CHAPTER 5
This chapter is a narration of day to day experiences of Mahar women in the social, economic and political fields. It delves into the existing customs and practices within the social worlds of these women. Further, it focuses on rural and urban variations in the public and private spheres, and tries to understand the political consciousness and multiple patriarchies.

Mahars considered education as a major tool for the upliftment and development of their community. Mahar women were more conscious about the value of education than the Mahar men. However, drop-outs were rampant among them because of poverty. Rural and urban women from slums vehemently protested against state institutions and agencies. They participated in demonstrations at the Taluka and Zilla offices against water and electricity scarcity, lack of drainage, and other social problems like harassment and molestation of women in work places. In urban areas of Ahmadnagar and Sangli, educated Mahar women visited the urban slums and tried to sort out the problems of deserted wives among Mangs and Mahars. They established self-help groups among poor women to make them self independent. However, Mahar women did whatever work was available for them in the rural and urban areas. Mahar women had a small Mahila Mandal in the urban areas but not in rural areas. Both rural and urban women visited Buddha Vihar regularly. In the rural places people did not have drinking water and other basic facilities; yet these same rural villages had a proper Buddha Vihars constructed by the Dalit politicians.
The Mahar women frequented government offices to enquire about new government schemes for their economic empowerment. For instance, the self-help groups of women were very active both in the rural and urban areas. But, due to monetary problems it did not sustain for long in the rural areas. In many cases, they have been closed down in a span of just six months or a year. Most of the women want to establish small-scale industries such as papad making, bottling pickles, stitching clothes, making incense sticks, candle making etc. However, the lack of infrastructure has frustrated their hopes. They argued that they did not have any organization that supported the economic or social rights of the women in the rural areas.

They tried to help all Dalit caste women or women in general who were victims of different forms of violence. They would rush to the spot to resolve the problems and provide all possible help for the victims. It was to witness a horrendous form of violence during the field trip. Several incidences of violence were narrated by Mahar women. In the urban slums and rural areas wife beating and extra-martial affair were commonly observed. The Mahar women in the vicinity mobilised all the other Mahar women and rushed to the spot. They argued that usually they filed the first information report at the police station and organised a demonstration in front of the collector's office. They further asked Mahar women lawyers to pursue those cases. In case a female lawyer is not available then the male lawyers are asked to pursue the cases. According to them educated people must pay attention to community. It should be their moral duty to serve the interest of the community. Thus, these women were highly conscious of their political rights. One of the major contradictions about activist women was that in the primary stages they selflessly worked for the community.
women and over a period of time joined non-governmental organizations purely for monetary benefits.

They argued that every department, every school and every gram Panchayat offices were afflicted by corruption; hence, they felt the need to fight against injustice. The Mahar girls said that they liked struggling for education and earning for themselves. One of the major problems among them was that as they were relatively better educated than the Mahar boys; hence, the Mahar boys were unwilling to marry them. This trend was found among the urban Mahar families, more so in Buddhist and Christian homes. Another problem in the rural areas was that girls, though wanting to educate themselves, were forced by their parents to go in for marriage because of poverty. Traditional views among Mahar and Mang can be seen clearly, but the traditional gap between them is not as rigid as it was earlier.

In the rural areas, women were aware of the governmental schemes and policies. For instance, *Mahatma Phule Vikas Mahamandal Yojana* provides the infrastructure to strengthen the economic position of all Dalits. Mahars can avail these schemes. The scheme provides livestock to these families for their financial autonomy. The office gives approval to the applicants on the basis of their land titles. The bank of that particular region provides financial assistance to buy cows, jersey cows, buffalos, goats, sheep, ox, bullocks and poultry. The investigator from the office of MPVMY visits the homes of the beneficiaries and submits the progress report to the office. However, the majority of the Mahar women argued that these schemes did not benefit them; they said more money was needed to feed the animals. It has also been said that they do not have the money to feed their children and so rearing animals is a herculean task for them.
Moreover, they are disappointed with the exclusion and discrimination practices of the government officers. In narrating their experiences in the focus group interviews, Mahar women lamented that even to get the cheques meant for them from the bank officers they have to bribe them.

The geographical classification of Mangwada and Maharwada still exists in the traditional fashion. However, the Mahar caste group now call the Maharwada as Buddhawada. The Mahars have warmly accepted this etymological shift because of the political significance related to the new name. The new name of their locale becomes a signifier of political difference. The traditional views among Mahar and Mang can be seen clearly. For instance, the Mahars told me stories about how Mangs are untrustworthy and lazy. They quoted proverbs like Mang aani Bhalacha Kahi Sanga! Magachya Sat Aanga. However, Mahar women went to the Mangwadas to try to help resolve family problems such as wife beating etc.

