

## Political Economy of a Dominant Caste

Rajeshwari Deshpande and Suhas Palshikar\*

This paper is an attempt to investigate the multiple crises facing the Maratha community of Maharashtra. A dominant, intermediate peasantry caste that assumed control of the state's political apparatus in the fifties, the Marathas ordinarily resided politically within the Congress fold and thus facilitated the continued domination of the Congress party within the state. However, Maratha politics has been in flux over the past two decades or so. At the formal level, this dominant community has somehow managed to retain power in the electoral arena (Palshikar- Birmal, 2003) – though it may be about to lose it. And yet, at the more intricate levels of political competition, the long surviving, complex patterns of Maratha dominance stand challenged in several ways. One, the challenge is of loss of Maratha hegemony and consequent loss of leadership of the non-Maratha backward communities, the OBCs. The other challenge pertains to the inability of different factions of Marathas to negotiate peace and ensure their combined domination through power sharing. And the third was the internal crisis of disconnect between political elite and the Maratha community which further contribute to the loss of hegemony.

Various consequences emerged from these crises. One was simply the dispersal of the Maratha elite across different parties. The other was the increased competitiveness of politics in the state and the decline of not only the Congress system, but of the Congress party in Maharashtra. The third was a growing chasm within the community between the neo-rich and the newly impoverished. These developments resulted into the discourse of backwardness that dominated the politics of the Maratha community in the more recent times. Very crudely, the claim that the community is backward constitutes a response to internal fragmentation and stratification as much as to processes of urbanization and liberalization. Therefore, the post-1980 developments need to be seen not merely as the trajectory of one caste but by situating them at the cusp of dynamics of democratic politics and state's economy, some trends in political economy of caste may also be detected.

The paper is arranged in four parts. First part describes the multiple crises of the Marathas and their political fallout; the second part analyzes the discourse of backwardness and the demand for reservations for the Maratha community; the third part is woven around the issue of stratification within the community and in the fourth part we discuss the larger context of state's political economy within which the multiple crises of the Maratha community obtain. We hope that the paper, apart from being relevant to understanding the political economy of development in Maharashtra, will also have resonance for other regions where similarly situated middle peasant castes face a similar predicament at the intersection of democracy and development.

---

\*The authors teach at Dept. of Politics & Public Administration, Savitribai Phule Pune University.  
[rajeshwari.deshpande@gmail.com](mailto:rajeshwari.deshpande@gmail.com); [suhasplshikar@gmail.com](mailto:suhasplshikar@gmail.com)

## I

Earlier studies of Maratha dominance in Maharashtra (Lele, 1982 and 1990; Vora, 1994, 2003 and 2009- in this latest formulation on the topic Vora asks the question whether it is Maharashtra or a Maratha Rashtra, a nation of Marathas) have amply documented how Maratha dominance emerged as a combination of numerical preponderance, patterns of landownership and a historically nurtured sense of identity that was systematically appropriated by the Congress party in the pre- and the post-independence period. More recently, an ongoing project by a team of scholars from University of British Columbia has brought out the local level political and economic dominance of the Marathas through a large scale empirical study (draft of the work by Anderson, Francois and Kotwal made available by Ashok Kotwal and also available at the website of UBC). A conservative estimate of its numerical strength places the Maratha-Kunbi caste cluster at around 31 percent of the State's population. In terms of status, it is a highly stratified caste cluster centering on peasant cultivators but reaching up to feudal aristocrats and rulers. However they show a greater degree of unity and a greater absorptive power than similar peasant-warrior caste clusters from other regions of India. The history of Maharashtra depicts an interesting pattern of close interaction between Marathas and Kunbis at various levels (Lele, 1990). The early ethnographic literature on Maharashtra makes a distinction between Marathas proper and Kunbis. The Marathas claimed a Kshatriya rank and were proud of their Rajput lineages. Kunbis on the other hand were cultivators and remained within *shudra* fold. Sections of Kunbis, especially from western Maharashtra and Marathwada region of the state, tried to merge with the Marathas, often through marriage links. They could do so both due to the landowning pattern in these regions and a historically developed close interaction among these groups. In the regions of Vidarbha and Konkan, Kunbis retained their distinct caste identity. At present, they account for around ten per cent of State's population and are concentrated in the above two regions. The 'proper' Marathas always opposed Kunbi moves of upward mobility and developed a strict internal hierarchy within themselves. Only a few clans among the Marathas, ranging from five to ninety six, were identified as pure (Deshpande, 2007). In spite of these differences, the formative years of Congress dominance in state politics saw best use of the absorptive powers of the Maratha-Kunbi caste cluster as the Congress party projected them as a homogenous group and as cultural as well as political leader of the Marathi community. It is during this period that the two castes of Marathas and the Kunbis were projected as being one and their combined numerical strength in Maharashtra's politics was inflated. Marathas in Maharashtra consistently cornered nearly forty per cent of the seats in legislative assembly (considering the fact that there are constituencies reserved for Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes in proportion to their population – respectively 29 and 25, the share of Maratha-Kunbi MLAs among remaining constituencies goes up to more than 50 percent according to Vora; 2009). This was the case not only during the heydays of the Congress system. They have been able to retain their hold over formal positions of power till recent times, in spite of the large scale changes in the nature of party political competition in the state. Their overwhelming presence among the elected representatives was often seen as a marker of successful

transplant of their social dominance into the political arena. However, the easy equation between their social and political dominance was disrupted at various junctures throughout this apparently successful political journey.

