Caste Associations in the Post-Mandal Era:

Notes from Maharashtra

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Preface

We are happy to bring out this Occasional Paper under the series of Occasional Papers under the Center for Advanced Studies (CAS) of this Department. The series of Occasional Papers will mostly consist of research work done by the faculty members of the Department. The purpose of this series is to make available to students, researchers, college teachers and colleagues the 'work-in-progress' that has benefited from the resources of the CAS.

The Department is currently running the first phase of the CAS after successful completion of three phases of Special Assistance Programme of the UGC from 1991 onwards. During those fifteen years, the Department initiated the practice of publishing Occasional papers and many have been subsequently revised and published separately or as part of edited books. We hope that this series will also help in disseminating the research work of the Department and benefit students and researchers.

The CAS was granted by the UGC for the period 2008-13 and was inaugurated in January 2009. The thrust area of research is Indian Politics with the theme of State of Democracy in India in Global Context.

This paper by Professor Rajeshwari Deshpande is based on her ongoing work continuing from her research project for the BCUD on Caste Associations. We are thankful to her for preparing the draft and giving the same to CAS for publication. We are also thankful to the reviewer who did the peer review of the draft.

Coordinator,
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Caste Associations in Maharashtra

Introduction

Three kinds of processes shaping around caste have attracted attention of students of Indian politics and society towards the study of caste in the more recent period. The first kind of changes are in the economic sphere where the traditional links between caste and occupation are breaking (although slowly) and complex patterns of intra and inter caste economic stratification are emerging. The second type of changes are related to the processes of politicization of caste. These processes have unleashed intricate patterns of interaction between caste and democratic politics in India and have become extremely important as politics enters the post Mandal era. The third kind of changes are taking shape in the sphere of caste identity. There are two opposite and yet related processes shaping around caste. On the one hand, the attempts to construct caste blocs and thus redefine boundaries of caste; are going on. On the other hand, the rediscovery of caste as a resource has meant the rise of single caste organizations. Investigations about the contemporary location of caste acquire an immensely interesting character in the wake of these changes.

The present paper tries to investigate a slice of the contemporary caste reality and the complications surrounding it in its study of select caste associations from Maharashtra. Unlike the traditional caste panchayats, the caste associations emerged in a more modern setting and mainly served mobilisational/political rather than regulative/ sanctimonious functions. The arrival of these associations symbolized an important adaptive moment in the journey of caste, as caste prepared to operate in the modern democratic context. We try to investigate here the most recent phase of the journey in which caste became the dominant idiom of politics and caste associations contributed in myriad ways to the shaping of the idiom.

We may highlight three distinctive moments in India's political history when caste was exposed to democratic power play. These moments decisively influenced not only the nature of caste but also altered the ways in which democratic politics was conceptualized and practiced. The first moment came in the early 1920s when the idea of democracy was introduced to the Indians as a

part of the official colonial discourse. The constitutional reform package, what was popularly known as the Montagu Chelmsford reforms, extended in 1919, initiated a wide debate on issues related to democratic rights and representation and caste rights were articulated for the first time at that moment. These debates were revived, albeit in a new context, with the formal inaugural of the democratic project in the post independence period. This phase was marked by the process of politicization of caste- both in the context of unfolding of the electoral democracy and also in the wake of the state practices legitimizing caste through policies of affirmative action. The institutional logic behind the policies of affirmative action combined with the patterns of post independence capitalist development and unevenly shaped democratic claims during the past five odd decades ushered in the most recent phase of caste politics interaction in the Indian politics. This phase emerged in the context of mandalisation of politics in which backward caste groups articulated caste rights mainly in terms of rights of representation.

Associations of castes and caste groups always played an important role as mediating agencies at all these stages of development of the caste politics interaction. Earlier studies of caste associations (Kothari, 1970; Rudolph and Rudolph 1967; Shah, 1975; Hardgrave, 1969) discussed their role in the process of secularization, politicization and democratization of caste. For Kothari, the emerging democratic framework in India had two implications for the working of the caste system. One is that the caste system provided structural ideological bases for political mobilization. On the other hand, in its efforts to appropriate the power structure of the caste system, modern politics had to make consultations with the local bases of power. These two processes led to emergence of a more complex power structure of the caste system and the newly emerging caste associations became an important aspect of this power structure (Kothari, 1970: 9-10). The complex power structures led to formation of new caste identities on the basis of more secular- political/ material interests.

The first efforts to mobilize caste in the secular democratic context arrived in the late colonial period. The history of most of the present day caste associations therefore typically goes back to the late 19th/ early 20th century when they prepared ground for caste to operate in the changing social context. Carroll argues that the arrival of caste organizations in particular and caste polemics in general in the late 19th early 20th century was an unintended but direct consequence

of the foreign definitions of Indian society (Carroll, 1978; 233). The colonial classifications and categories of division had important political and economic repercussions in the changing social context. In order to manage these repercussions the early caste associations put forward twin demands of material and cultural- ritual up gradation of the community to the colonial power (Carroll, 1975 and 1978; Templeman, 1996; Khare, 1970).

The practices of democracy in the post independence context altered the role of caste associations in a significant way. There was a clear shift from sacred to secular in the work of these organizations and that undermined the hold of traditional culture and society. The organizations acquired a secular form as they made demands on the state for up gradation of the position of their caste in social hierarchy, for extension of privileges and rights for the community and generally worked towards upward mobility of the group. These claims were essentially political in nature. The leadership of the caste organizations depended on the capacity to articulate and represent these claims in the political sphere. In order to operate effectively in politics the organizations became moral formal with elected office bearers and registered members. Caste associations of the sixties created conditions under which local sub castes could be linked together in geographically extended associations. Rudolphs refer to them as 'para communities' that resemble voluntary associations or interest groups (Rudolph and Rudolph, 1967; 36).

Caste associations of the early post-independence period acquired the form of an adaptive institution where traditional and modern social features can meet and fuse. They contributed a great deal in gradually leveling the sacred, hierarchical caste order and replacing it under the new political circumstances. Formation of caste associations led to homogenizing of the caste identities on the one hand and also to the democratization of caste in the long run. Although the democratic politics introduced several profound changes in the working of the traditional caste system, caste did not completely disappear as a result of these. Instead, from a static system of stratification caste changed its form to a more dynamic base of competition and integration and accommodated itself with politics. The dynamic interactions of caste and democratic politics in the sixties traditionalized Indian politics and caste became a legitimate platform for political

mobilization. Politics, on the other hand, secularized and politicized caste leading to complex versions of identity politics in the later period.

Politics of caste acquired a new tone in the post Mandal phase and provided a new visibility to the associations of castes. The politics of Mandal contributed to the process of regionalization of politics and to the already emerging multipolar competitions in the electoral arena. At the same time processes of regionalization and the subsequent rise of a competitive party system in the 1990s provided a possibility for many marginal, localized castes to take an active part in politics and to assert their bargaining powers. Their mobilizations challenged the dominance of the regionally dominant castes, upset the earlier tone of regional politics and encouraged a further dispersal of political competition- not only at the regional, but at the local sub regional level. The process brought in new mechanisms of political bargaining at the regional and sub regional level. It required some kind of federative processes in which castes and communities could come together to form loose alliances. At the same time this politics also encouraged constant fragmentation and realignments of social blocs due to its extremely competitive, tentative character. Political realignments and social churning during the last two decades have unleashed a variety of patterns of identity politics. The peculiar nature of political competition of this phase, the advent of caste framework and the weaving of complex patterns of identity politics led to revival of the role of caste associations in the electoral and mobilisational arenas.

In the context of the post Mandal moment of caste the present paper has two starting points. As students of Indian politics it helps us investigate the nature of politics of caste, the kind of identity politics that shapes around caste and also allows us to generalize on issues related to political mobilization in the era of identity politics. At another level, the study of caste associations of the present times becomes a vantage point to understand the changing nature of caste in terms of political/ cultural as well as material/ social dimensions.

The paper reports fieldwork in Maharashtra (and parts of Karnataka) [1] where we studied organizations of three castes –namely the Lingayats (a non Brahmin intermediate caste), Vanjaris (placed among the Other Backward Castes in Maharashtra and having nomadic origins) and Charmakars (one of the three main Dalit castes of the State). As a part of our fieldwork, we

collected information regarding the genesis of the organization, its membership and office bearers, sources of funding, extension of network, social and political programmes, demands made to the government and whether and how the organization links itself to the local political process. The focus was to understand the changing nature of the organization during the last two decades. The next section of the paper takes a brief review of nature of caste politics in Maharashtra that forms the backdrop for the work of the caste associations that we studied. The following sections report details of the work of the organizations in a summary form. On the basis of our main findings from the fieldwork, the last section of the paper tries to put forward some generalizations about the role of caste associations in contemporary Indian politics, about the changing nature of caste politics interaction and its implications for democratic politics and on the life of caste and finally about issues related to politics of identities.

