Chapter-V

Dalit Panthers: Annihilating Caste; Class Enemies
Dawn

The Revolution is not going to wait  
the clenched fists are not to be loosened now  
I have endured much, no more enduring now  
I can't be unfaithful to the blood  
ordering me to hold arms.

The colossal fire is burning  
the seeds of revolution are already sown  
no point in waiting for explosion  
and no life, security even if you drift away.

How to put off inflamed blood-drops?  
the infection pervades every heart  
how would you forbid it?  
no use of being thoughtful, far,  
thoughtlessness brings much more  
What is the harm in keeping the doors open  
at the crimson dawn?

The Dalit Panthers emerged in an atmosphere where there seemed to be no group or party that appeared to be genuinely involved with the problems of Dalits. The country had seen, by late 1960s, the rise and demise of several parties professing to fight for the Dalit cause. It was in this atmosphere of disenchantment with the politics of these parties that the radical, and sometimes violent, programme of the Dalit Panthers emerged. The period of the emergence of Dalit Panthers was also the period when both education and communication was leading to a range of events of great historical significance across the globe, including the revolution in

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380 This poem was written by J. V. Pawar, one of the founder members of 'Dalit Panther Party.' He was also the founding General Secretary of the party. The poem, originally in Marathi (Naakebandi), has been cited from an English translation in the collection titled 'Blockade', p. 49.

381 According to the Dalit Panther Manifesto, the word 'Dalit' was applicable to scheduled castes and tribes, neo-Buddhists, economically backward workers, landless poor peasants, women, and all other persons who were being exploited. The manifesto described landlords, capitalists, moneylenders and their agents and the government which supported these elements as the sworn enemies of the Panthers. It identified all those forces which fought against caste and class oppression as the Panther's friends. The manifesto highlighted the burning problems of the Dalits such as lack of food, water, shelter, jobs and land, and their excessively unequal social status. The Panthers diagnosed the problem as essentially one related to economic and political power.
China, the War in Vietnam, Civil Rights Movement in the US, Black Movement, Women’s Movement and the New Left Movement. These movements were all a part of the new global reality within which the Panthers in particular and the Dalit movement in general drew inspiration from.\textsuperscript{382}

However, we must not assume that the Dalits’ condition had remained historically constant and unchanging, that they had been passive recipients of oppression and domination. Various historical currents had transformed their status in the past. For instance, when the industrial revolution came, Dalits were harnessed to the machines; they became the new underclass that was essential for the survival of the new industrial complexes. However, while the conditions of Dalits changed to some extent, remnants of the feudal ideology of coercion, obedience and subservience continued to survive within the minds of the upper castes. This clash between the new wave of industrialisation and the remnants of the old feudal system were parts of a peculiar kind of modernity that came into existence in India, a reality that was even more warped by colonialism and its ideologies. This led to a very volatile situation, a situation that was ripe nevertheless for mobilization through a political struggle that focused on the Dalit condition. However, all political factions, including the Left, singularly failed to achieve this. In fact, their manifestoes and activities led to the stunting of the revolutionary potential of the Dalit struggle.

The sense of grievance and of being historically wronged persisted among the Dalit masses in post-colonial India, and the Dalit Panther movement used this sentiment to win popular support for its activities. The Dalit Panther movement in fact did not have an ideology of its own to start with; it emerged as a retaliatory action against the increasing atrocities perpetrated on the backward castes. It was, in this sense, a ‘reactive’ or ‘negative’ movement rather than a movement that forged a positive ideology for social change. The movement had no national

headquarters, no cohesive national leadership and yet it served as both the locus and vector of an influential ideology that took concrete shape in local-level organizations in widely-dispersed linguistic regions.

However, according to Gail Omvedt, the early Dalit upsurge had a strong Naxalite flavour because they identified themselves with the proletariat and regarded Hinduism itself as a symbol of feudal backwardness. Militancy was also an integral part of the movement. A Dalit activist from a Bombay slum reflected about the time when the movement was at its peak, noting that: “we knew nothing of what was written in the manifesto, all we knew was that if someone put his hand on your sister, cut it off”. This rebellious and retaliatory mood distinguished Dalit Panthers from Dalit movements of the first half of twentieth century, and identified it with worldwide, violent upsurge of the ‘new-left’.383

W. N. Kuber, while analysing the Ambedkar movement, suggests that the progress of the Black Americans from the peaceful path of ‘Civil Rights Movement’ since the 1950s to a radical ‘Black Panther Party’ has its parallel in the historical process that led to the formation of the Dalit Panther Party among the scheduled castes in India. In Maharashtra, Dalit Panthers represented a grass-roots revolt against the reluctance and mendicancy of the leadership of the Republican Party of India. It was part of the angry young men’s protest that had been gathering momentum in many industrial towns where Dalits were facing unrelenting atrocities.384 Further, it was not only fashioned on material/economic issues, but was animated by a desire to gain respect for the community; little wonder then that Dalit poets and writers were prominent in providing an intellectual leadership to the movement.