The first tremors came as a part of Indira Gandhi's politics of the early 1970s when she sought to destabilize the state level leadership. During this phase, one witnesses both the beginning of the decline of Congress system and erosion of the dominance of Marathas. However, it was only a beginning in the sense that, although tattered into factions both the Congress and the Marathas could retain their hold over power in the state during this phase. The Congress in Maharashtra has always been a divided house and these divisions were led by three prominent factions within the Maratha community. One was a faction loyal to Y. B Chavan who, as the first chief minister of the state, played a key role in the shaping of the distinctive regional model of the 'Congress system' in Maharashtra in the 1960s. The extensive network of sugar cooperatives in parts of Maharashtra established during the 1960s gave rise to a rival faction within the Congress that was opposed to Chavan's leadership. This faction was led by the Maratha leader Vasantdada Patil. Both these Congress factions had their base in the Maratha-Kunbis of Western Maharashtra. The third faction underlined both regional and economic division among the Marathas and was led by S. B Chavan from the Marathwada region. Chavan himself had little support among the Marathas in the Marathwada region and he developed his politics within the Congress party in opposition to the leaders of the sugar cooperatives.

The results of 1977 elections in Maharashtra were an outcome of factionalism within the Congress (Vora, Palshikar, Sumant, 1983). The assembly elections of 1978 saw clear divisions among Maratha leaders in the state when Indira-loyalists contested elections against the established Maratha lobby. The two factions, however, joined hands after the elections to form a coalition ministry. At this juncture, Sharad Pawar began to articulate his own version of the Maratha politics when he broke away from the loose alliance of the Maratha leaders and formed a parallel Congress party that came to power in coalition with the Janata Party and the Peasants' and Workers' Party in 1978 ( Vora-Palshikar, 1996).

However, Maharashtra did not witness mobilization of backward castes as a counterpoint to Maratha politics during this period and political contestations were expressed mainly in terms of internal rivalries of the Maratha factions. Janata party remained a weak force in Maharashtra and lacked social support. It was only because of Sharad Pawar's rebellion within the Congress that the opposition parties could come to power and that too only briefly. In other words, Congress system in Maharashtra managed to survive both the populism of Indira Gandhi and rise of anti-Congress politics in the 1970s as compared to other states like Karnataka, Andhra Pradesh and Gujarat where along with Congress party the dominant castes also faced challenges.

At the same time, internal factionalism and external challenges produced political frustrations that began to beset the Maratha leadership since early 1980s. Maratha leadership faced humiliation at the hands of Indira Gandhi during 1980-1984. Along with loss of unity the Maratha leadership of Maharashtra also lost its political initiative during this period.

Since then, the Marathas have tried various political vehicles in order to maintain their dominance and also to register their anger against the established Maratha leadership. During the eighties, Shetkari Sanghatana successfully mobilized the Marathas over agrarian issues (Deshpande, 2004). Then it was the Shiv Sena that recruited Maratha youth from more backward regions like Vidarbha, Marathwada and Konkan (Palshikar, 2004). In assembly elections of 1995 many Maratha leaders from Congress party contested as rebel candidates resulting a formal change of guard in the state. And finally, it was the Nationalist Congress Party (NCP) that emerged as a party of the Marathas in late nineties. Throughout this period a rapid process of fragmentation of Maratha votes was taking shape (Palshikar, Deshpande, Birmal, 2014; 440-41). It was both an outcome and a cause of the competitive party system that emerged in the state. The fragmented Marathas could retain formal political power till recent times (Palshikar-Birmal, 2003). The traditional feature that Marathas would win at least forty percent seats in state legislature, continued during the period of 1999-2009 in spite of the decline of the Congress and fragmentation of Maratha vote and Maratha elite. Similarly, as a recent study on the social and regional profile of the Maharashtra cabinets (Datar and Ghotale, 2013) shows, Maratha leaders from the western Maharashtra region continued to monopolize the key positions of power within the cabinet. At the same time, at in spite of this apparent control of the Marathas over state machinery, political frustrations among the Marathas increased remarkably.

Emergence of a competitive party system provided more opportunities of recruitment in the formal political realm for Marathas, but during the same phase, they also had to share local political offices with the OBCs and the Dalits as part of the process of *mandalisation* and as a result of the 73<sup>rd</sup>, 74<sup>th</sup> constitutional amendments. Competitive politics made recruitment and survival in politics more difficult. Many new players, like caste associations of each small caste, entered the political realm; political contestations became more dispersed and were shaped at the district level resulting in loss of control of the leadership over local processes and power equations. Social support base of the leaders became floating and politics became a more tentative, more uncertain activity. Finally, under the neo-liberal discourse the formal realm of democratic politics narrowed considerably. Important political decisions were shaped outside the democratic process and were often influenced by bureaucrats, social technocrats and corporate sector. At the local level politics was reduced to management and appropriation of limited resources and politicians were reduced to contractors. These changes seriously jeopardised the status of Marathas as a ruling community and a hegemonic force.

The Maratha response to the political crises was manifold. At one level, it took the shape of identity politics and pushed the Marathas towards Hindutva during the nineties. The notions of caste pride fitted well in the framework of communal pride. The politics of Hindutva, especially under Shiv Sena's leadership successfully appropriated symbols of caste pride in its discourse, swiftly transforming Shivaji from a regional to religious symbol. While sections of Maratha elite acquiesced into Hindu identity politics, others had reservations about it because of the Brahmanical face of Hindutva led by BJP at that juncture. Because of the historical context of rivalry between Brahmins and Marathas, this feature of Hindutva in the state made some sections of Marathas uncomfortable. At the same

time, both BJP and Shiv Sena were actively wooing the OBCs at that point and this meant that for Maratha political actors, opportunities of political recruitment remained limited even in the BJP-Shiv Sena fold.