I

Caste Politics in Maharashtra

The politics of Maharashtra is long known for its placid and well knit Congress system that survived intact for almost three decades of the post independence period (Palshikar Deshpande, 2003). It survived on the basis of successful accommodation of the entrenched interests, a neat and institutionalized system of patronage and favorable caste equations under the leadership of the dominant Maratha-Kunbi caste cluster. The Maratha- Kunbi caste cluster is famous for its numerical preponderance and political dominance in the State (Lele, 1981; Baviskar, 1980). The most conservative estimate of their numerical strength places Maratha-Kunbis at around 31 percent of Maharashtra's population. It is a highly stratified caste cluster centering among peasant cultivators but reaching up to feudal aristocrats and rulers. They show a greater degree of unification and a greater absorptive power than similar peasant-warrior caste clusters from other Indian regions. These absorptive powers were best put to use in the formative years of the Congress dominance in the state politics. Along with their numerical preponderance, the Maratha dominance was a result of patterns of landownership in Maharashtra and a historically nurtured sense of identity among the Marathas. The Congress party of the pre and post independence

could successfully appropriate this sense of identity under its Bahujan Samaj ideology in which the caste/ cultural conflict in Maharashtra was essentially seen in terms of a conflict between Brahmins and non Brahmins. Marathas were seen as leading the conflict on behalf of the various small lower castes. The construction of the Bahujan ideology provided the much needed cultural tool to the Congress and the Maratha dominance and politics of Maharashtra became synonymous with the politics of Marathas (Vora, 2003, Palshikar- Deshpande, 2003; Palshikar-Birmal, 2004).

The local/ sub regional caste reality in Maharashtra did upset the overall patterns of Maratha dominance to a certain extent. Apart from Marathas and Kunbis many other intermediate-trading and peasant castes exerted numerical/ social dominance and controlled economic resources in certain pockets of the State (Birmal, 1996; Vora, 1994; Vora, 2009). Among the non Maratha intermediate castes, Lingayats, Rajputs and the Gujjars are politically more important than others. Although each of these castes has carved out its own local/sub regional political space collectively these non Maratha intermediate castes do not nurture any sharp political identity. These communities, including the Lingayats, could not challenge political dominance of the Marathas at the State level. Rather, the Marathas could establish horizontal and vertical alliances with these communities and could successfully retain regional political power till the decade of nineteen eighties.

The Maratha dominance faced first cracks in the eighties when the nature of regional political economy changed rapidly in the wake of liberalization, when the politics of Mandal and of Hindutva posed a challenge to its accommodative political ideology and when the nature of the party system in the State became more competitive with the rise of the BJP and the Shiv Sena as oppositional political forces. These changes altered the nature of both regional politics in general and of the Maratha politics in particular (Deshpande, 2006). Maratha votes were fragmented across parties and yet they could retain the formal political power with them even in the 2004 national and state level elections (Palshikar and Birmal, 2004). However the electoral contestations of the 1990s and the changing nature of the mobilisational context provided a chance for many other social groups to take active part in electoral and non electoral politics of the State.

Unlike the North, the OBC politics in Maharashtra could not develop its own independent, forceful trajectory in the nineteen nineties. Instead the then emerging politics of opposition to the Congress rule, in the form of BJP and Shiv Sena, tried to accommodate OBC aspirations within its fold. OBCs in Maharashtra roughly account for 27 percent of the States' population (Vora, 2009 based on the 1931 caste census figures). The figure does not include Kunbis who constitute around 7 percent of the population and are officially included among the OBCs. Kunbis however have been historically a part of the Maratha Kunbi dominant caste cluster of the State and cannot be considered as part of the OBCs as far as their social and political status is concerned. The OBCs in Maharashtra consist of peasant OBC castes such as the Malis, Vanjaris and the Dhangars, artisan castes like Telis, Shimpi, Koshti, and Bhoi etc. A small section of the OBCs comes from the lowly service castes like the Beldars, Kalals, and Vadars etc. The peasant OBC castes of the State are greater in number compared to the other two groups and are concentrated in certain pockets. The artisan OBC castes are scattered in all districts of Maharashtra.

There were a few attempts of consolidation of the OBC politics in Maharashtra but without much success. And yet the arrival of the Bahujan idiom (Palshikar, 1994) in the post Mandal period contributed to the redefinition of caste consciousness, rise of caste based mobilizations including some single caste based parties and most importantly to the process of regionalization and further dispersal of party/ electoral politics. The new caste based mobilizations, combined with the decline of the Congress system, arrival of a strong political opposition in the form of the BJP and the Shiv Sena, the setting up of a new logic of coalitional politics in a competitive party system etc. gave rise to new political configurations in the State. The process of Mandalisation was not limited to those castes that were officially included in the State list of OBCs. It engulfed many other smaller castes that were confined to certain sub regions, had a marginal yet significant presence in the earlier electoral politics and were desperate to consolidate their claims of representation. Both at the national as well as at the State level the logic of Mandal inaugurated a new phase of caste politics- mainly a politics of presence- in which each small caste wanted to participate and be visible.

II

Lingayat Associations: Negotiating Political Space with Marathas

The case of Lingayats in southern Maharashtra and parts of northern Karnataka presents an interesting shift in caste politics as the caste travels from pre independence modernities to the post Mandal moment of Indian democracy.

The social history of Lingayats goes back to the State of Karnataka and to the Veershaiva movement of the 12th century and is well documented (Singh, 1998; Ishwaran, 1983; McCormack, 1963). Lingayats derive their identity from their worship of Shiva and from the sacred linga (a symbol of Shiva) that they wear on their person. The community was initially founded as a sect of Veershaivism by Basveshwara to mark revolt against Brahminical/ Vedic religion. The ideology of Veershaivism, that the Lingayats practised, tried to substitute the Brahminical religion in its preaching of equality before God and in establishing a new set of rituals, sacred centers based on the preaching. The Lingayats acquired a very complex social identity since the very inception of Veershaivism. Historically the Lingayats were converted from various segments of communities following Hinduism. These communities, although tried to replace Vedic religion, actually developed a parallel and very elaborate social hierarchy within them. The hierarchy was largely linked to the occupational distinctions among these groups. The Anthropological Survey of India studied twenty four different Lingayat communities across six states of the country. These communities followed social divisions like sects, clans and sub castes within them and followed varied occupational patterns (Singh, 1998: 1984-85). At the same time, all these communities together, in their religious practices claimed the status of a separate religious sect. Many groups within the Lingayats never completely detached themselves from the fold of Hinduism. As a result, when the Bhakti movement and its historical context declined, the Lingayats gradually claimed an inclusive caste identity especially in States of Karnataka and Maharashtra. In discussing the status of Lingayats as a sect, many anthropologists and sociologists (most notably Max Weber), considered Lingayats to be the example par excellence of a religious group becoming a caste and describe them as a caste-sect (quoted by

McCormack,1963). As a result of historical processes that spread across more than eight centuries, the Lingayats today acquire a complex social identity- an identity that oscillates between being a separate sect detached from Brahminical Hinduism and claiming the status of a dominant group within the existing caste hierarchy of Hinduism.

In Karnataka (and in some regions of Maharashtra) the Lingayat dominance emerges as a result of their numerical strength, ritual status and possession of material resources. In the State of Karnataka Lingayats are concentrated in the northern districts. They constitute around 16% of the total population of the Karnataka State, of which nearly 60% reside in the northern districts. This region is adjacent to the southern part of Maharashtra and forms a continuous stretch of Lingayat dominance. They constitute hardly two percent of the total population of Maharashtra State. However their concentration in southern pockets like the districts of Solapur, Kolhapur, Latur, Osmanabad etc. makes them numerically significant at the local- regional level.

Although Lingayats come from diverse occupational and social groups, the Lingayats in the regions of Maharashtra and Karnataka mostly come from intermediate castes and possess material resources both in the rural as well as urban sector. In Karnataka nearly 18% of the Lingayat families own more than 5 hectares of land. Similarly, a large number of Lingayats are placed in the government sector. In Maharashtra, the Lingayats have land ownership as well as trading monopoly in many southern districts. Well known Lingayat families control cotton mills that form backbone of the city's economy in Solapur. In other adjacent districts they are well placed as agriculturists, as traders and also control key resources in Maharashtra's famous cooperative movement. The common ritual/ social and economic status shared by Lingayat elites, makes them a more homogeneous group in parts of Maharashtra and Karnataka. Along with the trading castes, many other small occupational groups share the Lingayat status in this region. These include artisan castes, castes traditionally engaged in services and even some formerly untouchable groups. These groups were bound together by their distinct Lingayat identity and by the numerical as well as social preponderance of the elite Lingayat sections. The consolidated strength of all the Lingayat communities transformed them into a significant caste bloc not only in Karnataka but in parts of Maharashtra as well.