Dalit Panthers made their early appearance in cities like Bombay, Poona, Nashik, Nagpur etc. where there was a large concentration of Mahars. The formal

383 Ibid, p. 77.
political programmes of the Dalit Panthers as well as language they used in the public meetings and pamphlets reflected a potent and powerful radicalism. Two important reasons that could have partly led to this included the influence of the Left groups, from whom the Panthers borrowed various terminologies and concepts and with whom they came in contact in the cities; the second factor was the growing distrust of established political parties who had miserably failed to counter the atrocities.385

In the absence of a definite, clear-cut political ideology, Ambedkar’s ideology initially served the Panthers’ needs. The leaders, however, were conscious of the lack of a coherent ideology and eventually developed their own and published it in the form of a manifesto a year or so after the organisation was formally established. While the Panthers continued to draw inspiration from Ambedkar, an attempt was made in the manifesto to formulate an ideology that drew inspiration from Marxism, in order to give the movement a broader orientation. It was even said that the manifesto was based on the Communist Manifesto of 1848,386 and that it also drew inspiration from the ideology of the Black Panthers. What was clear, however, was that the party’s ideology or guiding sentiment was distinctly different from the bourgeois-liberal and parliamentarian platform of the Republican Party of India (RPI).

The manifesto, for example, did not prescribe conversion to any other religion as the panacea for the ills of the oppressed.387 It stressed a scientific, secular, humanitarian approach and class awareness and emphasised that servility existed not only due to psychological reasons, but because of the reality of economic subjugation. The Panthers believed that casteism was rooted so deeply within the Indian social structure that dignity and liberation of the scheduled castes was not possible without profound changes in the system, which could only be

achieved through a revolution. But then their revolutionary ideas were not similar to those of Naxalites and other extremists. To justify their militant stand and to show how it was in accordance with the Buddhist philosophy, the leaders explained the difference in ‘will to kill’ and ‘need to kill’ while reiterating that ‘killing to protect oneself is not violence’.388

The Panther’s manifesto condemned Leftist parties for being electorally-oriented, for indulging in opportunistic and unprincipled alliances and for failing to provide an alternative to the Congress rule. The Panthers’ programme of action was a response to the nature of politics prevailing at that time. Their politics was a response to what they chose to call the ‘reformist’ politics of leaders like Ambedkar. In fact, their policies can be more clearly understood when one compares them with the politics of leading Dalit ideologues like Ambedkar. According to them, the solution to the problem of untouchability lay in revolutionary actions and not in just demanding concessions and reservations or in leading reform movements.389

The Panthers broke new ground when they acknowledged that the problems of Dalit masses could not be solved within the framework of caste and religion only.390 They aimed much higher and advocated the abolition of the entrenched capitalistic society with its feudal overtones, whereas Ambedkar favoured only a nominal socialist allegiance and not an overthrow of the entire capitalist apparatus. Ambedkar failed to notice the inherent weakness of capitalist societies which could not bring about any change within the established dominant-subaltern relationships which was based on the caste system. This was, however, one of the foremost ideologies of the Panthers. Further, while Ambedkar’s ideology was a bourgeois-liberal ideology, that of the Panthers was proletarian-radical as reflected in their manifesto. Though Ambedkar’s idea of Cultural Revolution implied total rejection

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A Copy of *Maratha* during Worli-Riots, Bombay 1974

A Copy of *Navashakti*, Bombay
of the old, unequal, discriminative practices, and their replacement with new values based on equality, liberty and social justice, he believed in bringing about cultural changes through the parliamentary democratic system. It has been asserted, perhaps not entirely justifiably, that Ambedkar did not link the caste element with that of class and that insistence on community politics rather than class politics weakened the movement in the country. He perhaps thought if what was effective in gaining power was adopted, the rest would follow. Later events, however, have proved that political and economic developments have to be coupled and related, if either is to be effective.