The Mang boys said that Mahars claimed Ambedkar belonged to them alone. Boys from both communities would greet each other 'Jaibhim'. But, after walking some distance and they part ways, the Mahars would remark to each other about how the Mangs too have started saying 'Jaibhim'. Thus the Mahar boys made fun of the Mang boys. Mangs also say that the Mahars think of themselves as superior. It was also true that many of the Mang families had a sense of pride as they were respected by the Marathas. This was because Mangs are considered as lucky for the Marathas. The interaction of the educated Buddhist Mahar and Hindu Mang boys is a positive development.

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The Mahar Buddhist/Christian women from the urban areas celebrate Ambedkar Jayanti together but Mang Christians and Hindus do not attend these functions. The women from both the groups were eager to share their experiences. But, everywhere, the male members—the husband, brother or son—cautioned them not to share their experiences. Some times, women spoke out and that would lead to squabbles among them. Women from the Mahar caste were not willing to answer any questions on the current political discourse. In their view all politicians were corrupted and made money for themselves while remaining insensitive to the plight of the people. Most of them argued that politics was meant only for the males. They said they had no idea about it at all. All these women go to vote by merely remembering the symbols of the party. They did not understand the agenda, the insight or the ideological orientations of political parties. This is an indication of the failure to strengthen the democratic spaces for them in the public sphere. Here, we will deal with the major thematic issues that emerged from the survey with data sampling.

The educated women from the Mahar Buddhist families did not like the idea of them being referred to as Mahar Buddhists. They pointed out that they are Buddhists. Therefore, they rejected the idea of being referred to as Mahar caste. The educated women officers from the Mahar Buddhist community said that though they had given up Hindu goddesses and gods, Buddhist values were not cultivated among the families, especially among the male members. Many of the Mahar women from urban educated families had similar views. In the rural areas, Mahar Buddhist women still engage in the propitiation of goddesses and gods. However, it is not strictly followed among them. Several women are victims of Mahar patriarchy. They keenly narrated their stories. They pointed out that the male members did not like them going to the Buddha Vihar by
themselves. They were accused of ignoring the families and other responsibilities. However, some of the women said that compared to Brahman and caste Hindu women, they did not have to face the intense forms of patriarchy because educated Mahar males were changing lot. Most of the urban women said that their husbands helped them in domestic work. These women took the decisions in their every day discourses most of the time. According to them, the change among Mahar males will occur slowly because male and female members are impacted by the larger society. In their understanding, there is need for the father and mother within the home to understand the basic values of Buddha and his teaching and adhere to the principal of equality in every day life. Then probably society will change. The rural women respondents said that most of the decision making is a collective effort of the husband and wife. Interestingly, Mahar Buddhist women were very vocal on the issues of patriarchy. They gave interviews separately to avoid the interference of the male members. However, the male members were cooperative and allowed the women to speak out their views and understanding of the community. But, most of the educated women did not have a deep understanding of economic and political crisis of Mahar community brought about forces such as liberalization, globalization and privatization.

Many Mahar Buddhist and Christian women told stories of their husbands indulging in extra-marital affairs. Extra-marital affair was found to be very common in rural places. Some of the urban women also narrated similar stories of their families and said that despite being they were economically independent they continued to stay with their husbands. They did not dare go in for divorce as they found it was impossible. Society did not allow the existence of single
women. Since they belonged to the Dalit/Mahar caste, not one of the family members (mother, father, sister, brother etc) would support them morally.

Conversion to Buddhism has not resulted in the eradication of patriarchy. It was education and the legacy of the Ambedkarite movement that mobilized women to achieve their dreams. No women organizations in the groups including Mahila Mandal and trade unions addressed their day to day survival concerns in rural areas. It is true that to a large extended the urban Mahar women have rejected the worship of Hindu gods and goddesses. But, the social activities of Buddhism have failed to address their socio-economic political problems and exploitation of their own sisters.

The Vastis of Mahars in the rural and urban areas can be easily located. Even today they are located in the outskirts of the villages because other non-Dalit castes do not stay in such areas. The Vastis in the urban and rural areas do not have proper infrastructures. The Buddhist Mahars in the urban areas call themselves as followers of Ambedkar. Ever since they embraced Buddhism they have given up Hindu rituals. Their claims are similar to that of the Mangs in the rural areas. However, the Mangs continue to rigidly follow tradition while very few Buddhist Mahars do so.