The alternative emerged (1999) in the form of Nationalist Congress Party (NCP). Since its inception, NCP acquired the form of a party of the Marathas (Birmal, 1999). Most of the NCP seats in the two subsequent assemblies came from western Maharashtra, a Maratha bastion. Social support base of the party also remained restricted mainly to Maratha votes, just as its core leadership too was confined to Marathas. In spite of this, the NCP could not become a satisfactory vehicle for Maratha concerns. By this time, the weaker sections from Maratha community had become more alienated from local Maratha leadership of the NCP and more assertive leadership pursuing caste-specific demands had arisen among Marathas. Thus, NCP engaged in Maratha politics and emerging aspirations of sections of the community could not be satisfied by that party. While at the socio-cultural level, various groups from Maratha community emerged and became active during the post-1990 period, in terms of electoral politics, the Maratha community became consistently fragmented during the same period. The two Congress parties and the Shiv Sena and BJP competed for Maratha votes. Only in 2014, we find that the trends are stabilizing in favour of the Shiv Sena and the BJP (see Table One).

Table One: Maratha vote by party since 1999 ( Lok Sabha and Vidhan Sabha Elections)

	LS 1999	VS 1999	LS 2004	VS 2004	LS 2009	VS 2009	LS 2014	VS 2014
Congress+ NCP	52	47	30	35	34	35	39	Cong.- 11
								NCP- 17
BJP+ Shiv Sena	44	34	57	38	49	30	51	BJP-24
								Ss-29

Source: Palshikar, Deshpande, Birmal, 2014; pp 440-41 and Palshikar-Birmal, 2014

In our earlier work (Palshikar et al, 2014), we have made two further observations regarding the caste based voting patterns in Maharashtra during recent elections. One, not only Marathas but each social section in the state seems to be getting politically divided internally rather than becoming the strong base of any one political party. Secondly, our analysis of the election data based on multivariate regressions reveal a declining significance of caste in explaining the nature of vote in Maharashtra. On the other hand class consistently remains a statistically significant factor for all parties (Palshikar et al; 2014; 442-43). These observations have important implications for the politics of Marathas. As caste breaks internally, Marathas are forced to bring in class content to their caste politics. But as the caste idiom becomes more and more devoid of content, Marathas are also pushed towards using the

empty rhetoric of caste for their political survival. In that sense, caste remains to be an inadequate but inevitable survival strategy for the Marathas and also for the other smaller castes.

The multi-level crisis before Maratha hegemony, thus, has been shaping over a long period since the first split within the Maratha elite in the seventies. That split was characteristic of the inability of the Congress party to accommodate political and material ambitions of the Maratha elite. Since then, Maratha hegemony has been weakening consistently. The unprecedented scale of the rebellion by Maratha leaders in 1995 may be seen as the next critical moment while the defeat of the Congress and NCP in the latest elections to state Assembly (October 2014) signify the further erosion of Maratha hegemony (Palshikar; 2014 EPW). Apart from the inability of the Maratha elite to function as a united bloc in the politics of the state, the voting pattern over time also indicates the inability of the Maratha leadership to carry the Maratha vote with it. This was not only because of the internal splits among the elites. This phenomenon indicates the deeper anxieties of the ordinary voters from the community.

## II

The growing distance between Maratha elite and the community in general gave rise to two types of anxieties among the community. One was related to issues of identity and the other was related to issues of material concerns. These two anxieties expressed themselves in a combined manner during the period after 1990.

Frustrated Maratha youths moved beyond the realm of party politics and began pressurizing party politics through militant caste organizations. Such caste organizations of the Maratha community were not an entirely new phenomenon since the Maratha Mahasangh was active even earlier (Vora-Palshikar; 1990). But their political interventions became more prominent after 1990. Maratha caste organizations have resorted to symbolic gestures since the 2000s. They engaged in aggressive contestations over issues of symbolic cultural pride of the caste. As a result, Maharashtra witnessed a series of violent outbursts over small symbolic issues of cultural pride by the angry and frustrated Maratha youth (Deshpande, 2006). At the same time, demands of reservations that were also linked to the material frustrations of the sections of Marathas became central to the politics of Maratha community.

During the 2000s, Maharashtra witnessed a series of violent outrages over small issues. The James Laine- Bhandarkar Oriental Research Institute (BORI) controversy over a book on Shivaji in 2004 was perhaps the first major instance of this kind. It was followed by several other instances where sections of the Maratha activists resorted to a violent politics of intolerance. Narendra Maharaj, an influential god man was not allowed to carry his 'dhwajadanda' (mast) on board. His followers organised violent protests in different cities of the state in December 2005. A Marathi play was attacked and forced to change its title for its disrespect to a Hindu deity. A neo-Hinduist militant organisation ransacked the offices of a Marathi daily for not commemorating the birth anniversary of Shivaji in (what they saw as) a proper way. *Chhava*, another militant Maratha organisation, threatened to demolish

Shaniwarwada (the seat of Peshwas), because it symbolises unjust Brahminic rule. There was a row over a passage quoted (from some unknown source) in a question paper for the higher secondary examinations of the state board. The passage contained derogatory remarks about Sant Tukaram, one of the most well-known saint poets from the Bhakti tradition of the 12th century. This time it was the *Varkari Mahasangh* (a federation of the Varkaris – followers of the Bhakti tradition, worshippers of Vithoba at Pandharpur) that joined more militant organisations like the *Sambhaji Brigade* in attacking and manhandling the chairman of the state educational board. Four teachers responsible for the controversial question paper were arrested for spreading communal hatred (and were released on bail). In the celebrations of the birth anniversary of Tukaram Maharaj, the then state home minister – a leader of the NCP publicly apologised to the Varkaris and withdrew all cases against them on the charges of attacking the chairman of the state educational board (for a detailed comment on these instances, see Deshpande, 2006). These issues were not simply about cultural chauvinism on the part of militant Maratha organisations nor also only about curtailment of freedom of expression. As we try to argue here, these political outbursts over trivial and symbolic issues were expressions of the unattended material and political anxieties of the Marathas.