In contrast to the rather more non-confrontational strategies adopted by Ambedkar, the Panthers made their presence felt through violent attacks on Hindu deities and popular Hindu heroes like Shivaji. Their successful campaign for the boycott of the by-election for the Lok Sabha from Central Bombay constituency in January 1974, and also their participation within the Worli Riots that broke out in the midst of the election reflect the combative stance adopted by the Panthers. The constant attempt by the Maharashtra Government as well as police to repress the Panthers served further to create an impression that Dalit Panthers were a political force committed to overthrowing the existing social and political system.391

The Panthers began by campaigning on caste and class issues, while also simultaneously launching a campaign to expose the regressive aspects of some Hindu religious tenets. The movement began amongst young Dalits in the sprawling tenements of Bombay in the early 1970s where an impoverished and isolated untouchable population struggled against ‘higher’ castes for physical, social and economic space. This happened at a time when a growing number of young Dalits began to have access to improved educational facilities and some of them had relatively stable employment.

This, in a way, substantiates the idea proposed by Alexis de Tocqueville more than a century and a half ago in the context of the French Revolution that revolutions break out not when oppressive structures are most entrenched, but when they begin to show signs of weakening. However, the ultimate failure of Dalit Panthers and other movements of a more moderate nature shows that though repressive caste-structures might have been weakened to some extent in recent times through the existence of modern practices such as education or an egalitarian constitution, modernity and caste are not inherently antithetical to each other, as has been asserted by some social commentators. Indeed, caste-based violence and oppression survive and indeed thrive in most parts of India even today.

Caste-related violence and oppression are generally seen today as existing solely within tradition-bound villages, a direct bi-product of ‘illiteracy and ignorance’. However, it is far from being a purely rural phenomenon, as proved by the occupational differentiation even within cities. For example, the lowest-paid jobs within city municipalities are generally undertaken by the lowest castes, and these jobs are seen as being ritually polluting by the higher castes. As a result, caste-based violence has not been completely unknown within urban India too, as proved by the violent caste clashes in the urban chawls of Mumbai during our period of study. There was, for example, an incidence of urban violence which

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393 Colonial rulers and even nationalist thinkers dilated upon this antithesis between modern inventions and ‘medieval practices’ like caste. Railways were, for example, seen as a very progressive modern invention that would not only reduce travel time and expense, but would also force the higher and lower castes to travel together, thereby destroying the idea of untouchability. In hindsight, we can see that this was far from the truth.
394 Heinous caste killings in Jhajhhar (Haryana) in 2002 and in Khairlanji (Maharashtra) during 2006 are glaring examples.
395 In modern political discourse within the subcontinent too, urbanity is often equated directly with awareness, while rural existence is seen as being co-terminus with orthodoxy, ignorance and conservativeness. The union minister for Family Affairs and Health, Ghulam Nabi Azad, made a statement on the World Population Day (13 July 2009) noting that people in rural India reproduce prodigiously due to a combination of lack of awareness and a lack of entertainment, a statement that was widely applauded within the mainstream corporate media. Urban Indians, without doubt, are both aware and affluent according to the enlightened minister, notwithstanding the comparable rate of population growth in the cities. http://www.medindia.net/news/Ghulam-Nabi-Azad-Reiterates-Family-Planning-Importance-on-World-Population-Day-54611-1.htm, accessed on 5 August 2009.
396 These include jobs such as night-soil carriers, sweepers, and other jobs of a similar nature.
A copy of *Mahanagar* during Worli-Riot, Bombay
broke out in Worli in 1974 when Dalit Panther activists clashed with the Shiv Sena, a violent supremacist Hindu right-wing organisation that is powerful within the state of Maharashtra. This riot proved to be a landmark in the short career of the Dalit Panther movement as it wrought a change in the ideology of party’s leaders and in the consciousness of the rank and file of the Dalit masses. The seeds of this riot lie in the Shiv Sena’s wrath on the subject of Dalits conversion into Buddhism, a strategy for obviating caste hierarchies that was first advocated by Ambedkar many decades ago.

This violent episode forced Dalit Panthers to rethink their strategy of militant struggle and forced the leadership to realise that the struggle could not survive for long based solely on an expression of emotional angst, and that it had to be combined with an ideology/strategy that addressed basic issues. However, while these riots and other similar incidents were ideologically productive, they also led to dissension within the ranks of the party, leading ultimately to a split in the Dalit Panther movement by the end of 1974. These riots therefore had a dual and completely contradictory effect on the movement, and this chapter examines these developments in detail.