**Myth and Reality**

To see Mahar women is believed to be a bad omen. One has to explore the dynamics of the myth that is associated with the Balutedari system to explain this phenomenon. It has aggravated the hierarchy within these castes. Mahar men/women consider the stigmatized labour like messengers and carrying
corpses as unfortunate conditions of their life. Earlier they use to perform village duties as watchmen, wall-menders, servants of any passing government official, aides to the Patil (headmen) in boundary disputes, tax or police matters etc. These occupations were transferred from one generation to the next and the forms of subordination associated with such labours were passed on. They were given small portions of *watan* land as a badge of public office; they were thus confined within that limited *watan* land. Before converting to Buddhism, many of the Mahars followed similar rituals like that of the Mangs. This has been discussed in the previous chapter.

But, the conversion to Buddhism had a tremendous impact in the lifestyles of Mahars. The urban educated as well as the uneducated women visited the Buddha Vihar regularly once or twice a week. They performed the Trisharan and Panchsheel which is explained to them by the senior male/female. They also read Ambedkar’s book entitled *Buddha and his Dhamma* and engaged in dialogue among themselves on the different aspects of Buddhism. Despite suffering from abject poverty, they celebrated the two main festivals Ambedkar Jayanti (Birthday celebration of Ambedkar) and Buddha Purnima2/Jayanti (Birthday celebration of Buddha). The main reason for the celebration of such festivals was to show gratitude to these persons or images of counter cultures that empowered their community. They argued that they were there because of Ambedkar. They were able to make headway because of his struggles. If Ambedkar had not carried out the reforms, they would have been carrying corpses like their forefathers. These women wear white sari on the day of celebration. Their

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2 It means full-moon day.
enthusiasm was surprising on the day of the birth celebration of Ambedkar which fell on 14 April.

On 13 April 2006, an interview was conducted with a group of women staying in the same slum. Most of them were graduate and post-graduate degree holders. They worked in the various places on a daily basis. Some worked as domestic labourers; others stitched cloths in the slums.

Although they had no money to even buy ingredients to make tea and cook food, they contributed money for the celebration of Ambedkar Jayanti. In rural areas many of the families follow the Buddha and Ambedkar along with Mariaai. Especially in Sangli, the elderly women labourers are followers of Mariaai and Kaluaais. In Sangli’s urban areas some Mahar Buddhists still celebrate Hindu festival such as Diwali, Akshyatritiya, Pitremokshaamvasya, Dassehra, Rakshabandan and Nagpanchami. However, Christian Mahars have completely dismissed the Hindu gods and goddesses and their festivals. In fact, a couple of Potraj from the Mahar Buddhist community were still found, which is a rare case.

The number of Potraj is high in the Mang community as compared to the Mahars. The Mahar women from rural and urban areas asserted that if a large number of Mangs had converted to Buddhism then there would have been tremendous

3 Mariaai is one of the Hindu goddesses traditionally worshipped by Dalit castes such as Mahar, Mang, Dhor, Chamar etc. Mariaai is worshipped because she is believed to protect the villagers from famine and contagious diseases. Most of the Mahars have given up the worship after their conversion. However, a few Buddhists are found practicing it.

4 It refers to a person who is dedicated to the gods and goddesses from childhood. He performs some duties of the gods and goddesses. During the field trip I came across a Potraj, who was a Nagar Sevak. He was by profession a Bhangar. Bhangar is one of the occupations of the Mangs who have migrated from villages to urban spaces.
changes among them. It would also have helped them get the self respect which Hindu religion has denied them for centuries.

Mahars would not accept the Mangs but project themselves (Mahars) as superior. However, many of the Mahar women respondents said that they always tried to accommodate Mang women in the private and public spaces. Mahars consider commensality a threat to their purity of caste. However, most of the Mahar women believe that only they can break the caste within caste. They believe in the strength of collectivist activities. They also believed that such solidarities will break the identity formation on the basis of sub-castes.

