to-Centre-plan-to-cut-agricultural-land-ceiling/articleshow/21637303>

<sup>84</sup> Abraham, 1978

– although dalit movements after 1972 encouraged it – but that dependence on agriculture and agricultural labour had actually increased.<sup>85</sup> Notably only 4% of all the land in Marathwada was easily cultivatable in the decade or so after Independence; the region’s backwardness caused it to have few irrigation facilities, frequent drought and floods made most of the land infertile.<sup>86</sup>

Agricultural labourers were hired either as ‘casual’ or ‘attached’ labour. Casual labour implied a seasonal contract and hours as needed by the landowners. Attached labour, a far more common practice, was a system where workers were hired on a yearly basis and worked 10-16 hours a day, usually without a weekly holiday, in exchange for food and shelter. What propelled most agricultural labourers to concede to attached labour was the immense indebtedness they accumulated as a result of political, economic and environmental factors. When agricultural labourers were hired as attached labour by way of debt repayment, landed employers rarely supplied them with working conditions above the bare minimum level of sustenance required; they had to recover the loan amount with interest. This was in itself a form of bonded labour, but the ‘dalit condition’ made it an “option” many dalits preferred, since it was – in a sense – a year-long job guarantee.<sup>87</sup>

In general, agricultural labourers were heavily dependent on wage employment. Marathwada had the lowest wage rates of any region in Maharashtra, and consequently the lowest income. The minimum agricultural wage in Nanded in 1978 was Rs. 3. Dalits

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<sup>85</sup> “Minimum Wages for Agricultural Labour.” *Economic and Political Weekly* Vol. 8, No. 39 (September 29, 1973): 1752–1755, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/4363057> (accessed February 19, 2017)

<sup>86</sup> Atyachar Virodh Samiti, 1978

<sup>87</sup> Minimum Wages, 1973

who worked on the fields in the homes of village chiefs were paid between Rs. 3 and Rs. 3.5. In drier parts of the region, landless labour was paid Rs. 1.25 to Rs. 1.5.<sup>88</sup> The average income from agricultural wages was Rs. 260 annually (Rs. 30 from non-agricultural industries, Rs. 26 from land yield, and Rs. 9 from other sources) and the average overall income was Rs. 353. According to the Report on Economic Conditions of Weaker Sections of the Rural Population of Maharashtra in 1970-71, the total wage income was Rs. 1,253 annually and the average expenditure was Rs. 1,417. The average amount in outstanding loans per wage earner in rural areas across the state was Rs. 57. Most of these loans were taken out for normal maintenance, seed and agricultural input in cases of landed labourers, and ceremonies. During off-seasons, the “near-subsistence level” wage was insufficient to cover the consumption needs and expenses of agricultural labourer families, who resorted to taking loans from money-lenders or pledging their labour at even lower rates for the next season.<sup>89</sup>

The Page Committee that published the Report made recommendations to the Maharashtrian government to implement laws requiring labourers to avail fewer working hours, a fixed and generous number of paid holidays, and a strict minimum wage (calculated by converting the amount of staple grain needed into a cash figure; as mentioned earlier, poverty in India is assessed by the minimum amount of calorie intake required by a person for sustenance). Unsurprisingly, the state and national governments did little to seriously put these recommendations into action. Even the opposition parties did not put pressure on their rivals in power on this issue. In all likelihood, even if the government were to have passed a fixed, reasonable minimum wage, it would have

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<sup>88</sup> Abraham, 1978

<sup>89</sup> Minimum Wages, 1973

stayed on paper unless the agricultural workers were *politically organized*. The political organization of dalits in Maharashtra has a vibrant history as a result of Ambedkar and his politics, but in Marathwada most dalit movements relating to land and labour were successfully suppressed. When the new tenancy laws were enacted in the mid 1950s, most small tenants and landless dalits were “terrorized” by the landlords into “voluntarily” surrendering their newly-acquired tenancies. In fact, estimates from fact-finding committees reveal that only a third of all tenancy cases in the state resulted in the tenant successfully getting a part or all of the land leased to them. In Marathwada, the percentage was around 13%.<sup>90</sup> The argument was that landless labourers could have made full avail of these opportunities had there been strong political organization among them.

To be sure, there were many political struggles and movements waged against the government. The kisans and the mazdurs, for instance, put significant pressure on the state to make changes towards easing the plight of the rural poor, even if just on paper. The issue was being politically organized against regional upper caste and elitist interests, enough to bring about an attitudinal and sociocultural shift at best, or at the very least gain enough political leverage to ensure safety and survival. The political climate of Maharashtra through the 1970s was complex and multifaceted; it was not easy to delineate what the “upper caste and elitist interests” were, especially since they were intertwined with the power structures of political party interests. In fact, the intensity of the sociopolitical hegemony of these “interests” was manifested in the deep regional

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<sup>90</sup> Ibid.

disparity in agricultural development of rural areas, and particularly in the emergence of sugarcane and cotton co-operatives.