Later, in 1978, the movement advocating for the renaming of Marathawada University also snowballed into a Marathawada riot, and the Panthers were the leaders within this movement. Gail Omvedt, in a debate with Dipankar Gupta which took place in the pages of the Social Scientist, refuses to even accept the ‘violent episode’ of Marathawada as ‘riot’. She clarified her position in the following words:

“Riots” is what they were called in the bourgeoisie press. Gupta...talks about what happened as an ‘uprising’ and a ‘revolt’. Riots are clashes between two groups of fighting people; in Marathwada, Dalits were victims of attacks and they did not fight back (and where they were ready to as in Aurangabad city, such attacks did not take place). Uprisings and revolts are generally by oppressed people against the oppressors in some form or another, the very opposite happened in Marathwada. “Attacks” would be a mild term for what took place; “Pogrom” might be a more accurate one.

The communication between the two was an attempt to clinch a debate upon whether it was a 'class struggle' or 'caste war' and whether caste was becoming a barrier to 'class-unity'. While Worli represented an 'urban-violence’, the canvas for Marathwada was purely rural. The violence in Marathwada reflected a principal contradiction between agricultural labourers and capitalistic farmers, and the overlap between the issues of caste and class. A section of this chapter will deal with Marathwada, but firstly we must discuss the Worli riots, which first brought the Panthers into great prominence.
WORLD RIOTS

Worli: January 1974

Leave me, Set me Free,
Let me tear off these dogs,
Let me show them my prowess;
The bullet-pierced stomach,
Ramesh trying to hold back the gushing blood,
Standing before three thousand and five hundred year-old enemy,
Breathing his last, crying—Revenge! Revenge!!

Like fish out of water,
People suffocated and died;
Sacrificing themselves,
To end the misery of ages.

Please don’t beat me, don’t torture me,
I’m disabled, I’m helpless;
Shrill cries of Ranu Ranadive
Met the thrashing,
Just as when a mouse is thrashed;
Biting his lips he fell down
Glancing pitifully at his own blue-black body.

These are living prisons, this society we live in—
Such words exploded in our ears like dynamites;
Freedom doesn’t arrive uninvited, we were told—
It has to be snatched through struggle, through brute force;
These lion-hearted words pierced our ears like so many bullets,
Boiling the already-warm blood.

Volcanic blood,
Blood flowing out as each blow from armed hands landed;
Let our blood flow in the name of Bheem—we shouted,
While all the time the kicks from the defenders of culture,
The brokers of a corrupt government,
Turned the kids blue and black.

Oh don’t hit her, she is eight-months pregnant, we begged,
While Satan and darkness danced menacingly before her;
One kick, finding its way to the lungs of her throbbing foetus,
And she heard the shrill and silent voice of her baby
Crying—I am coming out,
Keep ready for me your arms.³⁹⁸

³⁹⁸ This poem was written by J.V.Pawar during the Worli riots of Mumbai, originally in Marathi and has been cited from an English translation in a collection called ‘Blockade’. 
These are powerful words indeed, depicting acts of graphic violence during extremely charged times. They portray not only the angst of the oppressed, but also clearly identify the ‘enemy’, ‘Satan’, situating them clearly within a political context. It is indeed the underlying political tensions that distinguish such acts of mass violence from individual and wanton acts. Any analysis of political violence must therefore, of necessity, wrestle with the conceptual problem of defining what is meant by the terms ‘violence’ and ‘political’.

There have been many historical struggles that have adopted physically violent means of achieving their goals, backed by theorists that have justified the use of violence to neutralise the feeling of inadequacy within an oppressed people.\(^{399}\) In post-colonial India too, left-wing struggles such as the Naxalite movement in Eastern and Southern regions during the 1960s also adopted a similar strategy of violent uprising. However, violence sometimes has logic of its own and it is perhaps true that it has a strong tendency to spiral out of control—once unleashed, it acquires a momentum of its own.