Politics of Lingayats in Karnataka is too well known and well researched (Manor, 1990). In Karnataka they form one of the two most dominant social groups contesting for political power. There is also a very neat geographical/ regional division between these two communities- Lingayats and Vokkaligas in Karnataka. Therefore Lingayats are able to exert complete political influence in parts of northern Karnataka. The situation in Maharashtra is different for them. The numerical dominance of Lingayats in Maharashtra is localized in a few centers of the State. Even in these pockets, the Maratha Kunbis have a prominent numerical as well as political presence. Thus the politics of the Lingayats in Maharashtra shaped not through contestations but in the form of constant negotiations with the dominant Maratha Kunbi caste bloc and other small social groups. The State level leadership of the Marathas and the Congress encouraged these negotiations in the formative period of State politics as a part of their accommodative political ideology. Lingayats on the other hand did not challenge the overall dominance of the Marathas in the State politics and remained loyal to the Congress party for a long time.

On an average around six or seven Lingayat members are elected in the legislative assembly of Maharashtra. Most of them are elected from the Lingayat dominant districts of southern part. Till 1990 the Lingayat leaders were mostly loyal to the Congress party. In the district of Solapur that we want to discuss here in detail, both Lingayats and Marathas have shared political power at the district level for a long time (Shirapurkar, 2007). Economically influential Lingayat families supported the electoral politics of the Congress and the Marathas since the 1960s. The Congress in turn protected their economic interests in the then existing regional political economy and extended the state institutional infrastructure for the benefit of these groups.

Akhil Bharatiya Veershaiva Mahasabha[2]

Community interests of the Lingayats were represented by the 'Akhil Bharatiya Veershaiva Mahasabha', that was established in 1904, over a hundred years ago. This was a federal body that worked for spread of Veershaivism and for protection of interests of all Lingayat communities. The work of the Mahasabha was mainly coordinated from Karnataka, but Lingayat elites from Solapur were equally active in it till 1950. Like many other associations of the influential castes in different parts of the country, the Veershaiva Mahasabha, in its early phase, mainly developed a twofold agenda- of modernization and internal consolidation of the

community (Bairy, 2009; Khare, 1970). There were not many demands towards the State as the community elites could manage the economic affairs of the Sabha. The Sabha used religious-sectarian identity for internal consolidation of the group and for facilitating the secular material interests of the community.

The politics of the Mahasabha did not acquire communal overtones in the initial period and did not antagonize Hindus or Muslims. This was mainly because the Lingayat identity shaped differently as far as their electoral participation was concerned. Electoral politics of the Lingayats gained momentum since the creation of the State of Karnataka in mid nineteen fifties. Demographic and political situation in Karnataka posited Lingayats against Vokkaligas, a dominant peasant caste officially belonging to the Hindu fold of the caste hierarchy. Electoral contestations with the Vokkaligas saw Lingayats acquiring the form of a dominant caste group and highlight their numerical strength as a caste bloc. In Karantaka politics, a reference to Lingayats actually meant reference to the dominant landowning sections within the Lingayat group. But with the advances in electoral politics, these sections could manage to create an overlap between these two groups in order to consolidate the required numerical support for Lingayat politics. Thus the Lingayats consistently used their caste identity in the electoral politics of Karnataka. The work of the Mahasabha and consolidation of Lingayats as Veershaivaites helped in the emergence of the Lingayat caste bloc.

As discussed earlier, the politics in Maharashtra shaped differently for the Lingayats. As a part of their negotiations with the regionally dominant Maratha Kunbis, the Veershaiva Mahasabha in Maharashtra largely adopted a non-political stance. Leaders of the Mahasabha shared a good equation with the Congress party since the formative period of the nationalist movement. These equations were put to use in the early period of Congress dominance and Lingayats in Maharashtra generally supported the Congress party. The efforts of the Mahasabha to mobilize various sub castes of Lingayats on the basis of their distinct religious identity also proved useful in this respect. However what helped the Mahasabha the most in maintaining its non political stance was the limited spread of the democratic politics. As a result of the well knit Congress system, almost till 1980s politics in Maharashtra was largely confined to elites and offered a very limited scope for large scale political participation. This helped the Lingayat elites to maintain

their hold over the marginal sub castes within Lingayat fold. Office bearers of the Mahasabha in Solapur mainly came from the influential trading castes within the Lingayats. Their interests were well represented under the Congress system and also under the political economy taking shape under the leadership of the Congress.

Along with the Veershaiva Mahasabha, associations of small Lingayat sub castes were formed in the pre and post independence period. The Lingayat Gawalis (A sub caste representing the milk traders) had established the 'Akhil Bhartiya Veershaiva Gawali Parishad' in 1968. The community of tanners from the Lingayat fold, known as Veershaiva Kakkyyas, founded an organization for social reforms within the community in 1937. However these organizations never challenged the authority of the Mahasabha in the field of political representation. Lingayat sub castes were a curious mix of distinct social and occupational identities that also shared the larger caste-sectarian identity of the Veershaivas. These communities looked upon their independent organizations as a useful resource in the modern context. In most cases the associations doubled up as business/ occupational organizations, voiced the demands of these communities to the state regarding their caste occupations, run a marriage bureau for the community members and generally had a very limited scope. These associations became active mainly under the changing political and social context of the 1990s.

Among the Lingayats in Solapur, small artisan sub castes like Lingayat Gawalis, Veershaiva Kakkyyas, Madiwal Machayyas (washer men) reactivated their respective caste associations during the nineteen nineties. Beyond the common sectarian identity that they shared with upper caste Lingayats, each sub caste tried to define its own identity in terms of the three kinds of demands. These castes invented their own community heroes and their symbolic cultural demands typically involved a request to the state to name some institution after that person or to erect his statue at some place. The second set of demands was about protection of their community based economic rights. This has been a very prominent concern for many artisan castes in the recent years. The skewed nature of capitalist development in the post independence period has affected the economic existence of these castes in a serious manner. They are uprooted from the traditional rural economy long back. And yet many of these castes did not get any opportunity to take up modern occupations in the urban sphere. Instead majority of caste

members are either forced to cling to their traditional occupation in whatever form it survives in the present context or are ghettoized in sundry manual occupations in the so called modern sphere. Thus even today most of the Lingayat Gawalis raise cattle and are in petty milk business in Solapur. Majority of the Madiwal Machayyas run small laundries in towns and cities and Kakkyyas still survive on the business of tanning. These groups have inevitably resorted to their caste identities in putting forward their economic demands. For them the caste associations have doubled up as business organizations. Our studies in Maharashtra show a similar process taking shape across different artisan castes (Palshikar, 2000).

The economic existence of different caste groups thus provides an important aspect of their contemporary construction of identities. These constructions however are distorted at various levels as capitalist development and the subsequent processes of urbanization, education etc have introduced economic stratification within each small caste. And yet these caste groups find it convenient to fall back on their caste identities in order to put forward their secular economic demands. As far as Lingayats are concerned, the process of economic stratification is twofold. Each Lingayat sub caste is internally stratified to a certain extent. However, the patterns of economic development, especially within the local confines of city of Solapur, have also resulted in a growing distance between upper caste/ upper class Lingayats and the small artisan groups. At both these levels economic stratification has damaged the cohesive Lingayat caste-sect identity of the earlier period.

The third type of demands are linked to the reservation policies of the state. The small, backward sub castes among Lingayats seek maximum benefits of the reservation policy with the help of their caste based mobilizations. Since the reservation policy is largely tokenistic and encourages only a thin dispersal of the scantly available resources with the state, these castes like many other backward castes keep demanding a separate quota within quota for themselves. There are also demands to shift their particular community from this to that group of beneficiaries of reservation policy. The competition for backward status has gone to such an extreme that many small castes from the Lingayat fold in Karnataka have suggested that the suffix 'Lingayat' should be dropped from the caste names so that they would be treated on par with their Hindu counterpart backward castes. The other kind of extreme is evident in the politics of a more

militant organization of the Lingayat youths recently established in Solapur, namely the Shiva Sanghatana.

This organization is named as 'Shiva Sanghatana' and thus proclaims a robust Lingayat identity in its name. It claims that for purposes of affirmative action, all Lingayats be considered as 'Lingders' and be included in the category of Scheduled Castes! Lingders are one of the lowly communities within the Lingayat fold who have been included among the scheduled castes by the government. Taking a clue from this the Shiva Sanghatana initiated an agitation over the issue since the year 2002. The organization insisted that since Lingders are Lingayats and belong to the scheduled castes, all Lingayats or Veershaivas must be included in the same category and be treated as members of the scheduled castes (Deshmukh, 2006)! Although the Veershaiva Mahasabha- still the official representative agency of the Lingayat community has not supported it, the demand of Shiva Sanghatana to consider all Lingayats as Dalits presents an interesting twist in the contemporary constructions of the Lingayat identity. At one level it points to an extreme case of what happens to caste when it is exposed to the reservation discourse that is manipulated by the state at various levels and is reduced to a politics of categories. On the other hand this journey of the Lingayats from their claims of being a dominant caste to those of being a lowest of the low castes also shows how flexible the caste identity has become in the contemporary context in terms of its movement on the purity pollution axis. But more importantly, the demand brings out the complications in contemporary constructions of caste identities for mobilizational purposes.