The Mahars were found to have converted to Christianity at Ahmadnagar and Jamkhed in big numbers. Therefore, Mahar Buddhist women also share the elements of Christianity. They did not follow orthodox life-styles like that of Mang Hindus. Mahar women rejected the traditional/caste-based dress code because of their affinity towards the Ambedkarite ideology which advocated the modernization of their polluted social body. Mahar women do not carry any caste-related signs like particular dress code, ornaments, tattoos etc. Educated women who are members of social organization such as Backward and Minority Community Employee Federation, Pradya Ankur, Ambedkar Mahila Mandal and others completely rejected wearing Mangalsutra and usually wear just the single golden chain with the logo of Dhamma Chakra. Mahar women also share certain other similar habits like wearing green bangles. Even after conversion, the Mahar Buddhists continue to follow certain old rituals and customs like Hindus.
and Mangs. But, the percentage of those women who defy the doxas of religion is very small.5

Oblation among Mahar

During the research survey, it was observed that there were very few Mahar families who believed in the oblation of goat or any other animal. This ritual is followed by a very few aged women in the areas like Sangli and Atpadi. But it is not found among women in Jamkhed and Ahmadnagar. The practice is considered a way of resolving their day to day problems such as diseases. The subcultures like worship of Mariaai, oblation of animals etc., are practices unique from the dominant caste Hindu ethos of Maharashtra. The oblation which is dedicated to Khandoba in Jaisuri is a common practice in western Maharashtra. They sacrifice their daughters to Khandoba and they are called Muralis. Sacrifice of sons to Khandoba is called Vaghya. This practice still exists, to a very small extent, among the illiterate and ignorant Mahar Buddhists. The advent of education among Mahars prompted them to discard such derogatory practices.

Traditional and Modern Trends of Occupational Mobility of Mahar Women

The occupational mobility of the Mahars/Dalits in the Balutedari system was determined by the caste hierarchy of the Hindu social order. However, following conversion, many of the Mahar Buddhist males and females discarded their traditional occupations. But they remained as agricultural/seasonal labourers and daily wage labourers in the rural areas.

The refusal to live within the fold of Hindu religion is encoded in the modern aspirations among Mahar Buddhists. The social forces like industrialization, urbanization and education brought about a lot of changes in the occupation of Mahars. Nevertheless, in the rural and urban areas they are transformed into invisible paid bonded labourers, which is a direct impact of a hegemonic state that maintains the caste system.

**Table 1.1: Traditional and Modern Occupations of Mahar Women**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Occupational change of Mahar Women; Traditional and Modern</th>
<th>Traditional Occupations: Carrying Carrión/Watchman/Messenger etc.</th>
<th>Labourers/daily wages/constructions/rag pickers</th>
<th>Agricultural Labourers/Seasonal</th>
<th>Domestic Servants</th>
<th>Government Services</th>
<th>Total</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Rural Mahar Women</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>20</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Urban Mahar Women</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>20</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

As the statistics shows, 0% of the rural Mahar women are engaged in traditional occupations. The proportion is the same in urban areas. The rural Mahar women working as daily wages labourers and construction workers are 25 per cent. The urban Mahar women who performed similar jobs that include market-yard\(^6\) workers are 20 per cent. They are especially engaged in well-digging and

\(^6\) Market yard is term coined by the leading socialist leader Baba Adhav. He established an organization for labourers and workers who worked in the market as porters.
constructions, and none of them are rag pickers. The neo-liberal agricultural economy has created a major crisis in the life of rural Mahar women who are agricultural labourers. Women constitute 55 per cent of the agricultural labourers. Most of these women are involved in seasonal activities related to agriculture. The urban Mahar women who are into a similar occupation constitute about 25 per cent.

Therefore, the migration rate of these Mahar Buddhist women to urban areas is increasing. Many of the women who were agricultural labourers have shifted as domestic servants in the urban places. About 10% of the Mahar women in rural areas are into domestic services. The percentage of urban Mahar domestic workers is 35%. The percentage of women working as government servants among rural Mahar women is 10%. This figure among urban Mahar women is 20%. Hence we can argue that the government’s polices have not brought about any substantial change in the life of Mahar Buddhist rural women. Although their traditional occupations have vanished, the living conditions of agricultural labourers and migrated women in the work places have remained the same.