Marathwada had been an economically backward region for decades, in large measure as a result of the oppressive social structures and neglect of the Nizam. The ryotwari land tenures in the rural parts of the region had the potential for “the growth of enterprise” and “generated incentives for work,” particularly through sugarcane and cotton cultivation by kisans, but the negligence of the Nizam stifled any form of agricultural development.<sup>91</sup> Importantly, the Nizam’s regime was Muslim in a predominantly Maratha region; the Maratha elites felt oppressed by his theocratic politics. These sentiments (along with colonial “divide and rule” politics) set the stage for both the rising tide of Hindu nationalism as well as the strong sub-regional identity that emerged in Marathwada in the latter half of twentieth century, upon which parties like the Shiv Sena lobbied and rose to power. Unlike the rest of Maharashtra, Marathwada did not “enjoy the contingencies of democracy and capitalist modernization [that came with] British colonial rule, rather it had to continue with the framework of a community based on caste and religion.”<sup>92</sup>

Elsewhere in Maharashtra, capitalism had penetrated into rural life and the development of agro-industries and co-operatives led to increasing prosperity for a section of farmers in irrigated areas. Massive irrigation schemes and long-term development plans were initiated, particularly in the Sahyadri Mountain (Western Ghats)

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<sup>91</sup> Mohanty, B. B. “Regional Disparity in Agricultural Development of Maharashtra.” *Economic and Political Weekly* Vol. 44, No. 6 (February 7–13, 2009): 63–69, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/40278486> (accessed February 1, 2017)

<sup>92</sup> Ibid.

valleys where eastward-flowing rivers could be used for hydroelectric power.<sup>93</sup> Many of these dam-building projects resulted in the displacement of large communities and widespread corruption and electoral politics in affected areas, but were deemed “successful” since overall state-wide irrigation had improved. The irrigation schemes and the creation of massively state-sponsored cooperative credit institutions laid the economic basis for a “rich-peasant cash crop economy,” and later the Green Revolution in some parts of the state. The state also actively pushed for setting up agro-industries, mostly sugar co-operative factories, for which they improved transport and communication. All of these changes – including the strong Maratha presence, land reform laws, and even the spread of education in rural areas – essentially facilitated a transfer of power from urban to rural spheres of life in Maharashtra. This meant the “emergence of firm political bases and centers of power in the rural areas, [creating] a solid phalanx of district level leadership for the Congress.”<sup>94</sup>

This shift of power and the uneven capitalist development of Maharashtra resulted in a number of concurrent processes. Y.B Chavan consolidated his position in rural Maharashtra, using a “mix of factionalism and pragmatism, bordering on opportunism” to establish his credibility among the national Congress leadership. As Chief Minister from 1956 onwards, he “built bridges” with the urban, industrial and trading interests in Bombay and elsewhere, becoming a symbol of rural Maratha power in the minds of the common people.<sup>95</sup> Since Maharashtra had no indigenous trading or entrepreneurial class of its own, most businesses were owned by migrants from other

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<sup>93</sup> Kamat, 1980

<sup>94</sup> Ibid.

<sup>95</sup> Ibid.

parts of India. The urban trading interests were, therefore, in the hands of non-Maharashtrians and Chavan's alliance with them was perceived more as a sign of dominance rather than co-operation. Nonetheless, the urban industrial sector of Bombay boomed under capitalist development initiatives in the state. Oil refineries and engineering industries rose as did the population of the city (from 1.5 million in 1941 to 6 million in 1971). Capital, labour and trade "converged and crowded into Bombay" and its ever-expanding suburbs, inevitably making it an immensely crowded conglomerate with worsening work and living conditions.<sup>96</sup> This unchecked development and haphazard growth formed part of the reason for the resentment against Bombay and Western Maharashtra by Marathwada elites. But more importantly, the rapid growth of factories and industrial sectors had led to the unionization of wage-workers and salaried employees. Bombay had become the stronghold of the Left, particularly of the communists. But after the center of power shifted to rural bases, the ruling Congress party succeeded in dismantling and disuniting large populations from their leftist militant organizations, making the Left politically fragmented in Bombay.<sup>97</sup>

### **Sugar Kings and their Irrigated Kingdoms**

Many "islands of rural capitalism" emerged through the 1960s and 70s, central to which were the co-operative sugar factories and co-operative banks. In the early 1970s, there were 39 sugar co-ops in Maharashtra, of which 34 were in Western Maharashtra, 2 in Vidarbha and 3 in Marathwada. The total membership of the co-ops was around 130,000. In the 1972-73 season, 37 sugar co-ops produced 8.5 tonnes of sugar. Given the

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<sup>96</sup> Ibid.

<sup>97</sup> Ibid.

average price levels of sugar in the year, the sugar co-ops were estimated to have a gross turnover of around two *billion* rupees.<sup>98</sup> The vast amount of profits generated from these co-ops made them the mainstay for political power. Elections to their board of directors happened yearly and were, unsurprisingly, trials of political strength that matched the intensity of government elections. Various leaders sent a “panel” to represent them, who were in turn voted to service specific sugarcane producing villages and factories. In the Congress years, the central political figures leading the co-ops included Vasantdada Patil, Y.B. Chavan, V.P Naik and Sharad Pawar.

Needless to say, the sugar co-ops play an important role in the Congress party politics of Maharashtra. They are a major source of funding for the party; the government frequently manipulates sugar prices or relaxes restrictions in order to increase the profits generated, even marginally. The sugar co-ops dominate the rural economy; several farmers made small fortunes by joining them, since they paid full price for sugarcane and arranged for crop loans. Those who controlled sugar co-ops also controlled local panchayati raj institutions in the emerging capitalist political order. The sugar co-ops soon diversified their activities into manufacturing liquor. Under pressure from the co-ops, the government scrapped prohibition laws and in fact dramatically lowered sales tax on liquor, expanding the profit margin of the sugar co-ops immensely. Widespread corruption and vote bank politics among the avaricious government ensured their sway over other sectors of life would remain strong and the benefits of the co-ops would be limited to only those in power. The chokehold of sugar co-ops in Maharashtra point to the

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<sup>98</sup> “Battle for Sugar Co-operatives.” *Economic and Political Weekly* Vol. 8, No. 49 (December 8, 1973): 2165–2166, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/4363256> (accessed February 1, 2017)

extent of capitalist political hegemony that shaped the region and their sheer dominance over life in rural areas. The discrepancy between Western Maharashtra and the rest of the state is clearer. Most importantly, it gives an idea of the weight of what the dalits and other agricultural labourers demanding for higher wages were up against. It seemed futile for any opposition party, particularly a Leftist party, to challenge Congress control over sugar co-ops, or the influence of the co-ops over the local economy and politics. But it is important to note that the benefits of the most prosperous co-op was still limited only to a small section of the rural elite, and if co-op workers – the proletariat – could be organized against bourgeois interests, the system could tumble.