Politics of Shiva Sanghatana

The entire politics of the Shiva Sanghatana is full of many such complications. It is also a remarkable pointer to various dimensions of caste politics interaction in contemporary Maharashtra that have set the terms of regional politics and facilitated dispersal of claims of power in the more recent period.

Shiva Sanghatana was established in 1996. It started as an organization of the youth- the Veershaiva youth- to aggressively declare their distinct Veershaiva identity. These youths basically complained against the elite hold over politics of the Lingayats and challenged the

established political leadership of the community. The organization worked to upset the established patterns of politics of the caste in which an effective nexus between the Congress party and the Lingayat leadership prevailed. In the context of the changing nature of party system of the State, Shiva Sanghatana wanted to enter into new political equations on behalf of sections of Lingayat youth.

The Sanghatana used various tactics to create a political space for itself in the Lingayat dominant regions of the State. In the second half of the decade of nineties the organization spread rapidly in southern districts of the State including regions of western Maharashtra and Marathwada. In all these districts the Shiva Sanghatana tried to upset the established equations of political power by staking claims of representation on behalf of the Lingayats. Initially the Sanghatana declared its support to all Lingayat candidates, irrespective of the political parties to which they belong, in the State assembly in 1999. In all subsequent elections the Sanghatana extended support to either the local Lingayat candidates or to the BJP Shiv Sena. Through their negotiations with the BJP and Shiv Sena the organization tried to oppose the dominance of their own caste elites, the Marathas and the Congress party. At the same time by keeping the caste card intact the organization could keep its political loyalties constantly shifting from one party to the other. This was the beginning of an essentially floating, tentative kind of caste based politics that the Sanghatana wanted to promote. The message was that the Sanghatana (and therefore the community) would not be loyal to any particular political party but would always encourage political bargaining at the time of elections. This kind of political bargaining would be based on caste/ community loyalties. Politics of Shiva Sanghatana thus represented a phase in which caste associations would take up more obvious political tasks and would mainly act as negotiating agencies in electoral politics. Their work constituted one important aspect of the constant configuration and fragmentation of caste blocs at that time. Caste associations worked to create social alliances that shaped coalitional politics at a more formal level. Since both social and political alliances were essentially weak, incoherent in nature, the work of the caste associations became a difficult task for them.

In order to act as a bargaining agency on behalf of Lingayats, the Shiva Sanghatana had to construct the Lingayat caste identity in a skillful manner. The attempts on part of Shiva

Sanghatana to construct a Lingayat identity suitable for its politics, show how communities, including caste communities, remain porous, are fractured and are constantly reshaped in the multiple grids of identity politics. These communities remain open to competing identity claims and need to constantly negotiate with these claims in order to keep their political presence alive. Shiva Sanghatana tried to do exactly the same on behalf of sections of Lingayats.

The cluster like identity of the Lingayat caste had already declined when the Shiva Sanghatana arrived on the scene. The small sub castes among Lingayats had accepted an active role in mobilizing the members of their own communities in the post Mandal era. There was a further fragmentation on political lines with the arrival of a competitive party system. Not only different sections of the Lingayats were favouring different political parties but each sub caste was also internally split in favour of different political forces. In order to mobilize these splintering sections of Lingayats and to create a numerically strong constituency for itself the Shiva Sanghatana projected a complex identity of the Lingayat community. At one level it demanded that all Lingayats be considered as Lingders and be awarded the status of a Scheduled Castes. At the same time it also advertised the distinct religious identity of the Lingayats as Veershaivas in a more militant manner. Since 2001, the Shiva Sanghatana picked up an issue related to one of the Lingayat symbols in Solapur and entered into a fight against the Muslims (Deshmukh, 2006: 68-69. This was about one of the 68 Lingas that Veershaiva guru Siddheshwar established in and around Solapur in the 12th century and is placed adjacent to a mosque. Contestations emerged long back at the start of the 20th century when the Lingayats accused the Muslims for not respecting the sanctity of the place and deliberately creating obstacles when Lingayats wanted to offer prayers at the place. The issue remained contentious but was temporarily resolved when the municipal corporation of the city intervened.

By taking up the issue the Sanghatana began a process of othering of Muslims and its politics quickly acquired a communal form. This was an attempt on part of the Lingayat organization to appropriate the moment of Hindutva politics that was shaping in Maharashtra under the leadership of the BJP and Shiv Sena. In order to negotiate with these two forces the Sanghatana acquired communal overtones that were lacking in the earlier stance of the Lingayat caste associations. In its politics the Sanghatana posed the religious identity of the Lingayats in a very

interesting manner. Sometimes it proclaimed a distinct religious identity of the Veershaivas that essentially negated links with Hinduism. On one occasion, for example, the chairman of Shiva Sanghatana appealed all Lingayats to drop Ram from their names as it pollutes their pure Veershaiva identity. These proclamations of a distinct religious identity were seen as useful for internal consolidation of the community- especially of the small sub castes within Lingayats. At the same time, Lingayats also wanted to set up their alliances with militant versions of Hindutva politics. Therefore on other occasions, the Sanghatana glorified Hindutva symbols like Shivaji, participated in celebrating these symbols and antagonized Muslims against both Hindus and Veershaivas. Both, the name of the Sanghatana and its main slogan '*Garv Se Kahon Hum Lingayat Hain!'* bring out these dual strategies that it practised. Shiva connotes a reference to Shiva –the deity whose devotees the Veershaivas are. But the name also bears close connection with that of Shivaji who is chosen as a core symbol of their own versions of identity politics by both the Shiv Sena and the Marathas in Maharashtra. The slogan 'Garv Se Kahon' no doubt proclaims an aggressive, distinct sectarian identity of the Lingayats. But at the same time it keeps a close affiliation with the politics of Hindutva by accepting its terminology both in letter and in spirit. It is the duality, incoherence and implicit contradictions that defined the politics of Shiva Sanghatana in particular and of caste associations in general. In the context of overall political instability and disintegration of communities, caste associations had to traverse a difficult path in shaping identity politics around caste ideology.

It was a difficult path for Shiva Sanghatana as it tried to cope with the simultaneous processes of state identifications and categorizations of castes as backward and forward, the political processes shaping around caste that demanded both shaping of caste blocs and assertions of individual caste, the politics of Hindutva that provided a new framework of identity politics and also with the material anxieties of caste (s). It is at this difficult juncture that the politics of Shiva Sanghatana tried to negotiate with the political process and tried to navigate a variety of identity politics that sometimes colluded with the state, sometimes tried to evade its logic and sometimes tried to subvert it.

To what extent were these strategies of the Shiva Sanghatana successful? Did its politics give the organisation any chance to negotiate the terms of electoral contests in the Lingayat dominant regions of the State? In the 2004 elections two office bearers of the Sanghatana were elected to

the state legislative assembly as representatives of BJP Shiv Sena. To that extent the Shiva Sanghatana was successful in breaking the Congress Lingayat nexus that worked well earlier. It was also able to make a dent in the mainstream electoral politics of the State although in a limited way. The Sanghatana's efforts to establish alliances with Marathas as well as with other castes added to the competitive nature of the electoral politics. By encouraging a straightforward political bargaining with all political parties, the Sanghatana not only created a foothold for itself, but also contributed to a further dispersal of power in the region.

III

Arrival of the Bahujan Idiom and Politics of the Vanjari Caste Associations

Vanjaris constitute one of the most prominent groups among the Other Backward Castes in Maharashtra. They are located in a few districts of the State and some of the recent unofficial estimates of the Vanjari population put them at around a quarter million in the State of Maharashtra. Vanjaris were mobilized for the first time in the post Mandal phase, when Gopinath Munde, a Vanjari leader from the Beed district, became a prominent leader within the ranks of the BJP. In their shift of loyalties from the Congress to the BJP the Vanjari groups formed many caste based associations that acted as pressure groups at the local and regional level politics. We selected three main organizations for our study. However two of these three had split from time to time and new splinter organizations were formed in the past few years. Our study also covers these sub factions of the three main organizations and helps evolve a more detailed understanding of the politics of the Vanjari caste[3].