Politics of the Maratha community since the early twentieth century has often vacillated between claims to Kshatriya status and claims of being part of the larger ‘non-Brahmin’ category. This has located the community in a complex relationship with both the Brahmins and the non-Brahmin, non-Maratha castes of Maharashtra. (Vora and Palshikar (1990) have argued that Marathas had a dual relation with the Brahmin community – that of historic contestation and also of sharing dominance.) Therefore, through the twentieth century, we come across differentiated and nuanced discourse of Marathas articulated initially through the non-Brahmin movement. That prism of non-Brahmin movement facilitated the claims over symbols, over leadership and also over the anti-(upper) caste discourse of affirmative action. The Marathas used the legacies of the non-Brahmin movement to ensure almost hegemony-like acceptance of their political domination. Firstly, the legacy helped them wrest the political initiative from the Brahmins, once the logic of democracy became operative in the late fifties. Secondly, it contributed to the skilful construction of the caste cluster of Marathas and Kunbis that also operated as a numerically preponderant caste cluster in Maharashtra politics. Thirdly, the non-Brahmin legacy firmly established the Marathas as the natural leader of the *shudra* masses and led to an ideological construct of the Maratha leadership. It further led to appropriation of the ‘*Bahujan Samaj*’ concept by the post-independence Maratha political leaders like Y B Chavan. Finally, the legacy of the non-Brahmin movement was used by the Marathas to evolve non-antagonistic relations with other sections of the society. As a result, the claims of backwardness initially articulated by the non-Brahmin movement in its politics in Maharashtra went missing in the early post-independence politics of the Marathas. Instead, the Marathas the role as a natural ruling community of the Marathi masses – by virtue of their being most numerous and also being the legatees of the non-Brahmin struggles.

This role was underscored by the developments in the regional political economy during the 1950s and the sixties. During this period, Maratha dominance was shaped under the

leadership of the Congress party. The Congress- Maratha nexus was a combination of political majority and ascendant material interests. Institutional networks like the cooperatives and economic policies of the state advocating capitalist growth in agrarian sector protected Maratha interests in this period. At the same time the industrial interests also generally benefited under Maratha political dispensation (Kamat, 1983, 80-90). Along with that, the Congress also protected interests of the Brahmins, a culturally influential social group from the region. In short, during its formative years, the Congress system successfully managed a complex set of entrenched interests that were internally competing with each other (Palshikar-Deshpande, 2003: 98) and the Marathas benefitted a great deal in this arrangement. With the decline of the Congress system and with the rising distortions in the regional political economy the Marathas revisited the legacies of the non-Brahmin movement once again. However, this time, the appropriations of these legacies acquired a completely different tone in the new politics of backwardness.

The *Maratha Mahasangh*, a leading caste organization of the Marathas, vehemently opposed the reservation policy till 1985 and took pride in their anti-Dalit rhetoric. The same organization has been a front runner in aggressively articulating the Maratha claims of backwardness in more recent times. The Maratha demand for reservations developed interesting narratives of deprivations of the community. Historically, Marathas have been very proud of their Kshatriya status but the recent writings by leaders of Maratha caste organizations reverse this logic and claim a *shudra* status for the Marathas. It is argued that Marathas and Kunbis are one and the same and that both basically depend on subsistence agriculture. Interestingly, these constructions use the same historical tools that were discarded at one time as *brahminical* interpretations of history. The second reversal is about the celebrations of reservation discourse as an emancipatory discourse. The first congregation of the *Maratha Mahasangh* in Mumbai in early 1980s most vehemently put forward its opposition to Mandal and to caste based reservations. It claimed that it would be suicidal to equate Marathas with *Mahars* and *Matangs*, the two important Dalit communities in Maharashtra. The recent texts of the Maratha leaders however celebrate Dr Ambedkar and also strongly uphold the idea of caste based reservations rather than those based on economic criteria. These claims are accompanied by clever construction of caste majorities and there are several interesting subtexts to these constructions. At one level, there is a revival and reformulation of the Brahmin/non-Brahmin cultural divide in which the Dalits are seen as allies of the Marathas. There are attempts to alleviate the memories of past antagonism between Dalits and Marathas by projecting Brahmins as instigators of these conflicts of the past. At another level, Maratha deprivations are defined in terms of overall indicators of social and economic deprivation of the state and these are invoked to prove the economic, social and educational backwardness of the Marathas. It is argued that since Maharashtra is poor and since Marathas constitute majority in Maharashtra, Marathas too are poor and need benefits of reservations. Intra-community gender disparities strangely intersperse in these narratives as pointers to social backwardness of the community and as justification of the demands for reservations ( Khedekar, 2008).

The backward classes commission of the state had rejected the claims of the Marathas to be a socially and educationally backward community in its report submitted to the government



in 2008. The government overruled the decision of the commission in its appointment of the Rane committee in 2013 (led by cabinet minister and staunch Maratha leader Narayan Rane) that declared the Marathas to be educationally and economically backward. In June 2014 the government of Maharashtra decided to allocate 16 per cent reservations for Marathas and 5 per cent for Muslims in education and employment (over and above reservations under Mandal Commission). The decision came after sustained agitations on the part of the Maratha caste organizations for over 10 years led by the '*Maratha Aarkshan Mahamorcha*' a platform of more than 23 caste organizations of the Marathas. Most of the leaders of these organizations come from the backward regions of Marathwada and are aspirants of formal positions of power.