What therefore amounts as political in a violent event and what the casus belli is lie in a very complex matrix wherein the intended impact may be drastically different from the motive \textit{in situ}.\(^{400}\) The impact and its effectiveness also vary from one socio-political context to another—as Hannah Arendt notes, the acceptability or otherwise of a violent act depends on the ‘banality of evil’ within particular social systems. Further, violence itself has been defined in very differing ways by different theorists, and recent formulations have tended to see ‘silent’ oppression also as acts of violence.\(^{401}\) However, for the purposes of this study, we shall see violence as those acts of physical disruption, destruction, injury and such physical

\(^{399}\) See for instance, Frantz Fanon, \textit{Wretched of the Earth}, (New York: Grove Press, 1963).


acts as aiming to modify the behaviour of others in a bargaining situation that has consequences for the social system.402

Political violence, irrespective of its motive, has its starting point in the conflicts of interest that are either primordial (religious, ethnic, racial, casteist, etc.) or ideological/material in nature. Normally, while distilling the political content of an act of violence, it is important on our part to understand that whatever the raison d'être, one point of conflict affects/progresses to another. This gives a historicity to the act of violence which is unique to each event. The Worli riot is a classic case where the complexity inherent in analysing the exact reason of conflict can be realised. What started off as a political strategy for the by-elections took a nasty turn due to some of the alleged remarks by Namdeo Dhasal in the public meeting organized by the Dalit Panthers at Worli on 5 January 1974.

Behind this metamorphosis lay the latent economic situation within the province. During the 1970s, the labour movement in Maharashtra had expanded considerably, and many of the agitating mill workers were Dalits. The ideologies of socialism and Marxism-Leninism were gradually gaining ascendancy within the community through the strong propaganda carried out by labour leaders. A few Dalit leaders who were very influenced by Marxist ideology even tried to analyse the thoughts of Ambedkar from the Marxist standpoint.

As these developments unfolded, the growing number of atrocities against scheduled castes was also being noticed. In a statement to the Lok Sabha on 19 August 1970, the Minister of State for Home Affairs, N.R. Mirdha, gave the following statistics of number of murders of Harijans during the period 1967–1969: Chandigarh 2; Gujarat 34; Delhi 4; Haryana 23; Punjab 76; Kerala 17; Andhra

402 This definition of political violence is along the same lines as the one given by H. L. Neiburg, *Political Violence: The Behavioural Process* (New York: St Martin's Press, 1969), p.13.
Pradesh 31; West Bengal 12; Himachal Pradesh 7; Tamil Nadu and Orissa 49 each; Mysore 117; Maharashtra 63; Bihar 29; UP 332.  

The growing Dalit disenchantment with mainstream politics was also partly precipitated by the inability of parties of leftist persuasion to mobilise them properly. These parties perhaps lost an opportunity to win the allegiance of one of the most oppressed and thereby radicalised sections of the population in the province. The great Leftist emphasis on class, both in rhetoric and practice, led to a marginalisation of equally important caste issues; this vacant space was immediately occupied by groups that were less clear in their strategies and who reacted reflexively rather than ideologically/strategically to issues and situations.  

Indeed, for long, left-leaning parties did not try to examine caste as a separate category, but insisted on subsuming it within the larger category of class. As a result of this ideological failure and blinkered vision, these political parties began to lose support even within sections that were their prime targets, such as the urban factory and mill workers, amongst whom right-wing parties like the Shiv Sena became more powerful. Dalit dissatisfaction was, to some extent, the result of the ‘imperfect mobilisation’ carried out by the Leftist parties. However, the blame cannot be pinned solely upon Left parties. One should not, after all, forget that the much-vaunted constitutional safeguards and equal rights within post-colonial India had been patently unable to ameliorate the condition of the Dalits. The resulting dissatisfaction with the state led to the growth of several violent struggles, including both the Dalit Panther movement and the Naxalite movement.  

Despite the granting of universal adult franchise, independent India saw an intensification of political differences between various social groups. Political parties began to target certain sections for purposes of garnering greater number of

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404 Ranajit Guha, in an interview published in the Biblio noted that the growth of Naxalism could be directly linked to the shattering of the post-colonial dream of an egalitarian India and the death of all hope for a utopian future.
votes, leading to a greater ‘communalisation’ of the Indian polity. No political party can be totally absolved of the charge of pandering to communal sentiments—no wonder then that several decades after decolonisation, the question of Dalit identity is at the forefront of Indian politics, though the question of economic/social integration of Dalits has lagged behind.

The Dalit Panthers Party was officially formed on 9 July 1972 in Bombay and was part of this social flux within which the question of Dalit identity was being debated and politicised. This was also the time when the newly-formed Shiv Sena was fomenting the politics of ‘Hindutva’ as an alternative to the politics of Buddhist revival launched by Prakash Ambedkar’s ‘Bhartiya Republican Party’ and the wave of Dalit conversion into Islam which was in vogue during the period. The originality of the Panthers lay in their re-formulation of the Dalit identity both in terms of a cultural as well as a proletarian experience.