The Vanjari identity was in a flux till recent times as the official records treated the Banjara and Vanjari communities as same and clubbed them together as part of the nomadic communities. Vanjaris were the wandering traders of grains and other commodities who settled in certain pockets of the State since the 16th century. The 1931 census, which was the last census giving caste wise enumeration of Indian population, treated Banjaras and Vanjaris as belonging to the same caste group. Vasantrao Naik, a prominent Banjara leader in Maharashtra, worked to consolidate the common identity of the two communities in order to strengthen his constituency

among both the groups. However the situation changed drastically after 1980. This was a period when individual castes had started asserting themselves in the local regional level political processes and the establishment of the Mandal commission had encouraged mobilization of the backward castes. The Mandal commission had listed both Vanjaris and the Banjaras among the nomadic tribes of the State. The Banjara community objected to this classification and claimed that Vanjaris constitute a separate caste. The Banjaras suspected that Vanjaris cornered most of the benefits of reservation policy as they were much more advanced than the Banjaras and the levels of education among the Vanjaris was much higher compared to the Banjaras. The suspicions resulted in a serious legal contestation between the two communities throughout the eighties. The Mumbai High court as well as the Supreme Court of India ruled that the Banjaras and the Vanjaris belong to the same caste group and be included in the Nomadic Tribes of the State.

In the mean time Vanjaris became a prominent caste in the politics of the State as the State BJP unit started mobilizing the OBC youth as a part of its social engineering in the nineties. This was a period in which the BJP and Shiv Sena challenged the Congress and the Maratha dominance in the State's politics. Sections of Maratha youth, who were dissatisfied with the Congress rule and the frustrated OBC youth, who did not get any chance of political recruitment during the Congress rule, were the main targets of these political parties. As a part of its social engineering project (Vora, 2004) the BJP systematically promoted what was called as the 'Madhav' formula in which Malis, Dhangars and Vanjaris – three prominent OBC communities were mobilized under the banner of the party. Gopinath Munde, a leader of the Vanjari community rose in the ranks of the BJP as a part of this strategy. During the same time the some of the caste associations of the Vanjaris had also become active in the politics of the State. These organizations and Gopinath Munde pressurized the Government of Maharashtra to appoint a commission to settle the issue of status of the Banjaras and the Vanjaris. The demands were prompted by the politics of reservations, in which the Vanjaris wanted a share in the OBC category rather than getting clubbed together along with other Nomadic Tribes. The Government succumbed to these demands and appointed a one man commission to investigate the caste realities of these two communities. The commission ruled favourably to state that Banjaras and

Vanjaris constitute two separate castes (Wadhwa, 1993) and according the State government placed these two groups under different categories for benefits of the reservation policy.

Political arrival of the Vanjari community thus classically coincided with the arrival of the politics of the Mandal in the eighties. Caste associations of the community sprang up during the same time in various regions of the State. The history of caste associations of the Vanjaris goes back to the 1920s when the first caste conference was organized in Nashik under the banner of the Akhil Bhartiya Vanjari Parishad. The organization attained a more formal status in 1943 when Akhil Bhartiya Vanjari Seva Sangh was established. The organization came to a standstill during the first three decades of the post independence period when Vanjaris had aligned themselves with the Banjaras and did not claim any independent caste identity. New Vanjari caste organizations came up in the 1980s when a separate caste identity was resurrected in the context of the Mandal.

Our review of the work of Vanjari caste organizations listed as many as 26 different organizations of the caste active in various parts of the State. We undertook detailed investigations of three prominent organizations namely, Bhagwan Sena, Maharashtra Rajya Vanjari Karmachari Seva Sangh and *Maharashtra Ustod Va Vahtuk Kamgar Sanghatana* (Cane Cutters and Transportation Workers' Union) that mobilizes mainly Vanjari cane cutters in the State. As the names of these three organizations suggest, the caste organizations of the Vanjaris, like those of many other small caste communities, double up as trade unions, business organizations and social and cultural organizations for the community members. Most of the organizations have a local spread and work only for a district or two. These organizations are mostly floated by factional leaders from the community who try to make inroads in the State level politics and use the caste base for it. The Vanjari community has a very small presence among the State level elites so far. An analysis of the State assembly election results since 1978 suggests that on an average 4/5 Vanjari representatives were elected to the assembly from select constituencies of the State (Vora, 2003). With the decline of the Congress patronage and under the changing political context many new Vanjari associations were formed as part of the caste politics of the 1990s.

The first organization that we reviewed was called the 'Bhagwan Sena'- named after a spiritual leader of the Vanjari community- Bhagwan baba. This organization mainly operates from the Beed district and claims to following from all over the State. Changing patterns of the local politics of Beed were mainly responsible for the rise of the organization in 1991. The district was a Congress bastion since independence and a Congress leader from the Teli community, Kesharbai Kshirsagar represented the district in State politics. In 1985, Kesharbai's son Jayadatta Kshirsagar took over the local leadership from her and the Vanjari youth from the district were disturbed over these developments. Beed is one of the few districts in Maharashtra where, along with the Marathas, two backward castes, Telis and Vanjaris, are numerically dominant groups. The local Congress leadership consisted of Telis. Shiv Sena mobilized the disgruntled Maratha youth against the local dominance of the Congress and its leadership at the start of the decade of the 1990s. The Vanjari leaders, most notably Gopinath Munde, joined the newly emerging BJP in order to contest the political claims of the Telis and the Marathas. The initial political platform that the Vanjari leaders used for this purpose was the Bhagwan Sena.

Bhagwan baba was a legendary spiritual leader of the community from the early 20th century. He had links with the Bhakti movement of Maharashtra and had following among Vanjaris from the Beed, Ahmadnagar, Osmanabad and Latur districts. In their efforts to appropriate cultural symbols for weaving a new caste identity in the nineties, Vanjari leaders used the legacy of Bhagwan Baba to mobilize the Vanjari youth. However Baba's message of peace and love that he preached as part of the legacies of the Bhakti movement was cleverly fused with the aggressive politics of the Shiv Sena, to create Bhagwan Sena- that symbolized the militant identity of the frustrated Vanjari youth. When castes were 'reinvented' in the 1990s each small caste tried to reconstruct its caste history to suit to its political demands. The symbol of Bhagwan Baba was revisited both to reconstruct a glorious past on behalf of the Vanjari caste and also to legitimize a kind of non democratic authority that the caste leaders tried to exert on the community. In the context of the 1990s, when along with the caste politics the politics of Hindutva also constituted a dominant idiom of democratic politics in India, each community tried to appropriate both caste and religion for mobilisational purposes. Each caste created its own patron saint or *dharmaguru* that helped reaffirm a distinct cultural identity of each caste. The symbol of Bhagwan Baba proved helpful to the Vanjaris on both these counts.

After its establishment, the Bhagwan Sena came up with typical demands that probably all caste associations of small and backward castes have been making all these years. The first set of demands is related to the benefits of reservation policy. After the legal fight with the Banjaras over a distinct caste status, the government of Maharashtra had listed Vanjaris among a separate group of the Nomadic Tribes (NT-D) that enjoys two percent reservations. Bhagwan Sena demands that they be placed among OBCs rather than among the NTs. The other set of demands are always over symbolic issues related to the cultural pride of the communities. Accordingly, the Bhagwan Sena keeps demanding that the Aurangabad Airport be renamed after Bhagwan Baba. The third set of demands is about the material welfare of the community and benefits/ subsidies requested from the government. There is a long list of demands in the Bhagwan Sena's pamphlets issued from time to time. These include establishment of credit institutions for the Vanjaris, subsidies to farmers in general and to Vanjari farmers in particular, increase in the amount of scholarship to Vanjari students, promotions for Vanjari employees in the public sector and easy loans to be made available for the Vanjari community members. The organization tried to do probably everything that is possible to make the community happy. There are two levels at which the caste organizations work in the recent period. One is to internally shape the community as a social network and as a possible political agency. The other is to enter into some kind of a bargaining on behalf of the community. Bhagwan Sena worked on both these counts. In terms of political bargaining, the Sena declared its more militant intentions as one of its official programmes included 'tit for tat' actions if the other communities (read Marathas and Telis) try to trouble the Vanjari community. In the state assembly elections of 2009 Bhagwan Gad became a visibly political site when Munde started his daughter's election campaign from there and aspired to conquer Mumbai via Bhagwan Gad (He said in his speech that he could see Mumbai (the centre of political power) from the Gad (Daily Sakal, Pune edition, 29th Sept 2009).

The politics of Bhagwan Sena is limited to the three districts of Beed, Latur and Ahmadnagar although it claimed to have following all over the State. The organization was most active during the transitional phase of Maharashtra politics when Shiv Sena and the BJP as oppositional politics tried to challenge the Congress dominance. Gopinath Munde played a key role in the State level BJP's politics at that time and served as deputy chief minister of the State when the

BJP Shiv Sena coalition government came to power after the 1995 elections to the State legislative assembly. The Bhagwan Sena flourished in Beed under Munde's leadership between 1992 and 1998. In 1992 when Munde was a leader of opposition in the assembly, while the congress was ruling the State, he organized a massive meet of the farmers of the district under the banner of Bhagwan Sena. The meet provided a major impetus to the growth of the organization. Most of the moves of the organization in the later period were overtly political in nature and it mainly focused on mobilization of the rural Vanjari youth and farmers.