It was not a coincidence that the demand for Maratha reservations gained its main support from the Marathwada region. Marathas are regionally concentrated in two regions of Western Maharashtra and Marathwada and there are significant differences in their economic status across regions. Maharashtra has only a small portion of its agricultural land under irrigation. The rest of the land is arid and most of the Maratha and Kunbi farmers survive as subsistence farmers. The Congress model of agrarian development even during the sixties added to the existing economic inequalities among these groups also regionally located in different areas. Internal contradictions within Maratha-Kunbi caste cluster were often discussed in terms of the irrigated and drought-prone areas, between aristocratic and non-aristocratic families, or in terms of rich and poor Marathas. At all these levels, the regional locations overlapped with their economic inequalities. The economic inequalities and the resulting material anxieties of sections of Marathas became an important push in their politics of reservations, particularly so in the Marathwada region, itself a backward region of the state.

### III

Being a large community, Marathas are bound to have internal stratification. The evolution of cooperatives could have been imagined as a factor addressing and reducing this stratification. At the least, it was expected to ameliorate the acuteness of stratification. Ironically, the sugar cooperatives led to the rise of a new class of well-off farmers within the community (who may be described as the neo-high Maratha as distinct from the 'high' Marathas in the traditional ritual hierarchical sense). The islands of relative prosperity, (particularly in western Maharashtra) that cooperatives produced, only made this stratification appear more sharply. While the demand for 'reservations' (affirmative action) and the discourse of backwardness, in a sense, conceals/denies this internal stratification, it also very emotively and effectively addresses the issue of stratification among the Maratha community.

Again, while the stratification of the community is not new and the emergence of a new rich class too, is not new, the claims of backwardness of the *community as a whole* have an important context. Maharashtra pursued an aggressive agenda of economic liberalization since 1988 under Sharad Pawar's leadership. It was during this latter phase (1988 onwards) that the precarious balance between the agrarian interests and urban-non-agrarian interests was upset. The new political economy neglected rural and agrarian interests and advocated

export oriented commercialization of agriculture that could benefit only a section of the agricultural classes. During this period, there were attempts to situate further industrial expansion outside of Mumbai. Assistance from financial institutions to the industrial sector increased multi-fold and even the tertiary sector recorded its highest share in state domestic product. Maharashtra has always been an industrially advanced state. However, earlier the political leadership tried to maintain a balance between the agrarian and the industrial sectors. The post 1990 phase saw rapid erosion of the balancing elements as capitalist development in Maharashtra became more skewed both in terms of neglect of the agriculture and in terms of its regional concentration. Apart from adding to rural distress, this new imbalance also meant that the political power holders (mostly coming from Maratha community), lost real power.

Despite the chronicles of political ascendance of the Maratha community, the nature of their material domination has always remained somewhat uncertain and open to examination. It is true that Marathas dominate the agrarian resources; that they had evolved an elaborate institutional mechanism to protect and further their material interests through the network of cooperatives in sugar, cotton but more importantly, in the field of rural credit and banking. Nevertheless, this always shaped within the context of industrial capitalism and the latter interests have always dominated the Maratha interests (Vora, 1994). In this sense, the Marathas could never effectively dominate the economy of the state fully; on the contrary, they had to take a secondary position vis-à-vis the urban-capitalist interests. Maharashtra's aggressive pursuit of the capitalist agenda during the post-liberalization phase added to this imbalance. Since the late eighties and nineties political dominance of the Maratha elite became more and more devoid of capacity to control the material interests. In this period, there was further erosion of the material role of the Marathas. We have described this development as disjunction between political and material dominance (Palshikar-Deshpande, 2003). As a result, the Maratha elite could no more divert flows of material interests to their followers in the rural areas.

A call for expansion of the industrial, urban centres naturally attracted Maratha youths to the urban centres since the eighties. However these sections could not have adequate access to urban resources for various reasons. One, only a few elite Maratha families could invest in medium and large capitalist projects in urban as well as rural areas. Secondly, the Maratha youths lacked skills and training required for the industrial sector. The nineties saw a further distortion in the capitalist development that resulted in disproportionate expansion of the service sector and the IT industry (Bhandari and Kale, 2007). Brahmins monopolized high profile jobs in these sectors with all their advantages as traditional elites in Marathi society. Maratha youths remained engaged in lower rung jobs or were mostly accommodated in the sundry networks of informal economy that flourishes around these sectors. The public sector opportunities were already shrinking when young Marathas aspired for them through State Public Service Commission examinations. The lack of access to urban economic resources developed a deep sense of relative deprivation among sections of Marathas.

A large section of the Marathas still remains trapped in the agricultural sector and do not have enough access to urban resources. There is not much systematic empirical evidence available regarding the current material realities of castes (The Report of the Rane committee which recommended reservations for Marathas on grounds of their economic backwardness has not been made public). Data from National Election Studies give us some useful pointers in this respect. As per the NES data of 2004, more than 70 percent of Maratha Kunbis lived in villages. After ten years the Maratha- Kunbis in Maharashtra still have a predominantly rural existence, as nearly 80 per cent of our sampled Maratha respondents were from villages. The NES data of 2014 also clearly reveals the internal economic stratification within the Marathas. More than fifty percent of the Marathas are engaged in agricultural activities as of now. Around 20 per cent of these respondents were landless labourers whereas around 15 per cent possessed land under 5 acres. The rural rich Marathas account for hardly three per cent of the sampled Maratha families. These realities point to a possible skew within the community which may strike at the roots of claims for a homogenous existence.