There were other implications of Congress leaders dominating the co-ops, on rural development as well as on maintaining effective state machinery. The competition for co-op control provided the grounds for factional politics within the ruling party. Vasantdada Patil campaigned ferociously for control of the sugar co-ops in order to block S. B Chavan's appointment as Chief Minister. Chavan, in turn, used his position as Chief Minister to keep the sugar co-ops at bay while he promised to tackle the droughts hitting the countryside in order to secure his reelection. The unchecked pressure on sugar co-ops for production led inevitably to massive droughts in the region. These droughts were a "man-made calamity consequent on the skewed pattern of irrigation in favour of certain areas and crops, notably Western Maharashtra and sugarcane."<sup>99</sup> Sugarcane cultivation consumes *ten times* as much water as required by coarse grain cultivation. As a result, all available water was used for sugarcane. Food grain production – particularly coarse

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<sup>99</sup> "Politics of Water." *Economic and Political Weekly* Vol. 21, No. 17 (April 26, 1986): 715, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/4375577> (accessed February 19, 2017)

cereals, the staple of rural and urban poor – consequently did not receive any irrigation and therefore did not do well over the years; it was “always the first victim of fluctuating rainfall.”<sup>100</sup> Irrigation is a political issue linked to the interests of the powerful sugar co-ops. The government’s irrigation schemes ensured a perennial supply of water to all of the state’s sugar co-ops. Even with severe droughts that hit the region, there was rarely a danger of the water supply being interrupted. In the 1980s, the state government’s annual expenditure on maintenance of irrigation projects was around Rs. 300 million, half of which was expected to be recovered by way of irrigation water charges. However, the government rarely made back that money and their dues have risen by over 500 million in the years between 1976-1986. The sharp increase in dues is because of fines levied on the “large scale pilferage of water from canals, use of water for unsanctioned cash crops, and for drawing more than sanctioned water by paying bribes to officials.”<sup>101</sup> This is indicative of the immense corruption and underhanded dealings characteristic of any political profit endeavour in India. The dues existed for all practical purposes only on paper and no real efforts were made to recover them; the leaders in power were the ones responsible for them in the first place.

No political leader had challenged the irrigation policy that tipped steeply in favour of the sugar barons. In 1986, SB Chavan made the first attempt by trying to provide irrigation to the dry lands, like those in Marathwada, for at least 8 months a year, but he received little support. The percentage of irrigated area to net sown area in Marathwada was 5.14% in 1970, 9.21% in 1980 and then 14-15% from 1990 onwards. In

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<sup>100</sup> Ibid.

<sup>101</sup> “Politics of Irrigation Water.” *Economic and Political Weekly* Vol. 22, No. 24 (June 13, 1987): 913, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/4377081> (accessed February 19, 2017)

Western Maharashtra, the percentage increased from 10% to around 29% in the same time period.<sup>102</sup> Even though there is a steady increase in the percentage of irrigated areas of Marathwada, the gap between Marathwada and Western Maharashtra remains almost the same through the decades. The irrigated areas of Maharashtra unsurprisingly constitute the ‘sugar belt’ and are the base for political hegemony in the state; development can only be equitable when this hegemony is broken, for instance by a Chief Minister reallocating irrigation projects, but since most Chief Ministers were central to the sugar lobby, the state was faced with a political impasse.

The situation was similar for cotton co-ops although the lobby was not as strong. Most of the sugarcane-producing factories also had set up units for cotton and tobacco cultivation. In the 1970s, Marathwada had a 27% share of the gross cropped area, its main crop being cotton. The village of Nanded had the largest cotton plantations and co-operative factories, including the Usmanshahi Mill, the only large cotton mill in all of Marathwada. In 1974, the Cotton Monopoly Purchase Scheme (CMPS) was implemented with the stated aims of preventing cotton cultivators and sharecroppers from exploitation. What it did was essentially prevent private operators, traders and co-operatives from procuring cotton directly from producers; they had to obtain licenses and broker the deal through the government, which determined the prices of cotton and charged its own commissions.<sup>103</sup> The CMPS was not implemented in its full capacity until S.B Chavan, an adversary of sugar and cotton lobbies, became Chief Minister. The scheme undermined

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<sup>102</sup> Mohanty, 2009

<sup>103</sup> “Maharashtra Ends Cotton Purchase Monopoly Plan.” *Business Standard*, September 2, 2002. [http://www.business-standard.com/article/markets/maharashtra-ends-cotton-purchase-monopoly-plan-102090601038\\_1](http://www.business-standard.com/article/markets/maharashtra-ends-cotton-purchase-monopoly-plan-102090601038_1)

trading and entrepreneurial interests and bred a great deal of anger among the dominant cotton traders.