Politics of the district and the State, changed once again when the Nationalist Congress party (NCP) was formed in 1999 under the leadership of Sharad Pawar. Politics in the State became more competitive and localized after the formation of the NCP. Disgruntled Vanjari youth form Beed and other districts joined the ranks of the NCP as a dissent against the established leadership of the community. This led to a split in the Bhagwan Sena and the faction opposed to Munde formed Bhagwan Brigade. This faction was led by T.P. Munde who, after the formation of the new organization, immediately joined the NCP. The split in the Bhagwan Sena brought out the fissures in the newly shaped caste identity of the Vanjaris and also revealed the openly political agenda of the Vanjari caste organizations.

If Bhagwan Sena acquired an openly political agenda the other two organizations that we studied were less explicit on this front. Instead they tried to combine the economic and caste interests of sections of the Vanjari community and functioned as occupational organizations, trade unions. The Vanjari community is an economically stratified community and at present the members of the community are engaged in three main kinds of economic activities. A section of them are landowners, especially in the Beed district and are into farming. The other section has entered government services and the third, most poor section among the Vanjaris work as cane cutters/ agricultural labourers in the sugarcane fields of western and southern Maharashtra.

The Cane cutters' organization is a typical example of emergence of overlapping identities and their politics in the recent period. The sugar industry in Maharashtra is too well known and in spite of its decline in the more recent period, a large number of workers in the State are dependent on it for employment. There are 163 sugar producing units operating in the State at

present. Of these 52 units are closed. The functioning sugar units (111) employ nearly nine hundred thousand workers. These workers mainly perform two tasks. They either cut the sugarcane in the fields or transport it to the factories. The sugar belt is spread in the western fertile part of Maharashtra. However the workers come from the drought prone districts of the State, mainly from the Marathwada region. These workers migrate to the sugar fields for four to six months per year and lead a completely insecure, wandering life (Guru, 1999). The government of Maharashtra had appointed a committee in 1993 to investigate the problems of the sugar workers. The committee estimated that most of these workers come from the backward castes. The leaders of the Vanjari trade union estimate that nearly 70 percent of the sugar workers are from the Vanjari community.

The sugar workers face myriad problems in organizing their life and work. Most of them are landless or marginal farmers from the drought prone districts of the State. Every year they migrate to the sugar belts of western Maharashtra for almost six months and are away from home. During this period their lives become completely insecure. In an important decision in 1986, the Industrial Disputes Tribunal of Maharashtra ruled that all these workers may be treated as employed by the sugar factory for which they work and their work conditions may be regularized accordingly. However, the sugar workers, especially the cane cutters and the transport workers work in a more informal manner. They are employed through contractors and the contractors use caste and community linkages while selecting the workers of his gang or *toli*. It is here that the caste ties among the Vanjaris get linked to their occupational identity as sugar workers. The trade union for the cane cutters more prominently acts as/ doubles up as the caste based organization of the Vanjaris.

The union is active in parts of Ahmadnagar district and of the Marathwada region where these workers reside in large numbers. All, except one, office bearers of the union are from the Vanjari community. The main demands of the union are naturally economic and occupational in nature. However its politics is largely dominated by the Vanjari identity and interests. The association is active since 1985 and is mainly engaged in negotiations with the federative body of the State cooperatives over various demands of the sugar workers. In 1987 the union organized a massive strike of the sugar workers in Maharashtra which lasted for over a month. The strike was led by

Babanrao Dhakne, a Vanjari leader form the Ahmadnagar district and founder of the union. The strike led to establishment of a committee to discuss the problems of sugar workers and creation of some safety nets for them. Babanrao Dhakne was earlier with the Janata Party and was elected on the state legislative assembly several times since 1978 on a Janta party ticket. He is one of the prominent political leaders form the Ahmadnagar district of the State. The leadership of the union slowly shifted to Gopinath Munde when his political importance grew within the BJP and among the Vanjaris. Initially this led to a leadership crisis within the organization. However after 1995, when the BJP Shiv Sena government came to power in the State, Babanrao Dhakne was forced to accept the leadership of Munde and he himself joined the BJP after 1999 elections.

There are a few legislative assembly constituencies in the State where the votes of the sugar workers prove decisive. Along with Babanrao Dhakne, a few other office bearers of the union, got elected to the state legislative assembly on the basis of the sugar workers' votes. In all these elections, the campaign used the Vanjari identity of the workers along with their occupational identity. The contractors or the *Mukadams* play a key role in the politics of the union. The contractors are the real employers of the workers as they act as middlemen between the workers and the sugar factories. The contractors invariably use the caste, kinship and other informal ties in recruiting the workers, extending leaves and loans to them and virtually create extensive patronage networks of their own. These patronage networks create important political role for the contractors and they become key players in the local and regional political process. Caste identity and caste authority gets interwoven in an interesting manner with the economic and political identity and authority in case of the cane cutters and transport workers.

The third organization of the Vanjari community engages itself in a similar kind of process in its mobilization of the government sector employees of the community. It is called as ' Maharashtra Rajya Vanjari Karmachari Seva Sangh' (Maharashtra Vanjari Government Employees Service Federation). The organization is mainly located in Aurangabad and has more than five thousand members from the ranks of government sector employees. The organization works as an employees' union but only for those from the Vanjari community. Its membership is not open for

government employees from other castes. This is another interesting attempt to construct the community identity on part of the Vanjaris. In spite of their nomadic pasts, a section among the Vanjaris had taken to education and progressed to take up government jobs. These sections led to a substantive economic stratification within the community and rise of a middle class within them. The middle class sections are mobilized under the banner of organizations like the Karmachari Seva Sangh.

The organisation has substantial economic resources at its disposal and works to provide social security measures for the community. They have been running a marriage bureau, a wedding hall and plan to have other infrastructure like hospitals and health facilities. They extend scholarships to bright students from the community and plan to take responsibilities for their further education. These are some of the channels that the leaders of the organization use for political mobilization of sections of Vanjaris. Most of its office bearers and members are sympathetic towards the BJP. When these patterns of political loyalties were disturbed after the 1999 elections, the organization split at the local level and a new organization called the Vanjari Karmachari Mahasangh (A mega federation of the Vanjari employees) was created in 2003. The new faction is close to the Congress unit in Beed district although officially it declares loyalty to no political party. The splintering platforms among the Vanjaris clearly point to a new political process taking shape in the State. It is a political process in which caste loyalties are used rampantly, but mainly for political purposes. It is the caste that shapes politics at certain levels but it is also politics that shapes caste at many other levels. The formation of so many caste organizations of the Vanjaris clearly point to the ways in which politics is shaping caste in the more recent period.

<div align="center">IV</div>

Caste Associations of the Charmakars: New Dalit Assertions? [4]

Along with the Lingayats and the Vanjaris the third caste that we studied was that of Charmakars. Charmakars are one of the three main Dalit castes in Maharashtra along with Mahars and the Matangs. Dalit politics in Maharashtra was traditionally dominated by the Mahars, especially the ex- Mahars who converted to Buddhism with Ambedkar and acquired the

Neo Buddhist identity. Mahars supported the RPI (Republican Party of India). The trajectory of the RPI politics is well known and it is often noted how the party split from time to time during the past sixty years. Various factions of the RPI supported either the secular third front or the Congress in different elections in the State (Jagzap, 2007). The other two communities of the Dalits, Charmakars and Matangs were never major supporters of the RPI. In fact they developed a kind of contestation with the RPI and its Buddhist leadership and always supported the Congress prior to the nineties. In the nineties, when the nature of party competition in the State changed and the BJP and Shiv Sena arrived on the political scene, politics of the Charmakars and Matangs acquired a new dimension. Both these communities were wooed by the BJP and the Shiv Sena in their efforts to spread their support base among the Dalits of the State. They played up the contestation between the Hindu and the Neo Buddhist Dalits and attracted followers among Charmakars and Matangs.

Charmakars in Maharashtra have three main sub castes among them- Charmakars or Chambhars, Dhors and Holars. They reside in almost all the districts of the State but are concentrated in districts like Mumbai, Pune, Nashik, Kolhapur, Solapur, Buldhana, Nagpur, Osmanabad, Satara, Raigad etc. Among the total Dalit population in Raigad, Charmakars constitute more than 40 percent. Traditionally the Charmakars or the leather workers held the highest social position among the Dalit groups and were also in a slightly better economic position than others (Deshpande, 2004; Velaskar, 2000). Historical studies of the city of Pune noted how the Charmakars resided in the main city unlike other Dalits, were not spatially segregated and had very less share of women and child workers compared to other Dalit groups (Mann, 1967). Economic advantages came to the Charmakars due to possibilities of retention of their traditional occupation in the urban milieu. Unlike other traditional occupations, leather work remained an integral aspect of the urban economy and helped in the survival and economic betterment of the Charmakars. However it did not lead to any aggressive caste politics on part of the Charmakars till the decade of 1990s. In fact Charmakars retained the traditional links with the Marathas in rural areas and remained loyal to the Congress party in the political sphere.