Shift from Agricultural Labour to Construction Labour

The Mahar women work as agricultural labourers. This is determined by the economic systems of the village. Their labour in the system of production can be delineated as domestic and landless agricultural labourers. The economic exploitation of the Mahar Buddhist women has a direct linkage with caste and agricultural land. The inequality is reproduced through the denial of the rights to the land and the exclusion on the basis of caste. Therefore, the Mahar women work in a different field of the system of production unlike the domestic
labourers. The Mahar Buddhist women of the agrarian families are different because of their shifting of location within the agrarian economic system. During the famine, agricultural women migrate to other places to work in the sugarcane fields. Mahar women have to remain away from the home and the village for their work. They have to face starvation situations for many weeks. The impoverished condition of Mahar women during those days questions the relevance of the schemes of the government. The domestic and agricultural labourers are influenced by the caste and patriarchal relations within the community and the relations outside the community. However, the accumulation of capital is absent in the lives of Mahar women, and such lack of capital increases the underdevelopment of these women. The Mahar males are aware of the developmental programs due to their education unlike the Mahar women. The privilege of Mahar males reveals the patriarchy within the community.

The Mahar women are subjugated in the domain of the material and cultural/systems through the intricate linkages of caste and patriarchy. The Mahar women have to work in their own lands as well as in the fields of other natives. The status of the women in the modes of production is determined by their land holding. Mahar women have to confront the dearth of the above mentioned capital. They are being uprooted from the modes of production of the region through the intangible webs of patriarchy and caste. Therefore, they are dependent on the landlords and remain as agricultural labourers throughout their lives. Thus, Mahar women live in miserable condition of constant economic crisis. Such a condition perpetuates the multiple inequalities in their lives. The environmental crisis too moulds their lives in a different manner. For instance, Atpadi and Ahmadnagar faced famines because of the scarcity of water. Mahars
in Atpadi do not get proper drinking water. They have to survive with the water that comes rarely.

Therefore, the Mahar males and females migrate to other places in search of jobs. Most of the Mahar males work as masons and women work as labourers at the construction sites. However, the masonry work is dominated by the Mahar males. They learn to mix cement and sand, and lay bricks. It also controls the different aspects of work. Further, they will distribute the work in which they will use, decide the quantity of cement, sand, bricks and other items used. Hence they also supervise the junior labourers. In this process Mahar male workers become skilled masons and Mahar women are reduced to mere construction labourers. Thus, a Mahar male, who is a construction labourer, is over time transformed into a mason and Mahar woman remains a construction labourer. The expertise in that work helps the Mahar male mason to exploit the Mahar women labourers. The autonomy of the Mahar men provides further scope for the manifestation of their masculine identity. Thus, Mahar males acquired upward mobility through masonry, a process which gained momentum from the increasing urbanization. The transformation of the seasonal Mahar women labourers to that of labourers at the construction site is a reflection of the caste on the labour of the Mahar women. The rat race that emerges as part of the capitalist economy also affects construction work and creates individualistic and selfish attitudes among the Mahar women in urban spaces. Mahar women could not accumulate the contacts and linguistic capabilities because of the lack of educational institutions and organizations in the rural areas. The urban Mahar women could not excel because of the above-mentioned deficiencies. Mahar women also could not pursue private education because of the impact of privatization and liberalization in the arena of education.
Mahar Women as Sweepers

The urban areas of Sangli and Ahmadnagar abound with men and women of Mahar Buddhists communities. Their labour can be analysed as a form of caste and patriarchy that is perpetuated through the agencies of the state. The division of labour is exploited by the upper castes resulting in the creation of social spaces of patronage and dependency. For example, the labour of sweepers and scavengers is perceived as a form of pollution by the upper castes, which is bounded by the Balutedari system. Mahars are silenced in their struggle for livelihood and are transformed into dependent subjects of the caste Hindu patrons. Thus, the life chances of these labourers are not changed because of the inherent traditional nature in the modern forms of occupations. The government also maintains the stigma of labour and labourers through state-sponsored jobs. The occupations that have derogatory connotations are legitimized through the discourses of the nation-state. For instance, the jobs of sweepers and manual scavengers are supported by proper salary and other state-centred incentives like provident funds etc. Non-Dalit castes refuse to apply for such jobs because of the subordinate status attached to such jobs. Thus, the ex-untouchables are forced to accept such occupations of disgrace out of the ignorance of their social consequences. Even if they are aware of such consequences, poverty forces them to take on the jobs. Due to the discrimination in the work places, they end up as alcoholics and drug addicts. A kind of inferiority complex can be discerned in their day to day behaviour. Their wives too have to work very hard as scavengers or sweepers. Mahar women's new status as degraded labourers accelerates the discriminations that are based on state-sponsored caste and

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patriarchy in a democratic set-up. Though their economic conditions are better than the ghettoized women, they are marginalized in spheres of education and politics. However, Mahar women are found to be quite conscious about their rights in the working places and their aspirations for the education of their children. In fact, the number of Mahar women engaged as sweepers are much less compared to Mangs women.