To investigate this problem further, we have currently undertaken the study of two villages. A socio-economic survey was conducted in these two villages in 2013. The villages were from the Marathwada and western Maharashtra region and in both villages the Maratha community had a significant numerical presence. The survey brings out the internal economic divisions among Marathas at these two sites. From our combined survey sample of over 800 families in the two villages, on an average 13 per cent families are landless. This percentage goes up to 29 among the Dalits and up to 25 per cent among the Marathas. In addition to this, more than 20 percent Maratha families own less than 2 acres of land and another 40 percent have less than five acres of land in their possession. The land ownership patterns suggest that nearly 65 per cent Marathas are poor whereas hardly 4 per cent own more than 20 acres of land and thus may be classified as rich farmers. More than three quarters of our Maratha respondents in the survey were engaged in agricultural activities. Among them ten per cent are landless agricultural labourers. The incidence of poverty among Marathas matches with the average patterns of poverty among these villages. This pattern underlines the deep threefold division consisting of poor Marathas, well-off Marathas having the capacity to negotiate with the urban environs and the rich Maratha class.

These patterns also overlap with the regional disparities if we generalize on the basis of these micro level studies. As mentioned earlier, one of the villages, Randhe is in the Ahmednagar district from the western Maharashtra region. This is one of the most prosperous regions of the state cultivating cash crops and where supportive agrarian infrastructure was put in place long ago. The other village, Khuntegaon is from the Latur district of the Marathwada region and has a somewhat different social as well as economic profile from Randhe. The region of Marathwada is historically known for its poverty, droughts and agrarian backwardness. Expectedly, the Maratha families in Khuntegaon in Marathwada are poorer than those in Randhe although the overall patterns of internal economic stratification within the community are evident in both the villages. The extent of landlessness can be found in 10 per cent of the Maratha families in Randhe whereas in

Khuntegaon their percentage goes up to 25. The same is true of share of marginal farmers among the Marathas in two villages.

While the internal stratification within the community has implications for both homogenization strategies and leadership patterns, it is also important in the short run in connection with vote-choice of the different sections of the community. Fragmentation of the Maratha vote has been a big story of Maharashtra elections throughout the past decade ( as we reported in section One above). The historic connection between the Congress party and the Maratha community are on the verge of being snapped. Moving away from the Congress, the Maratha community turned to Shiv Sena in 1995 and finally to Shiv Sena and BJP in the Lok Sabha elections of 2014. This trend was in evidence even in the 2009 Lok Sabha elections when 49 percent of the Maratha- Kunbis had preferred the BJP- Shiv Sena over the Congress- NCP. There was a further consolidation of the Maratha support for the saffron alliance in the 2014 round of elections. There is an interesting mix of caste and class factors in this trend.

While the fragmentation of Maratha vote and a turn towards BJP and Shiv Sena is becoming more and more evident over the last one decade, it still eludes a clear pattern. No clear picture emerges regarding which Maratha sections particularly prefer the non-Congress (and non-NCP) options. As shown in Table 2, the class character of the Maratha- Kunbi vote does not operate much at the obvious level of rich and poor Marathas but more in terms of their occupations and location. Marathas having access to urban and non- agricultural resources seem to have favoured the BJP-Shiv Sena alliance more than the rural, agriculturist Marathas. But even among agriculturist Marathas, a large section votes for the BJP-Shiv Sena alliance in the 2014 parliamentary elections. Besides their economic class and occupation, another factor associated with Maratha vote is their regional location. As Table three shows, each regions seems to have evolved a separate dynamic of the community’s political preference. This pattern also gels well with the overall nature of social support to the saffron alliance from the privileged groups.

Table 2: Internal Divisions among Maratha Kunbis( vote in LS elections 2014)

	Congress NCP+	BJP Shiv Sena +
Agriculturists	40	52
Maratha-Kunbis in non-agricultural occupations	33	46
Rich Maratha-Kunbis	44	43
Poor Maratha-Kunbis	40	39
Rural Maratha-Kunbis	42	48
Urban Maratha-Kunbis	25	51

Source: NES data 2014

Table Three: Maratha Vote by Region : 2014 Assembly

	BJP	SS	Cong	NCP
N. Maharashtra	35	21	11	9
Vidarbha	41	23	20	7
Marathwada	23	22	7	32
Mumbai-Thane	18	43	12	5
W. Maharashtra	18	36	11	25
Total	24	29	11	17

Source: Palshikar, 2014; 12

#### IV

This paper has attempted to map the challenges faced by the dominant caste and its politics. These challenges are related to the economic and socio-political situation in which the dominant community finds itself. The phenomenon of 'dominant caste' was an outcome of the interface between caste and modern democratic politics. At the same time, it was an outcome of political economy of each region. The dominance of Maratha-Kunbi caste cluster was not only an outcome of numerical strength of the community. Besides that, the historical memory and practice of rulership in rural Maharashtra helped the community stake claim for political power once democratic politics evolved. This claim was further consolidated because of the ability of the leadership to build a larger coalition—first within the community and later across castes but vis-à-vis the upper castes (Brahmins in particular). But in the period after 1960, the dominance of Marathas owed more to the political economy than to these historical factors. As we discussed in section one, state-protection accorded to agriculture and agro-based industry and rural cooperatives ensured the consolidation of the dominance of Maratha community. Thus, history and political economy facilitated not merely dominance but hegemony of the community. The demand for reservations and claim that the community is backward indicate erosion of that hegemony. As Maratha hegemony began to crumble, the dominance too began to be challenged. Exactly the same logic of democracy that propelled the Maratha community into a hegemonic position turned against it since the eighties. 'External' factors such as Indira Gandhi's efforts to undermine the Maratha leadership contributed to the crisis; but basically the challenge came from within the community and from non-Maratha OBC groups. The Maratha leadership succumbed to these pressures in that it first brushed aside the challenges and then acquiesced into the argument of backwardness. On the other hand, it also acquiesced into the logic of capitalist development because the elite had already moved out of agrarian interests. This shift weakened its hegemonic position both vis-à-vis the OBCs and vis-à-vis ordinary Maratha community as a whole. Politically however, the elite have been hopelessly dependent on the rural Maratha vote and emotive appeals to caste identity and attacks on imaginary enemies of Maratha identity had to be resorted to by the elite. This move further eroded the hegemony of the Maratha community. The entire period from the 1980s is thus a period of gradual displacement of the dominant caste from hegemonic position to that of numeric preponderance.