Our preliminary review of the organizations of Charmakars revealed around twenty associations and institutions of the community operating in different parts of the State. These included unions

of the leather workers, cooperatives in urban and rural areas, social and religious trusts for the Charmakars and more militant caste associations formed in the decade of the 1990s. We studied three of these organizations in detail. The first is Maharashtra Charmakar Sangh in Mumbai and Nashik districts. The second one was Akhil Bhartiya Guru Ravidas Samata Parishad from the Nanded district. And the third was the Shahu Officers Welfare Association form Kolhapur that works for the welfare of the Charmakar government employees. The three organizations represent three different ways in which the Charmakar identity was shaped in the changing political context and the ways in which different sections of Charmakars sought representation in politics. Although the history of associational life of the Charmakars goes back to the early twentieth century, all the three organizations that we studied were established sometime during the decade of the nineties and were thus clearly part of the identity politics of this period.

The Maharashtra Charmakar Sangh was established in 1995 under the leadership of the then Social Welfare minister of the State Babanrao Gholap. Babanrao Gholap was elected to the legislative assembly as a Shiv Sena candidate and had already become a prominent leader of the party. As stated earlier, the Shiv Sena had already expanded its base among the Charmakars when it came to power. In 2004 elections seven Charmakar members were elected on the state legislative assembly. All of them are elected on a non Congress political party ticket, including three from Shiv Sena and two each from the BJP and the NCP. Even at the national level of politics, two of the Charmakar members of parliament are elected on the Shiv Sena ticket.
In other word the Shiv Sena had been successful in attracting the Charmakars towards it in the nineties and Babanrao Gholap's leadership was a part of this larger phenomenon.

On 24th September 1995, Babanrao Gholap, with the help of the Shiv Sena, organized a massive rally of the Charmakars in Mumbai. This rally was attended by around five hundred thousand Charmakars from the State. Interestingly, along with the Shiv Sena leaders, BSP leader Mayawati was also present for this rally. The rally was seen as the first organized political exercise by the otherwise mute Charmakar community in Maharashtra politics. The Maharashtra Charmakar Sangh was officially established at the time of the rally. The official flag of the organization, symbolized the political role that the organization aspired to play. The flag has a combination of saffron and blue colours as symbols of the politics of Hindutva and the

Republican Dalit identity. The traditional instruments of the Charmakars as leather workers are depicted on the flag, to celebrate the traditional identity of the community. And then these are put as a part of a wheel to symbolize the arrival of the modern industrial society and the need to adjust to it.

The demands of the Maharashtra Charmakar Sangh shape in tune with these overlapping identities of the community. There are demands for quick and efficient delivery of caste certificates by the government, increase in the scholarship for the Dalit students, and demand to establish separate schools for Dalit children and for effective rehabilitation and development of the Mumbai slums as Charmakars reside in these slums in large numbers. If these demands are related to the overall material development of the community, there are certain others that represent the business interests of the leather worker Charmakars. These include demands for a separate development board for the Charmakars, push for their cooperatives where easy loans would be made available to leather workers, effective allocation of ward wise stalls to the leather workers etc. The third kind of demands are about effective implementation of the reservation policy and its extension to the private sector. And finally there are certain symbolic demands that are woven around the new symbols of caste pride that the organization has invented. Like all other castes, the Charmakars have also reconstructed their caste history and have discovered their own sect-saint, god men and leaders. Accordingly the Maharashtra Charmakar Sangh has demanded that the government should construct a national monument in memory of Guru Ravidas in Varanasi- the city where the Guru Ravidas, a Charmakar saint from the 13th century lived and worked. Similarly the Sangh has demanded a renaming of the Church gate Railway Station in Mumbai after Babu Jagjivanram- a once popular Charmakar leader from the 1970s. In their bid to express solidarity with the other Dalit and the OBC castes, the Sangh demanded that the North Maharashtra University in Maharashtra be renamed after Savitribai Phule.

The politics of symbols has helped the organization in entering into political negotiations at various levels. With Babanrao Gholap as the chief mentor of the organization, it has always been close to Shiv Sena as a political front and worked in full swing till the BJP Shiv Sena government was ruling the State. At the same time, the local units of the organization have been negotiating with various other non Congress political forces. We collected information about the

office bearers of the organisation from various districts of the State. It shows that the local chiefs of the Sangh have their own political positions and are affiliated with different political parties as per the local political dynamics. Yet many of them are loyal to Gholap as far as the State level leadership is concerned. Their dual loyalties create a very flexible pattern of politics for them where they use the caste loyalties in a very interesting manner. The Sangh does not officially support any political party, but supports Charmakar candidates across party lines in the local level elections. These flexibilities in the political position of the Sangh help leaders like Gholap to protect and enhance their constituencies, help the local level leaders in their negotiations with political parties and are generally suitable for the competitive party system that has evolved in the State in the post 1990 period.

The competitive nature of the party system has several implications for the politics of caste. One of them is linked to a continuous fragmentation of the caste associations and emergence of new organizations. Every caste organization, like the Maharashtra Charmakar Sangh, tries to construct a coherent caste identity under its banner. However the political processes as well as the present caste realities often lead to internally fractured caste identities and emergence of sectional caste associations. The two other caste organizations of the Charmakars that we studied are clear examples of this process. They mobilize the sectional claims within the Charmakar community in two different parts of the State.

One of them is called 'Akhil Bhartiya Guru Ravidas Samata Parishad' and is active as a social/ cultural organization of the Charmakars in Nanded district of the Marathwada region of the State. It claims to have an all India status and branches in more than eight States of the country. However in Maharashtra it operates in the two districts of Nanded and Latur. The Ravidas Samata Parishad has a progressive agenda for the Charmakars and aspires to lead social transformation towards a caste less society. Every member of the organization has to sign a pledge that expects them to be rationalist, to work for the abolition of caste system, encourage inter caste dining and inter caste marriages and openly dissent against the unjust religious practices of the Vedic religion. The organization selects Guru Ravidas as a symbol of the dissent against Vedic religion on behalf of the Charmakars. At the same time the symbol, as against

those of Ambedkar, Phule or any other anti caste leader, helps the organization maintain a caste specific identity for the Charmakars.

Samata Parishad is a recent arrival on the map of caste politics in Maharashtra. The establishment and the growth of the organization interestingly coincide with the entry of the Bahujan Samaj Paksha (BSP) in the politics of the State in early twenty first century. After its spectacular success in the politics of Uttar Pradesh, the BSP tried to spread its wings and appeal to Dalits from other States in the country. In Maharashtra the BSP faced a direct challenge from the various factions of the RPI along with the Congress and the Shiv Sena. In its bid to counter the politics of all these parties and also to keep open the possibilities of political negotiations with them, the BSP used the instrument of caste organizations. It tried to establish links between the Chamars of Uttar Pradesh and Charmakar groups form Maharashtra and used organizations like the Samata Parishad for its politics. In all its slogans, demands and programmes over the past few years since its establishment in 2003, the Samata Parishad has expressed close ties with the politics of the BSP. Its progressive agenda can be seen as one of these linkages. But more openly it also appealed all the members of the community to join the event at Nagpur in 2006 when the golden jubilee of mass conversion of Dalits to Buddhism was celebrated with Mayawati as the chief guest.

There is an interesting twist to the organization's political stance. Most of its office bearers support the politics of the BSP. However in Latur, Congress is the most dominant political party and most of the Charmakars are loyal to it. The Parishad's local unit at Latur is no exception and overwhelmingly supports the Congress. The local level political dynamics is used by the caste leaders to link the regional and local dimensions of political process. This dynamics also provides a better chance for the BSP and the Congress to enter into political alliances and to manage these alliances at the social level.

The 'Shahu Officers Social Association (SOSA)' at Kolhapur presents yet another variety of caste politics on behalf of the Charmakars. Established in 1993, in the context of consolidation of a new middle class form among the Charmakars, the organization mobilizes only Charmakar officers and employees in the public sector units of the district. The organization is led by an ex

MLA of the Congress party. It too develops a complex symbolism for having a foothold in the local politics of Kolhapur. The organization is named after Shahu Maharaj- the famous reformer form the Non Brahmin movement of the early twentieth century. Himself a Maratha, Shahu tried to mobilize all the backward castes against the domination of Brahmins and Brahmanism. By accepting his legacy in its name, the SOSA shares/ declares to share the progressive anti caste agenda developed by the non Brahmin movement. But at a more practical level, Shahu's name becomes a handy tool for local politics, as the politics in Kolhapur is entirely driven by Shahu's legacy. It also helps the organization to have better linkages with the locally dominant politics of the Marathas. The organization's membership, on the other hand, comes from a very specific small sub caste from among the Charmakars. These are the Lingayat Charmakars, who practice Veershaivism as their religious ideology. As a symbol of this specificity the SOSA has Mahadeo's Lingam (which is a sacred symbol of all Veershaivas) as its official emblem.