Migration

Mahar women in rural areas, adopt migration as a source of mobility. They migrate to nearby urban areas in search of work at construction sites and as domestic workers. Agricultural labourers also seek such jobs because of the seasonal nature of their occupation. The literacy rate is very high among the Mahar women in the urban areas, but the government has failed to provide them employment. Even if some of the Mahar rural women have land in their own names, they continue to suffer from severe poverty due to the lack of money for irrigation. Moreover the chances of getting jobs for the rural Mahar women are limited by their illiteracy. The Mahar Buddhist/Christians are more aware of their rights and social securities than the Christian and Hindu Mangs. Agricultural labourers still face economic distress. The agricultural women labourers who work in the fields of sugarcane and maize are bonded labourers; the landlords exploit the surplus value of their bonded labour. A woman revealed that after marriage, she and her husband started working construction labourers due to poverty.

Hunger and poverty are the main problems. Sometime they get work daily. But, there is no guarantee that work will be available the next day. The contractors do
not pay them in time. Women have to literally beg for them. In the case of Mahar/Dalit woman, sexual exploitation is very common. Society always stereotypes Mahar/Dalit women as women of no moral character. Several times they and their children sleep without food. The parents constantly worry about how to ensure education for their daughters and sons. These experiences are the embodiment of the oppression of women.

**Education as a Capital**

Education is an important tool for awakening one's consciousness and giving the individual self-recognition. It also accelerates one's social, economic and political mobility. When one looks at Dalits, the most deprived community in Indian society, one can clearly see that historically, they had no access to education within the structural hierarchy of the Hindu social order. The Hindu social order maintained the rigidity of caste, class, and gender segregation. Ambedkar created space for the Dalits in the constitutional framework by incorporating reservation for them in various fields. He visualized that through education the underprivileged Dalit and tribal people might improve their position in society, assert their rights, and achieve dignity as human beings. He argued that, "education was not only a lever for their social mobility but also likely to open the door for their modernization. It would also create opportunities for occupational change. It would also make them aware of their humiliation and enslavement and will ultimately serve as an instrument of liberation and improvement."\(^8\)

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\(^8\) K.P. Subba Rao and D. Francis (2000), *Development of Weaker Section*, p. 137.
Gender disparity among Dalits in general and Dalit women in particular is a serious problem and a common phenomenon. It needs to be studied. But, here, the focus is on the Mahar and Mang girl’s education. Money and time are essential to acquiring knowledge. As such, elites everywhere draw the maximum benefits out of education. In the rural Mahar community, most of the families have very low income and survive through agriculture as landless labourers or through menial jobs. Boys are provided education because the patriarchal parents believe that it will bring some security for them. Daughters are not looked at in a similar manner. Caste status further multiplies this difference and very few girls from these two castes are able to enter educational institutions. And, if they do get access to education, the discrimination both within the classroom and outside it discourages them from pursuing education. The poverty and unawareness among the whole community, particularly among women from their respective castes, added to their pitiable plight. The girl child is entrusted with taking care of the younger siblings and the aged in the family. However, there is no denying the fact that education acts as an essential agent for the development of different societies. Women’s education plays an important role in the process of socialization of children. It awakens the consciousness in the girl child and her aware of her rights. Therefore, education is important for the upward mobility of Mahar women. Compared to Mahar males the literacy rate of the Mahar women is very low. One of the reasons for this state of affairs is the lack of access to education and the prevalent poverty. However, the government of Maharashtra has taken the initiative of introducing schemes like free education for girl child under Savitribai Yojana, Mahatma Phule Yojana etc. As part of these schemes, the girl children are given free education till the tenth standard. It is observed that aspiration of education among Mahar girls from rural and urban areas are very high.
Table 1.2 shows the difference in the educational levels of the rural and urban Mahar girls.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Mahar girls in school/higher education</th>
<th>Primary (I-V)</th>
<th>Middle (VI-VIII)</th>
<th>High school/Hr. Secondary (IX-XII)</th>
<th>BA/BA (Hons) B.Sc, B.Com.</th>
<th>MSc MA</th>
<th>PhD</th>
<th>Total Number</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Rural Mahar girls</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>20</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Urban Mahar girls</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>20</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

According to the data in Table 1.2, the percentage of rural Mahar girls' education at primary class is 5 per cent. In the middle class, they constitute 10 per cent and only 45 per cent studied in high school. In the rural areas, 35 per cent were graduates and just 5 per cent had completed masters. Not a single rural Mahar girl had a PhD.