Additionally, the consequences of undeveloped irrigation also meant the lack of flood control measures in areas like Nanded, which was prone to heavy floods. The severe flood and rain of 1969 destroyed the kharif cotton crops (summer/rain variety), and it was too late to plant other rabi (spring) crops as recommended.<sup>104</sup> The rich farmers who were members of various co-operative banks and federations demanded reparations for damage to their crops because of the severe weather, instead of repaying loans they owed to the government. In turn Congress explained these away for years as simply the “mounting arrears of successive droughts.”<sup>105</sup> Powerful lobbies downplayed both kharif and rabi grains, forestalling any move by the state to impose tax on the production of or the acreage under unsanctioned cash crops for which the farmers were demanding reparations.

Floods were a frequent occurrence in over 96 villages in Marathwada, and as a result the need for grain relief was immense, especially because almost a third of Marathwada’s population comprised agricultural labourers without land of their own. The floods of Nanded affected both landowners and landless labourers, but the latter were largely left out of damage analyses and reparations. With the cotton crop washed away, poor peasants and dalit labourers were out of work and thus had to borrow money to buy grain, which only increased their debt. With proper irrigation, enough jowar could have

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<sup>104</sup> “Floods in Nanded.” *Economic and Political Weekly* Vol. 10, No. 42 (October 18, 1975): 1633, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/40738293> (accessed February 19, 2017)

<sup>105</sup> “Crop Damage by Order.” *Economic and Political Weekly* Vol. 3, No. 5 (February 3, 1968): 252–253, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/4358205> (accessed February 17, 2017)

been produced for the entire state and the damage from floods could have been significantly mitigated.<sup>106</sup> In fertile seasons, the cotton trade of Nanded flourished under the baronage of rich rural elites. In fact, a number of farmer movements erupted in the 1970s to protect rich farmer interests by demanding higher prices for crops like onion, sugarcane and cotton. In the late 1970s, the sugar lobby succeeded in imposing higher prices for cane, jowar, rice and other crops. Sharad Joshi, painted as a leader of the peasant movement, began his career with a campaign on onion prices. He asserted that poor farmers in dry areas had to unite against the rich farmers in irrigated areas. He was quickly won over by Congress (I), and a number of parties, including the “politically motivated” opposition had a part to play. The movement was quickly adapted to sugarcane. According to the 1971 census, 83% of all sugarcane in Maharashtra is grown on farms bigger than 5 acres, and given the resources required for cane cultivation, it can be assumed that most of these farmers were rich, capitalist farmers. The “Cane Farmers Movement” was therefore “not just a movement *led* by rich peasants but also a movement *of* the rich peasants.”<sup>107</sup> It conflicted with the interests of the majority of rural poor families, including agricultural labourers and poor peasants dependent on wage labour, who required lower prices for food, higher wages for work and an end to caste atrocities.

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Overall, Marathwada was not able to achieve the level of development its regional counterparts enjoyed and was therefore unable to effectively compete for a share of the

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<sup>106</sup> Floods in Nanded, 1975

<sup>107</sup> Omvedt, Gail. “Cane Farmers’ Movement.” *Economic and Political Weekly* Vol. 15, No. 49 (December 6, 1980): 2041–2042, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/4369299> (accessed March 4, 2017)

state's resources. Not only was this a result of the lack of an articulated structure of alliances and factions, but also because of the political dominance of elite interests in various agro-industries and the unchecked capitalist power of self-interested politicians in those lobbies. The politics of Maharashtra as a whole were an expression of the "hegemony of sugar barons and the big bourgeoisie of Bombay."<sup>108</sup> Vasantdada Patil, Y.B Chavan and Sharad Pawar all came from Western Maharashtra; no leader from the rest of the state has had nearly as much power and influence as they have had. S.B Chavan was one of the only leaders from Marathwada and along with VP Naik of Vidarbha, tried to push the interests of backward regions. All that came of it was his own downfall; the rich farmer movements backed by powerful lobbies were too strong to budge. Civil society organizations like the Janata Vikas Andolan in Marathwada – led by the Marathas – argued the case for more budgetary allocation vis-à-vis the issue of economic backwardness in the region, but the Congress party "strategically diluted this sub-regional protest by co-opting the dominant landowning Maratha elites who were mostly associated with Congress" anyway.<sup>109</sup> Most of the struggles that dominated the politics of rural Maharashtra have been those over terms of trade (higher prices for crops, concessions for farm input, etc.) that were indicative of the capitalist nature of the rural economy, benefits of which had been reaped by big landowners who grew sugarcane and cotton. These were not struggles of the "peasant against the landlord," but rather a manifestation of the conflict between the rural and industrial bourgeoisie, with no room for dalit voices to be heard. All over India in the 1970s, rallies with tens of thousands of people erupted to protest against giving land to the landless, blaming the economy for

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<sup>108</sup> Mohanty, 2009

<sup>109</sup> Ibid.

their inability to give higher wages to their labourers and in the same breath complaining that the dalits were getting “lazier and more arrogant by the day.”<sup>110</sup>

The agrarian landscape of Maharashtra is instrumental in contextualizing the violence against rural dalits in the 1978 Marathwada riots. The ‘political awakening’ of the Mahars against the uneven capitalist development of the state formed the basis for a shift in labour-landowner relations. The intensity of the riots was greatest in the three districts of Marathwada (eastern Aurangabad, Parbhani and Nanded) that had experienced the shift to cash crop production of sugarcane and HYV cotton.<sup>111</sup> That along with increased irrigation facilities – albeit minimal compared to other parts of Maharashtra – had resulted in more agricultural work. The land tenure schemes, where successful, had given dalits small plots of land on which to cultivate their own cash crops, which followed the successes of the sugarcane and cotton market on a small scale. Those who continued to work as waged labourers saw an increase in agricultural wages across the board. After the recession of 1965-70, the prices of food grain began to drop and government subsidies enabled poor peasants and dalits to afford a reasonable ration of necessary staples. Government-created work and the capitalist expansion of industry, along with government quotas and concessions, gave dalits a huge opportunity to leave their jobs as forced labourers behind. Because of their increasing independence from the landed gentry, dalits’ support to political parties underwent changes. Where they first voted for whomever their landlords supported, they now voted against Congress and in favour of dalit parties like the RPI or the Dalit Panthers, or whichever party campaigned on the grounds of improving dalit lives in their hometowns. All of these changes gave