During the same period, both elite and ordinary Marathas began to look for political vehicles other than the Congress. On the one hand, this ended the congress system in Maharashtra while on the other hand, it also resulted into political fragmentation of the Maratha community. The Assembly elections of 2014 have pushed the crisis of the dominant caste into a more serious predicament because not only did the leadership and the community fragmented in this election, but the elite also lost control over state apparatus and key resources (Palshikar; 2014). Needless to say, all these developments are interwoven with developments at the all-India level and have implications for the politics of dominant caste in general. We contend that the trajectory of the Maratha community and its dominance in Maharashtra is thus representative of the multiple challenges faced by a dominant caste.

One way to comprehend these challenges would simply be to say that such challenges to dominance constitute an inevitable part of the dynamic of democracy. However, we have shown that structural factors (material condition of the Marathas) along with their internal differentiation produce most of the challenges. In this sense, besides the specificity of society and economy of Maharashtra, we come across a larger and more general question. As we move away from historical construction of dominance, politics of dominant caste confronts challenges both for its homogeneity and its hegemonic practices. The ongoing project by Anderson et al (2013 and 2014; mentioned at the beginning in Section one) brings out interesting details and traverses a somewhat different theoretical space. In our view, that study has many overlaps with our present argument but of course, the theoretical move to situate the issue in the contexts of functioning of local institutions, the structural boundedness of democratic processes and the overall context of clientelism as an analytical framework differentiates that study from the present argument. Yet, we find the valuable empirical data from that study as an important factor in understanding the larger, state level predicament and political strategies of the elite from Maratha caste. At the micro level, the elite capture of democratic institutions may continue, and yet, the resistance to 'political reservations' and attempts to sabotage those by claiming 'kunbi' status indicates the insecurities of the Maratha elites. Similarly, the local clientelist control of vote notwithstanding, survey data from post-election studies shows that Marathas as a community are facing deep fragmentation since the nineties. Third, while Maratha elite manage to appropriate democratic spaces locally, their control over public policy is severely restricted now and as such they have to resort to claiming overall backwardness of the entire community as a tool to retain control over the community. These factors in conjunction with the data from Anderson et al, present a paradoxical picture of dominance and insecurity, control and loss of power. We argue that this paradoxical picture sums up the contemporary predicament of the politics of dominant caste. 'Dominance' shaped from and in the context of competitive democracy and that same framework of competitive democracy has now posed challenges before dominance. Another impetus to dominance was the welfare oriented state policies within a capitalist framework. That same political economy has now presented the dominant castes with the situation wherein they have to rely on the (poor) masses but have less and less to deliver to them by way of benefits. This contemporary predicament undermines dominant role of the dominant caste and the political advantage

that the congress party could historically draw from its association with the dominant castes in different parts of the country.

We can witness this broader trajectory unfolding in many states – at different times and with different details. The demand for reservations and claims of backwardness were not confined only to the Marathas and Maharashtra during the post-Mandal phase. The locally/regionally dominant castes from different states used claims of backwardness as a successful political strategy during this period. The Marathas initially opposed the weakly articulated challenge of the politics but later on join in their discourse. The Lingayats and Vokkaligas as the two dominant castes in Karnantaka diffused the backward caste challenge to their dominance by successfully appropriating the discourse of backwardness for their own benefits (Deshpande; 2014, forthcoming). In Rajasthan on the other hand, the elite backlash, on behalf of the Jats, preceded the subaltern challenge (Jenkins, 2004). These different strategies of assertions of backwardness by the dominant castes are rooted in different regional contexts and thus acquire different regional and temporal dimensions. However, in all the states like Maharashtra, where the Congress system survived for a long time, the OBC challenge remains weakly articulated. This may be seen as an important strategic success for the dominant castes in appropriating the reservation discourse. Their claims of backwardness also seriously undermine the potentiality of reservation discourse as a text of social justice.

On the other hand, as we argue here, the material and political anxieties of the dominant castes, compel them to resort to claims of backwardness. At this level, the politics of the dominant castes remains embedded in the structuring of the local regional economies. At the same time it is also influenced by the twin impact of unfolding democratic and capitalist economic processes at the macro level. The logic of democratic politics in India and more specifically the policies of affirmative action have redefined caste. At the same time, other developments in the material field also intervened in the traditional caste hierarchy and caste system. Capitalist development played a crucial role here. But routine changes such as urbanization, spread of education and formal access to freedom of occupation underscored the effects of the logic of capitalist development. More significant aspect of this development is the fragmentation of the caste in terms of material status of its members. While politics makes it viable to converse in the language of caste, for that to be possible, it is necessary that strategies of overcoming this fragmentation are employed.