For the urban Mahar girls the share of primary class is 0 per cent. The share of those in middle class is 5 per cent, at higher secondary 15 per cent, in graduation 45 per cent, and 25 per cent in post-graduation. Ten per cent are in higher studies like PhD. Thus, it can be argued that more and more Mahar girls are getting educated. This is because mobilization for the needs of community, aspirations for higher education and political consciousness are high among the entire Mahar community. However, the common complaint of the Mahar girls is that
their families are still biased in favour of the education of the Mahar boys. It is found that most of the Mahar girls are earning and educating themselves to become economically independent. Even in the middle class families, a girl’s education is considered a waste of time and money. In the rural areas, parents believed that girls should not be educated beyond the junior basic level. It is enough that girls are able to read and write. This is because, they are considered as someone else’s property; they will be married and sent away from this house after their marriage. If girls have done schooling enough to write a letter to their parents from her new home, that will be a sufficient achievement on their part. At every step of their education, these girls have no say in the acquisition of knowledge; it is the elder males in the generation/family who decide the educational stream.

It is thus possible to argue that the educational level of the Mahar girls has shown signs of improvement, but we cannot assert with a degree of certainty that educationally the Mahars have been able to register a substantial improvement in their situation. At best, the gains have been marginal and they continue to be at the lowest rung of the educational hierarchy. The drop-out rate of Mahar girls is high especially in rural areas due to poverty. Hence attention should be given to them.

Therefore, the reservation/affirmative policies have largely brought about visible changes in the life chances of the Mahar males and, to a lesser degree, in the Mahar women. One of the salient features of the caste system is that it was based on occupation. Historically, every caste was divided on the basis of their occupations or traditional professions. This was a superimposed system of work culture for the respective castes. The right of the worker to select the job was
denied by the codes of the caste system. Through this discourse of ascribed identity, upper castes and caste Hindus achieved material benefits and self esteem. Thus, lower castes had to confine themselves within the space of stigmatized jobs which denied them self-respect. Therefore, the political economy of caste was very complex and rigid in its day to day operations. Hence, the territory of a particular caste was marked to exclude the “other” castes. But, that discourse is changing among the Mahars and upward mobility is becoming quite common due to the spread of education.

Conversion

Mahars in Maharashtra engage themselves in the nuances of the debates on conversion. Differing positions of the Mahars have been observed on the various aspects of conversion. The Mahar Buddhist community consider conversion as a positive step that took them out of their wretched life under the Hindu religion. The Ambedkarite movement created radical changes in the subjectivities of the Mahar Buddhists. They believe that conversion changed the life-styles of the Mahars, particularly those of the Mahar females, and liberated them from the social stigma. However, the elites among the Mahar Buddhists engross themselves in the eclectic debates on conversion rather than on social and economic development of the vulnerable among their community. However, it is a positive step in that they have given up the worship of Hindu gods and goddesses. Women in the urban areas have totally discarded the goddesses and gods. But in the rural areas they continue to worship them to some extent. Based on their narrations, it is observed that tremendous changes have taken place from the first to the third generation. The present generation of women have completely rejected the worship of Hindu gods and goddesses. One of the main
reasons for the rural Buddhist Mahar girls totally rejecting the worship of idols was because of their leaning towards the Ambedkarite ideology. They used to perform the Trisharan and Panchsheel. However, the Mahar leaders continue to manipulate the Mahars for their votes. On the one hand, the RPI have responded to these Buddhist actions in a positive manner and has challenged the agendas of the parties like BJP. But, the engagement of the RPI with the Buddhist discourses has not brought about any changes in the economic crisis of the Mahars.

**Political Parties and Mahar Women**

The Scheduled Caste and Scheduled Tribe Commission report of 2001 reflects upon the plight of Dalits and Scheduled castes as they are humiliated, insulted, manhandled, assaulted, burnt alive, tortured and subjected to different forms of exclusions and discriminations. The women from these communities are victims of intense violence in the form of rape, molestation, naked parade, witch hunt, murder, excommunication etc. Dalit women have to face these discriminations in their day to day life due to her lower caste and gender status within the realm of graded inequality. Of the forty interviews, around 39 women respondents replied that they had faced discrimination directly or indirectly. The rural respondents had faced direct discrimination and had failed to challenge them.