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<sup>110</sup> Omvedt, Cane Farmers Movement, 1980

<sup>111</sup> Morkhandikar, 1978

agricultural labourers greater bargaining power and agency, albeit not uniformly and consistently across Marathwada. Where for decades landless labour had been at the “beck and call” of the rich landowners, they now had to be sought after. This came as a “psychological shock” to the landowners, who saw in the renaming of Marathwada University “a reflection of their own situation.”<sup>112</sup> The Mahars had become an independent and liberated class, on par with many suvarnas. The landed elites wanted the dalits, especially the Mahars, to return to their “traditional jobs” in fields and houses – in other words back to the practice of vethbegar. Attacks on Mahars were especially vicious in all areas of Marathwada, with the conspicuous exception of those areas where bonded labour was still practiced and the inferiority of dalits was the status quo. In areas where Mahars “worked like slaves,” the post-renaming agitations were least severe and most Mahar wadis remained untouched.<sup>113</sup>

Once the riots started, word spread that this was the moment for suvarnas to ‘settle scores’ with dalits and no one could stop them; protection was guaranteed from the very top.<sup>114</sup> In Aurangabad and similar towns, the urban-rural divide was small. Since many villages were in close proximity – cycling distance – to urban centers (and since dalits took up jobs in other sectors of the economy to resist their subjugation), there was a lot of close contact and cultural exchange between them. Many of the students in Aurangabad came from rich and middle class farmer families in the rural areas; the fierce involvement of the latter in the university issue is explainable.<sup>115</sup> These close links in regular trade and communications are some of the main reasons why the riots spread to

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<sup>112</sup> Ibid.

<sup>113</sup> Abraham, 1978

<sup>114</sup> Ibid.

<sup>115</sup> Morkhandikar, 1978

the villages so quickly. The question to be asked then is why the riots in the urban center of Aurangabad did not take the form of bloody street clashes. This militancy of the DPs has served as a deterrent to the urban agitators from the SAC. In the past the SAC did not plan targets; their grievances were generally directed towards the government, and so all their riots and protests concerned only the destruction of public property. What they had in common with the DPs was that they functioned only in crisis; they had little visibility otherwise. But even though the DPs were disorganized and surfaced only sporadically, they could typically organize hundreds of people within minutes.<sup>116</sup>

The Parliamentary Committee's Report stated that the riots, particularly the rural ones, were premeditated; "dalits were executed like a military campaign."<sup>117</sup> This was atypical of groups like the SAC and their fellow agitators. Pro-agitation stances were published in all leading Marathi newspapers, thousands of propaganda letters and clandestine leaflets were circulated in Aurangabad and surrounding villages informing people to participate in the riots. Many dalits in the villages caught whiff of these rumours and fled their homes before the riots began. Several hundred dalits went to the police, but to no avail as most policemen were controlled by powerful people in the higher echelons of corporate government. After the riots, many dalits identified local attackers but also *hundreds* of outsiders. If the urban agitations had put a halt to the public transport system, damaged the roads and destroyed the bridges, how did truckloads of agitators from the cities (then in disarray) get to the villages so swiftly, within six days, unless there was a degree of planning? How were some wadis and dalit bustis chosen as targets, but not others? This is further evidence that the riots cannot be attributed simply

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<sup>116</sup> Abraham, 1978

<sup>117</sup> Abraham, 1979

to “high caste rage.”<sup>118</sup> Interestingly, the cotton merchants and traders of cities, scapegoating their anger of the CMPS onto dalits, generously funded the rioters in the cities and provided trucks and weapons for them to enter villages over the next two months. The renaming of Marathwada University was a symbolic defeat for the suvarnas. The riots were not intended to “wipe out” the dalits – suvarnas were dependent on them for labour – but rather to “teach them a lesson.”<sup>119</sup> Throughout the agitations, the suvarnas shouted slogans reinforcing dalit inferiority and servitude as they viciously attacked them.

Not only did the upper castes successfully squash the feelings of assertiveness that had come about in dalits as their demands for equality and liberation started to occupy space on the political stage, but they also shattered any possibility of unity between dalits and caste Hindu peasants and labourers, who in theory had a lot more to gain if they joined forces against their common high caste oppressors. This was, of course, antithetical to the interests of the upper caste landed elites, who used caste, tribal loyalty and their own cohesion to wage a war against class unity. The caste-driven fractures between agricultural labourers and peasants secured the landowners’ monetary and political successes. The sugar and cotton baronage can be reframed as the rise of the “kulak” class, one that was discreetly established by the upper classes in order to maintain class antagonisms at the lower level, disguised as an inherent caste war. The Marathwada riots serve as a poignant critique of capitalism and its effects on the rural economy as well as in recontextualizing the caste system. Finally, it brings up an immensely relevant and long-debated issue within Indian discourse: the question of caste versus class struggle.