But the most prominent identity that the SOSA proclaims is that of the middle class sections among the Charmakars. On behalf of them, it officially maintains a non-political political stance and mainly engages itself in secular activities like distributing scholarships, running a marriage bureau, organizing festivals etc. Since the members come from affluent sections of the community the SOSA has no dearth of funds and announces to awards every year for the eminent persons form the Charmakar community. These awards are also seen as part of the political strategies of the organization to establish links across political parties. SOSA is a very small organization with around 500 members and the work of the organization mainly revolves around one person. However the symbolism that it carries with it makes it a very interesting case study among the caste associations in Maharashtra.

In the last two decades or so Maharashtra witnessed a gradual transformation of its party system in which elections became multi cornered, electoral politics was woven around two competing alliances that had shaky support bases and in which electoral outcomes could be better interpreted at the sub regional or rather at the district level (Palshikar- Birmal, 2007). Active role of the caste associations of the nineties can be seen as one of the important factors that contributed to the emergence of these unpredictable, floating, tentative patterns of electoral politics in the State. The tentative nature of politics shaping at the State level fractured the earlier patterns of caste politics nexus and set in some new- local equations of caste and region

dynamics. In the formal political realm Marathas have still been able to retain control over power in the State (Palshikar- Birmal, 2003). However as we have argued elsewhere the Maratha rule at the formal level survives amidst intense social volatility in Maharashtra in the recent period (Palshikar, Deshpande, Birmal, 2009). As the narratives above show caste associations of Lingayats, Vanjaris and Charmakars often emerged as obvious political sites at which the social volatility was translated in politics in myriad ways.

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V

Caste Associations in a Changing Political Context

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Our review of the work of associations of three main castes from Maharashtra brings forth a number of issues related to life and politics of caste in its most recent avatar. This avatar of caste unfolds under the influence of three main contextual factors and we submit that the study of caste associations becomes a vantage point to understand the nuanced influences that these factors have on the life of caste.

During the last twenty odd years politics of caste in India invariably developed in conversation with the Mandal. The project of Mandal contained a twin logic. On the one hand it legitimized the presence of caste as a legitimate political and social category in the institutional sphere when the state extended benefits of reservations to the OBCs. On the other hand the project of Mandal put in place an overarching caste framework of politics that challenged the other dominant ideological frameworks of the time. At both these levels the arrival of the Mandal framework marked a new phase of politicization of caste. This phase also saw considerable changes taking shape in the arena of mainstream electoral politics and in the nature of the Indian party system. The emergence of a competitive party system and regional dispersal of political competition provided a new space for caste based mobilizations of groups in the 1990s. Along with this, during the same time, the nature of caste was also changing drastically as an outcome of the capitalist development of the post independence period. The revival of caste associations as mediating agencies in politics marks the coming together of all these factors.

The simultaneous processes of mandalisation and regionalization of Indian politics ushered in complete interpenetration of caste and politics in the nineties. It had two major consequences for the work of the caste associations. Most of the organizations that we studied were localized in nature, revolved around a single leader who used the organization mainly to build up his (always men as women play a very marginal role in the organizational ranks) political constituency at the local/ regional level. In the 1960s the political role of these associations was federative as they tried to build up horizontal and vertical caste alliances. Mandal expected a similar role from them as it forwarded the ideological agenda of Dalit Bahujan unity. However during the nineteen nineties the agenda of Bahujan representation combined with a gradual fragmentation of the party system to unfold a dual process of mobilization around caste. On the one hand, the politics of Mandal encouraged formation of caste blocs. At the same time it also permitted arrival of single caste consciousness and political bargaining on behalf of each small caste. The nature of caste associations in this period amply reveals the political fragmentation of caste that completely defies the ideological logic of Mandal. Each of the community we studied had a number of small organizations that claimed to represent the community in politics. In these claims the idea of politics was reduced to bargaining in elections and representation was reduced to politics of presence. The competitive nature of the party system and dispersal of political contestations further encouraged internal fragmentation of the caste communities in political sphere. Caste associations acquired a completely instrumental role in the process and could not even effectively serve as interest groups on behalf of the community. This phase of the work of caste associations in a way marked an end of the caste logic as caste only symbolically and clumsily survived in their politics.

The last two decades of Indian politics presented an interesting scenario for political mobilizations on caste basis. The idiom of caste remained a dominant idiom of politics during this period. At the same time the task of mobilizing castes in politics became quite difficult in the context of changing nature of caste. The contradictions surrounding caste politics mirrored in the work of caste associations as they struggled to construct a coherent identity of the community for purposes of political mobilization.

Contemporary constructions of caste/ community identities do not strictly define castes in terms of their ritual status and in terms of the traditional hierarchy. Instead these identities get shaped

largely as a part of the contemporary social and political, state and non-state discourse. Caste associations become the main (and essentially) political sites at which the caste identities are shaped and articulated. The case of Lingayats shows how under the impact of politics and of political economy the community identity gets reconstructed at various levels and acquires a very flexible form. Community identities are always social constructs. In his early studies of changing identities in south Asia, Barnett (1977) states how community discourses become meaningful in the presence of particular institutional possibilities and socio-economic conditions. But he also goes on to show that these community discourses are never shaped in a smooth manner. When identity and identity choice becomes a central concern for any community, members of that community may hold widely differing views on what it means to belong to that community. This leads to constant internal fragmentation within the community and politics of any caste/ community develops a complex narrative. Politics of the Shiva Sanghatana faced the same problem when the Lingayat identity started breaking internally as each sub caste within them tried to mobilize itself on its own and many caste associations proliferated. The same was the case with the Vanjari caste associations. As we discussed earlier, each main caste association of the Vanjaris split into two or more such organizations when political aspirations of their members could not be constrained within the formal set up of the respective organizations. The arrival of the caste associations of the nineties has thus further contributed to the process of regionalization of politics of Maharashtra. At the same time it presented a difficult variety of politics of caste. In order to cope up with these difficulties, the organizations had to keep testing all the ideological choices that were contextually available to them for the construction of caste identity. As a part of these efforts the caste associations seem to have resorted to a variety of symbolic gestures.

Caste politics interaction in its recent phase points to certain major changes in the nature of caste. Caste has gradually been de ritualized as a part of the long journey of democratic politics in India. In its most contemporary phase, this journey points to what some commentators refer to a process of ethnicisation of caste (Fuller, 1997). The constitutive principles of caste seem to be shifting from hierarchy and status to interest and identity. It is around material, political interests that the community identities are shaped in this recent phase. In the context of democratic politics and also in the context of changing political economy, a new system of social

stratification seems to be shaping in which these caste like communities enter and are trying to negotiate their own space within it.

These negotiations sometimes take the form of obvious political bargaining with this or that political party. But the nature of caste associations also provides a more nuanced space for political negotiations in its contemporary phase. These are negotiations with the democratic politics itself. Agencies like caste associations try to create small openings within practices of democracy, where some form of non democratic, unaccountable politics may legitimately venture into democratic realm. This form of politics invokes primordial loyalties like caste or sect or religion. And at the same time also tries to redefine the content of these loyalties to suit to the democratic claims of the group. The contextual nature of Indian/ south Asian democracy did always provide some scope for a variety of non democratic claims to operate within its realm. As the nature of mainstream/ electoral democracy becomes more tentative, more floating in its recent phase and as politics starts revolving around symbols, a complex overlap between democratic claims and non democratic politics emerges. Caste associations, in their own small way, express and try to manage this tension. It is this tension that keeps caste alive while it is being constantly redefined and remoulded. These new caste identities and the agencies representing them may ensure a symbolic presence of caste communities in the present day democratic politics. Democratic politics apparently acquires a more contentious form as these agencies keep fighting for political power. However does this politics ensure a true representation of the communities involved? Such questions may be best left to the course of politics as it evolves.

Notes
1. The initial fieldwork was undertaken as a part of a research project titled 'Role of Caste in Contemporary Indian Politics' granted to me by the Board of College and University Development, University of Pune, under its research grant for the year 2006-2008. Several students of the department were involved in the fieldwork of the project and three of them used the material collected as a part of this project for their M.Phil. dissertations.

2. The information on Lingayat caste organizations unless otherwise stated is taken from M. Phil. dissertation that uses the data from the project 'Solapur Jilhyatil Lingayat Smajachya Sanghatana' (unpublished) Appasaheb Deshmukh, Department of Politics and Public Admn , University of Pune,2006.

3. The information on Vanjari caste organizations, unless otherwise stated, is taken from M. Phil. dissertation that uses the data from the project 'Maharashtratil Vanjari Samajachya Sanghatana- Ek Abhyas' (unpublished), Somnath Gholwe, Department of Politics and Public Admin. , University of Pune, 2008.

4. The information was collected as part of the fieldwork for the project mentioned above and will be used by Rajendra Agawane for his M.Phil. dissertation (ongoing).

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