While distortions produced by capitalist development and globalization make it possible to claim material deprivation and backwardness; reservation is the discursive space available within the democratic institutional set up that different castes and communities are bound to occupy. The discursive space of backwardness on the one hand facilitates a suitable construction of caste ideology that covers up material deprivations at least in a tokenist manner and also keeps intact the consensus around the theme of social justice. On the other hand, the Mandal discourse legitimizes caste as a political category and creates small openings within practices of democracy, for assertions of traditional caste dominance. This is what the Marathas attempted during the more recent times – despite but also because of their dominant political position in the state.

## References

- Anderson Siwan, Patrick Francois and Ashok Kotwal, 2013, One Kind of democracy, Working paper shared by authors; also available at the website of UBC.
- Anderson Siwan, Patrick Francois and Ashok Kotwal, 2014, Clientelism in Indian Villages, Working Paper shared by authors; also available at the website o UBC.
- Birmal Nitin, 1999, Prabal Jaaticha Pradeshik Paksha: Rashtravadi Congress (Marathi-NCP: Regional Party of the Dominant Caste), *Samaj Prabodhan Patrika*, October- December, pp. 221-5.
- Datar Abhay and Vivek Ghotale, 2013, Maharashtra Cabinets: Social and Regional Profile 1960-2010, *Economic and Political Weekly*, vol. 68, no 36, Sept.7, pp 37-42.
- Deshpande Prachi, 2007, *Creative Pasts, Historical Memory and Identity in western India 1700-1960*, New Delhi, Permanent Black.
- Deshpande Rajeshwari, 2004, Reservations to Kunbi Marathas: Backward Journey of a Caste, *Economic and Political Weekly*, Vol. 39, No. 14 and 15, April, 3-10, pp. 1448-1449.
- Deshpande Rajeshwari, 2006, Maharashtra: Politics of Anxieties, Frustrations and Outrage, *Economic and Political Weekly*, vol.41, No. 14, April 8-14, pp 1304-07.
- Deshpande Rajeshwari, 2010, Caste Associations in the Post-Mandal Era Notes from Maharashtra, *CAS Occasional Paper Series: No. 2*, Department of Politics and Public Admn., University of Pune, Pune.
- Deshpande Rajeshwari, 2014, *Bhagwangadavarun Mala Mumbai Disate Aahe'*: How Caste Survives Amidst Democratic Politics, in Dusan Deak and Daniel Thorner (eds.), *Rethinking Western India: The Changing Contexts of Culture, Society and Religion*, New Delhi, Orient Blackswan, pp. 91-104.
- Deshpande Rajeshwari, 2014 (forthcoming), Seeking OBC Status: Political Strategies of Two Dominant Castes, *Studies in Indian Politics*, Vol. 2, No. 2, December.
- Jenkins, Rob. (2004), *Reservation politics in Rajasthan*. Working paper, Crisis States Programme, London, LSE.
- Kamat A R, 1983, *Essays on Social Change in India*, Mumbai, Somaiyya Prakashan
- Khedekar Purushottam (ed), 2008, *Maratha Aarkshan* (Marathi, Maratha Reservations), Pune, Jijai Prakashan.
- Lele Jayant, 1982, *Elite Pluralism and Class Rule: Political Development in Maharashtra*, Mumbai, Popular Prakashan.



Lele Jayant, 1990, Caste, Class and Dominance: Political Mobilization in Maharashtra, in Francine Frankel and MSA Rao (eds), *Dominance and State Power in Modern India: Decline of a Social Order*, vol 2, Delhi, Oxford University Press, pp 115-211.

Palshikar Suhas, 2014, Maharashtra Assembly Election: Farewell to Maratha politics?, *Economic and Political Weekly*, Vol. 49, Nos. 43-44, 1 November; pp. 10-13.

Palshikar Suhas, 2004, Shiv Sena: A Tiger with Many Faces?, *Economic and Political Weekly*, volume 39, no 12, April 3-10, pp 1497-1507.

Palshikar Suhas and Nitin Birmal, 2003, 'Fragmented Marathas Retain Power' in P. Wallace and R. Roy (eds.), *India's 1999 Elections and Twentieth Century Politics*, New Delhi, Sage, pp 206-32.

Palshikar Suhas and Rajeshwari Deshpande, 2003, Maharashtra: Challenges Before the Congress System, *Journal of Indian School of Political Economy*, Vol. 15, No.1-2, January- June, pp. 97-122.

Palshikar Suhas, Rajeshwari Deshpande and Nitin Birmal, 2014, Survival in the Midst of Decline: A decade of Congress Rule in Maharashtra: 1999-2009, in Palshikar Suhas, K.C. Suri and Yogendra Yadav (eds.), *Party Competition in Indian States: Electoral Politics in post-Congress Polity*, New Delhi, Oxford University Press, pp. 416-430.

Vora Rajendra, 1994, An Agenda for the Study of Political Economy of Maharashtra, Occasional Paper no 1, SAP, Department of Politics and Public Admn, University of Pune, Pune.

Vora Rajendra, 2009, Maharashtra or Maratha Rashtra?, in Christophe Jaffrelot and Sanjay Kumar (eds.), *Rise of the Plebeians?: the Changing Face of Indian Legislative Assemblies*, New Delhi, Routledge, pp 215-244.

Vora Rajendra and Suhas Palshikar, 1996, *Maharashtratil Sattantar* (Marathi- Power Transfer in Maharashtra), Mumbai, Granthali.

Vora Rajendra, Suhas Palshikar and Yeshwant Sumant, 1983, Sixth Lok Sabha Elections: Maharashtra, Research Abstract Quarterly, ICSSR, Jan- June 1983,