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<sup>118</sup> Morkhandikar, 1978

<sup>119</sup> Abraham, 1979

## CHAPTER FOUR

### **Is Caste a Barrier to Class Unity?**

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Jyotilal Phule, several decades earlier, had emphasized that as long as a rigid correlation between jati and occupation existed, caste would always be a material base of exploitation in the post-Independence era. According to him, an alliance between dalits and OBCs was crucial, echoing the tenets of the BSP. As was the case with the Marathwada riots, the conflicts between dalits and shudra-rich farmers was “falling prey to the propaganda of the Brahminical caste-class establishment.”<sup>120</sup> The solution he envisaged was a political economy that would link peasants, dalits and adivasis on the basis of their economic exploitation against the caste system. Interestingly, the government seemed to take this approach as well, but for different reasons. Gradually after the 1950s, caste was intentionally reframed as a class struggle. Terminology like “backward *classes*” was preferred over “backward *castes*,” even though the latter was a more accurate description. After 1941 the Indian Census stopped collecting caste data and even Nehru never used the word “caste” in his socialist policy-making. Whether this was an attempt to eradicate caste hierarchies or simply brush it aside, it was unsuccessful. The ubiquitous question was whether caste served as a barrier to class unity.

Often, caste-class debates end as “sterile additive analyses” rather than a genuine synthesis of the dalit movement’s goals to eradicate the system as a whole, not simply reform it. But the “system” requires economic reconceptualization, whereby the

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<sup>120</sup> Omvedt, *Reinventing Revolution*, 1993

exploitative relations of production must be fundamentally changed on class *and* caste lines. The following is an academic back-and-forth between two scholars that contributes modestly to this debate and helps dissect the broader implications of the Marathwada riots.

Dipankar Gupta, a Marxist sociologist, public intellectual and professor at the Jawaharlal Nehru University in New Delhi, makes the bold argument that class is the primary barrier and its eradication will pave the way to addressing caste conflict. In the words of Marx himself, “where class struggle is pushed aside, nothing remains as a basis for socialism, except ‘true love for humanity’ and other empty phraseology about justice.”<sup>121</sup> In Nanded, Parbhani and Aurangabad the riot violence had been immense, whereas Beed and Osmanabad had remained largely untouched. In these three districts, most dalits had migrated to urban zones for jobs, there was a significantly higher degree of economic development and progress (in other words, more reservations and more competition between Mahars and caste Hindus), and the number of dalits enrolled in schools proportional to their population was much higher. Gupta argues that if the undercurrents to the violence were based simply on caste prejudice, all five districts would have been affected equally. In fact, this entire paper argues that the Marathwada riots were a result of and a response to factors much more varied than caste conflict and arguably rooted in class struggles.

According to Gupta, the unemployment rates and economic uncertainty led to the fusion of the bourgeoisie classes and poor labourers, who collectively used caste as an

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<sup>121</sup> Marx, Karl., Engels, Friedrich. 1879 Correspondence to August Bebel, Wilhelm Liebknecht, Wilhelm Bracke and others. *Gesamtausgabe International Publishers*, 1942. [https://www.marxists.org/archive/marx/works/1879/letters/79\\_09\\_15](https://www.marxists.org/archive/marx/works/1879/letters/79_09_15)

“immediate explanation for their lack of well-being.”<sup>122</sup> He criticizes the dalit movements for failing to acknowledge this and attributes it to the fact that in large part they were led by “educated, urban Mahars with petty bourgeois leanings” that agitated mostly for urban benefit, alienating themselves from their rural counterparts. He calls the dalit movements of the 1970s nothing short of a “petty bourgeois movement content to clamour within the bourgeois parliamentary system.”<sup>123</sup>

Conversely, Gail Omvedt, an American-born Indian scholar, sociologist and activist, refutes Gupta by arguing that the main contradiction in the rural Marathwada riots was more between the agricultural labourers, poor peasants and rich capitalist farmers. She states that once the old rentier classes turned to commercial farming, the rise of the kulak classes resulted in a shift in the relations of agricultural production, where agricultural labourers began to demand higher wages and greater rights. Many poor peasants and middle class farmers lost their land to dalit agricultural labourers as a result of land concentration processes, causing an influx of caste Hindus into the agricultural labour. The rich landed classes used caste to keep these labourers divided, using their material differences as the fault lines of caste, and as such, caste did become a barrier to class unity. She stresses that caste is a *material fact* of the relations of production – as the intensity of the physical violence shows beyond a doubt –and not simply an ideological or superstructural barrier as Gupta makes it out to be. The differences between caste Hindu labourers and dalit labourers were manifold and prevented them from being unified economically and ideologically. First, caste Hindu labourers were likely to possess land, even small holdings. Second, they were more skilled, and were given more

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<sup>122</sup> Gupta, 1979

<sup>123</sup> Ibid.

work and longer contracts as a result. Third, they were viewed as “peasants” and not derogatorily as “menial labourers.” Fourth, they were not considered inherently polluting and so were given work that many dalits were not. The dalits in these cases continued to do *gaonki* work from the times of feudal *vethbegar*. Fifth, caste Hindu labourers were “free” workers, unlike dalit “bonded” labourers. They were in this position because of loss of jobs and not as freedom from bondage. Finally, caste Hindu labourers still got to live inside the village and were not ostracized socially and culturally like their dalit counterparts.<sup>124</sup>

Both Gupta and Omvedt approach the question of whether caste is a barrier to class unity differently. Gupta uses a traditional Marxist approach and claims that during the Marathwada riots, the caste system was “evoked as a ruling class myth that functioned to rationalize the exploitation of the subordinate community.” He goes on to argue that caste practices “debase toiling classes on an empyrean principle,” which he calls a false consciousness that hinders caste unity. This is not an “insuperable” problem, but to demystify caste is no easy process. Omvedt, on the other hand, denies Gupta’s accusations that her argument implies caste antagonisms as most important and that Marxists should put class struggle aside and join the “cultural revolt” against caste. Instead, she argues that casteism cannot be solved solely by class struggle in the way that Gupta conceptualizes it. Dalits are ideologically and culturally oppressed and at the bottom of all caste hierarchies, and that will not change even if India were to become a classless society or one that achieves full capitalist development. She asserts that in feudal modes of production, economic relations were mediated through caste hierarchies,