A common feature of the Mahar Buddhist women is their lack of interest in speaking about politics and political parties. When questioned which party they voted for, most of them replied that they had voted for the Republican Party of India. The reason was quite simple: the leaders are from their respective caste and are Buddhists. However, the situation of the Jamkhed district was different; Mahar women said that they preferred to vote for the congress party. However,
they added that their voting pattern changed from time to time. In the urban areas, most of the Mahar women preferred to vote for RPI. The common explanation was that these leaders were from their caste. Therefore, one can argue that caste-based politics does play a very important role. In the urban areas of Sangli, the majority of the Mahar women also were inclined towards the Republican Party of India. However, they felt that a reserved constituency made no difference because their leaders were easily manipulated by the national-level Congress party. Moreover, they have not been able to bring about any development for the Dalits. The urban women opined that those who have money will win the election. They said money is used freely distributed to induce people to vote for the party concerned. Once the names of the candidate are declared by their respective parties, they will go to Dalit ghettos and provide them money and food, till the elections are over. The question then is what will the poor Dalits do?

To the question on the representation of Mahar women in politics, the women respondents said that it will be healthy to have women in the politics. But, it is difficult to challenge the political system, since it is dominated by males. Women are unable to take any decisions and have to face tremendous discriminations in their every day lives. There is a need for every political party to have mandatory reservation apart from the reserved constituency. Explaining their position, they said that they had been marginalised for hundreds of decades. The urban Mahar women are politically sharp and are aware of the 33 per cent reservation for women. Some of the educated women from the BAMCEF forcefully said that they opposed the 33 per cent reservation for women because women are not politically literate in our country. Therefore, they are being manipulated
thorough the patriarchal politics of the country. It is interesting to see the voting pattern of the Mahar Buddhist women and their preferences.

Table 1.3: Voting Pattern of Rural and Urban Mahar Women

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Name of the Political Party</th>
<th>Rural Mahar Women</th>
<th>Urban Mahar Women</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Congress I</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>RPI</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>NCP</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Shiv-Sena</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>BJP</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CPM</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>BSP</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>20</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Statistics show that the 45 per cent of the rural Mahar women prefer to vote for the Republican Party of India. Of the urban Mahar women, 50 per cent prefer to vote for the RPI. About 25 per cent of the rural Mahar women voted for the Congress. In the urban areas 20 per cent voted for the Congress. In the rural areas 20 per cent voted for the Nationalist Congress Party and in the urban areas 15 per cent voted for it. Significantly, since the last seven to eight years, the Mahar have begun to vote for the Bahujan Samaj Party (BSP). About 10 per cent of the rural women voted for the BSP while 15 per cent of the urban women voted for it. The BSP is emerging as an alternative to the RPI because of the latter’s failure to improve the lot of the Dalits. The Mahar women completely rejected the parties like Shiv-Sena, BJP and CPM.

Therefore, this chapter concludes by arguing that education and conversion brought about remarkable changes in the life of the Mahar women. The Mahar
women gave up their traditional stigmatised occupations but have been entrapped in new stigmatized occupations like sweeping in the urban sphere. They have begun to assert their rights. But, the corruptions in the institutions of state do not provide them further scope for their growth. Dalit political leaders themselves are marginal in number. Therefore, they are not able to provide the solutions to the problems in the life of Mahar women. It has thus become the responsibility of educated Mahar women to think about their rural sisters. The urban Mahar women should challenge the capitalistic ethos of the urban sphere and be one in solidarity with the rural Mahar women. The trust that emerges through such an alliance can lead their life chances in a positive direction.

Conclusion

Mahar Buddhist women are caught in the labyrinth of empowerment and subjugation through their dialogical encounters with Buddhism, Christianity and Hindu religion. On the one hand, they reject Hindu religion and embrace the eclectic version of Buddhism or Christianity. However, they have not been able to achieve the potentials of the Buddhist vision. The metaphysical exegesis that bounds the multiple identities of these women makes them blind towards economic development. The depoliticisation that emerged through the spiritual discourses of the Mahar Buddhist women limited their vision to surpass the circles of social backwardness. The political apathy of the leaders from their community also accelerated the marginalization of these women. The social space that exists between the educated Mahar Buddhist women and the poor among them signifies the proliferation of the lack of affinities between these groups. The realm of Mahar Buddhist women are determined by such constriction of social space and identity.