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<sup>124</sup> Omvedt, Reply to Dipankar Gupta, 1979

and while “caste” does not contrast with “class,” it is the form that class took in feudal society. She argues for a broader understanding of the class struggle, as one that “confronts the class enemy at all levels – social, cultural, economic, religious and political – and unites all that can be united.” Like Lenin, she asserts that a social revolution cannot be successful without “necessary sections of the petty bourgeois, the politically non-conscious proletariat or the semi-political masses.”<sup>125</sup> She calls the dalit struggle a “radical democratic movement” and states the real question to be asked is whether non-dalit working classes should take up the fight against caste oppression and align with the existing dalit movement. In her pragmatic approach, she is perhaps right in assuming that dalit politics need wider participation to achieve their goals. It is, however, counter-intuitive to the deep cultures of protest by the most downtrodden in society because it is first and foremost a liberation movement. The master’s tools will not dismantle the master’s house.

What poses the biggest problem is the equally formidable culture of opportunism that stifles any honest “democratic” movement at any step of the way. In that sense, Dipankar Gupta is correct in identify the Dalit Panthers’ leadership as a petty bourgeois movement – in a heuristic sense – seeing that they strayed further and further away from their impassioned manifesto to a commonplace quest for local power. Electoral and patronage-politics are the most pervasive obstacles to a true “democracy,” whatever that may be. At the same time, Omvedt is also correct in identifying the ways caste was used to keep class unity on hold – an inevitable product of colonial “divide and rule” politics. India as a postcolonial state is far from being democratically decolonized. Omvedt’s

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<sup>125</sup> Ibid.

assertion that caste is a *material* reality is evident. Globalization and the influx of capitalism have opened up new spaces for dalit politics at the grassroots level, but also created space for immense violence. The caste-class debate thrives today because of the contradictions on every level of Indian society. The practice of ‘untouchability’ has been made illegal in the modern postcolonial state, but it has yet to translate into social and cultural acceptance.

Because caste has become so deeply entrenched in so-called “Indian culture,” challenging it is an immensely difficult feat, given the stark disparities among the Indian population – fueled by every kind of flame. The Marathwada riots laid bare the economic problems that ignited the conflicts “at the heart of the caste doxa.”<sup>126</sup> Remove every unique economic barrier that creates such harsh material realities for three quarters of the Indian population, and caste will not automatically or magically disappear. But perhaps it will put all strata of society on a financially equitable footing with which to move forward in the process of justice, equality and democracy.

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<sup>126</sup> Waghmore, Suryakant, *Post-Panther Dalit movements and the making of civility in India*, Edinburgh, University of Edinburgh: 2010

## CONCLUSION

### **The Revolution: Blue, Green and Red**

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A few weeks into the Marathwada riots, the “political waters had become so muddied it was impossible to see what was at the bottom of the trouble.”<sup>127</sup> The build-up to the riots itself alluded to the inevitability of the conflict that resulted, yet it fell short in explaining them fully. The post-renaming violence did not arise from the “straightforward imposition of high caste authority but as a high caste reaction to initiatives of the dalits to slough off their historical condition and to rise up in the world. The more the dalits resisted their subordination, the more savage the reaction they engendered.”<sup>128</sup> The suvaranas and other caste Hindus were attempting to push back against the rising tide of dalit assertion and restore the old status quo. Therefore, the victims of the riots were overwhelmingly Mahars – both because of their allegiance to Ambedkar as well as their relative prosperity in raising themselves out of caste subordination. They were a newly emergent group in the class spectrum – from poor, landless labourers they became middle class professionals. They had a salient middle class and a political party of their own, unlike any other scheduled caste. The relative ascendancy of the Mahars was visible not just between dalit jatis but also between dalits living in the urban cities versus those in the rural areas, as there was a sharp contrast

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<sup>127</sup> Abraham, 1978

<sup>128</sup> Mendelsohn, 1998

between the two in the ways that social systems were observed and economic activity was carried out.

Consequently, the way the riots manifested in the urban parts of Marathwada was distinct from the way they unfolded in the rural parts. In both cases, it was mainly the dalits that were deeply affected. Where the urban dalits reacted with fury to the riots, the rural dalits were disheartened and acted out of self-preservation. They condemned the urban students for inciting crowds and demonstrating but leaving the villagers to suffer the wrath of high caste reprisal without offering any help. This did not necessarily imply that they were against fighting caste oppression; after all they, too, had been ‘awakened’ by Ambedkar’s politics. Rather, in many parts of rural Marathwada before the riots, dalits and suvarnas had come to informal agreements to share wells, public parks and hotels. Their anger was targeted at being patronized and silenced by their dalit counterparts in the cities. Their interests in preserving the precarious status quo were out of concern for their own safety – if clashes broke out, dalits in most villages did not have a coherent network through which to mobilize, and as such would have been overwhelmed by upper caste force, just like they were in the renaming riots. After the riots, all forms of cordiality that may have existed between dalits and suvarnas dissolved. Although legally abolished, practices of untouchability resurfaced with renewed energy. Rural Mahars were no longer allowed to use the same restrooms, hotels, schools or wells. They were not hired by any employer, local moneylenders refused to give them money, and even local grocery shops refused to sell them food. Surviving on fruits found in the jungle, rural dalits felt nothing but a deep sense of deprivation and hopelessness.<sup>129</sup> Gradually but

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<sup>129</sup> Atyachar Virodh Samiti, 1978

inevitably, this led to a “hardening of attitudes and more militant positions” among the dalits.<sup>130</sup>

In the cities, the attackers were largely from middle castes and lower classes, particularly the Maratha-kunbi peasants (“Kunbis” were traditionally non-elite land tillers). On average, they were economically backward in similar magnitude as urban dalits. In the rural parts, the agitators were a combination of poor suvarna labourers, rich rural peasants (a sort of “kulak” class) as well as the upper-caste, rural elite classes of farmers and landowners. The riots made it clear that any solidarity and unity that may have existed between dalits and non-Brahmins in rural Marathwada was broken by the onset of the riots.

The ingrained caste prejudice of upper caste Hindus was reignited and fueled by the structural facets of Marathwada in the 1970s. They revealed the complex historical, economic and geopolitical underpinnings that culminated in these attacks. What both the urban and rural sectors of Marathwada had in common was the ubiquitous pressure felt by the people as a result of the underdevelopment and compounded backwardness of the region, as well as the many problems that arose from it. The pattern of violence against dalits needs to be understood and interpreted first and foremost in terms of land structure and the level of socioeconomic development in Marathwada; it is the agrarian relations between labourers and rich farmers that make the social structure so hostile to the demands of the subaltern.<sup>131</sup>

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<sup>130</sup> Ibid.

<sup>131</sup> Guru, Gopal. “Understanding Violence against Dalits in Marathwada.” *Economic and Political Weekly* Vol. 29, No. 9 (February 26, 1994): 469–472, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/4400849> (accessed January 25, 2017)

The zamindars and landed gentry of Marathwada were virulent towards the dalits not simply because of Ambedkar's movements but because of the fear that they would have to lose their land to dalit labourers under laws like the Land Ceiling Act. Because of the severe backwardness of the region, whatever little development did take place affected the population unequally. The middle and lower classes of suvarnas and Maratha kunbis were not able to reap the benefits of development, however small. For them, the concessions, quotas and reservations were the primary enemy. 80% of the students at the University were dalits from outside of the region, getting fees subsidies and easy admission into classes; the suvarnas were left stranded. But because of the caste-driven hate induced from above, they took out their frustration on dalits instead of the powerful and rich "education lords" that should have been the ones held responsible.<sup>132</sup> These frustrations at uneven development were not isolated or fleeting occurrences; they were born from entrenched, unshakable divisions and disadvantages that ran deep across history and found expression in the renaming conflict. In the words of Gopal Guru, "the development process had helped a few Marathas siphon off the fruits of development and kept some Marathas so backward that even music from a dalit radio set or TV became so intolerably strident for these Marathas. Other well-to-do Marathas did not want dalits matching their lifestyles." In either case, the victim was the dalit.

The question posed earlier about whether the renaming issue actually served to further dalit politics is one worth discussing some more. As originally conceived, the demand to rename the university was supposed to lead to the emergence of a "corporate political identity" of the dalits, in keeping with the capitalist growth of the country. But

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<sup>132</sup> Ibid.

after the riots, and in fact even after the university changed name in 1994, the dalits as a community remain fragmented on parochial and religious lines, enveloped within a culture of political opportunism and a Sharad Pawar-prompted debilitation of dalit leadership. The fall of the Dalit Panthers in the late 1980s was succeeded by the growth of the Bahujan Samaj Party (BSP) and Manavi Hakk Abhiyan (MHA) nationally. Reminiscent of Y.B. Chavan's purported philosophies, the BSP in particular was a broad party meant to represent the Bahujans – “people in the majority” – that included over 6000 different scheduled castes, tribes, OBCs, and other groups of religious minorities. Together they comprised 85% of the country's population and today the BSP is the third largest national party in the country. However, the aftermath of the Marathwada riots and the segregation within the region prevented the BSP from successfully establishing a base in the state and instead focused on national politics. In Marathwada and in the country after Independence, political discourse slowly replaced terms like “exploitation” and “oppression” with “marginalization,” and dalit issues made only a “token appearance” in electoral politics and discussions of democracy.<sup>133</sup> Dalit persons in political office were put in charge of minor or otherwise irrelevant ministries in the bureaucracy, and for the common dalit population the state apparatus was as hostile as ever.

The political dalit movements that emerged in the second half of the twentieth century, including the Dalit Panthers, in their empirical organization did not tackle the discursive power of the upper caste's very base of wealth: the state machinery itself. While dalit activists and leaders went after state power themselves, and rightfully rejected

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<sup>133</sup> Guru, Gopal, “Dalits from margin to margin,” *India International Centre Quarterly* Vol. 27, No. 2 (Summer 2000): 111–116, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/23005493> (accessed November 27, 2017)

the “benefits” handed down paternalistically to them, they sought to become part of the ruling class through whatever form – armed force, parliamentary power, or bureaucratic access – rather than attempt to abolish the ruling class itself. Of course, this was a pragmatic decision and the insistence on state power was a way for dalits to lay claim to “modernity” and their role in carrying it forward. But corruption, greed and opportunism had a greater influence on the dalit leadership’s tactics than their purported common goals of liberation. But just as India has had a long, vibrant history, seeing the rise and fall of many great empires and leaders, hope for the dalit movement is far from destroyed. It is an ongoing project. The dynamism of dalit politics makes it *indispensible* to the cultural process of democratization.<sup>134</sup>

The fires from the burning *bastis* will eventually be put out. But from the ashes will emerge a new wave of dalit assertion, fiercer and more resilient than ever before.

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<sup>134</sup> Waghmore, 2010

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