Ideologically, the Panthers differed significantly both from Ambedkar’s and the naxalite positions—whereas Ambedkar separated the economic and cultural spheres and emphasized the latter, the ‘naxalite movement’ had a typically rural orientation and ‘Maoist fervour’ for agrarian revolution. The Dalit Panthers were, by contrast, an urban phenomenon that integrated both Marxist (in the traditional economic sense) and cultural struggle within their ideological armour. Also, though they might have borrowed heavily from Marxist terminology—an inclination that was shared by the Black Panthers in the USA—their strategies were more ambivalent and differed substantially from orthodox Marxist principles of

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405 Shiv-Sena is a Hindu far-right party founded on 19 June, 1966 in Maharashtra by Balasaheb Thackeray, son of Prabodhankar Thackeray, a leader in the Samyukta Maharashtra Samiti that led to the integration of Maharashtra in 1960. The party began as a movement in Bombay that favoured the increased influence of Marathi habitants in Maharashtra against non-Marathis.

406 Prakash Ambedkar was Dr. B. R. Ambedkar’s grandson. He had serious differences with Namdeo Dhasal a prolific leader of Dalit Panthers, and later founded the ‘Bhartiya Republican Party’.

class struggle. The run up to the events that led to the riots also reflected this ambivalence.

Events of the Riot

It was against this backdrop that a mid-term parliamentary by-election was announced for the Central Bombay Parliamentary in 1974. This constituency had to have a re-election as the sitting member, R. D. Bhandare, had resigned due to his appointment as the governor of Bihar. The polling for the by-election was to be held on 13 January 1974. Bombay was already in turmoil due to the Congress Party’s failure to meet the demands of the toiling masses—the Communist Party of India’s trade union front ‘Mumbai Girni Kamgar Mazdoor Union’ had already given a call for ‘Maharashtra-Bandh’ on 2nd January. Textile-mill workers were already on strike since 30th December 1973, which continued till the first week of February 1974. Most of the opposition parties in the Maharashtra assembly as well as Dalit Panthers supported the ‘Bandh’.

There were four main candidates contesting this election, Ramrao Adik representing Congress party, V. R. Pandit of Bhartiya Jana Sangh, Vikram Sawarkar of Hindu Mahasabha and S. A. Dange’s daughter Roza Deshpande from the Communist Party of India. Central Bombay comprised of Worli, Naigaon and other areas inhabited by mill workers, urban labourers, petty traders, and a majority of whom were Scheduled Castes. Since it was a Dalit-dominated constituency, the Republican Party of India had substantial support within the electorate but decided, under the leadership of R. S. Gawai, to support B.C. Kamble, a Congress candidate who had already managed Shiv Sena’s support.408

Quite unsurprisingly, many voters were unhappy with the Republican Party’s decision and a substantial chunk of these supporters were attracted to a militant group which was very active then and was aggressively fighting against the

408 Avinash Mahatekar, in personal interview conducted at Republican Party of India office located at Nehru Nagar (Kurla), Mumbai on 19th June 2007.
oppression by caste-Hindus. The Dalit Panthers saw this election as an opportunity to widen their base, to strengthen their organisation and to bring their movement within everyone’s sights, especially as this election was being projected by the media was as an extremely crucial one due to the recent loss suffered by the Congress in three states. Dalit Panthers declared that they would boycott the election and decided to condemn as well as target the Republican Party-Congress-Shiv Sena mahajot (grand alliance).

The Congress candidate in these elections was a caste-Hindu, even though this constituency was reserved for Scheduled Caste and had been traditionally represented by the Republican Party. For many radicalised Dalits, participating in the elections meant supporting a candidate from the upper caste community which had oppressed them for centuries. Lata Murugkar notes that had a neo-Buddhist Congress candidate been fielded, the boycott by the Panthers and substantial Dalit population could have been avoided.409 Panthers also realised and highlighted the fact that no party contesting elections had a clear-cut agenda for the welfare of Dalits. Even the Communist Party of India, which enjoyed sympathy of Dalits, failed to chalk out any concrete plan for stopping the atrocities against them.

Despite this call for a boycott, the Congress kept trying to enlist the Panthers’ support. It is believed that negotiations took place between a few Congress leaders and a small group of Panthers headed by Raja Dhale.410 The Congress, however, failed in its bid to divide the Panthers and as a result began to issue false statements about having garnered the Dalit Panthers’ full support in a

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410 Arjun Dangle while reviewing the Dalit Literary movement in Maharashtra in *Dalit Literature: Past, Present and Future* discusses that in post-Ambedkar Dalit literary tradition, a group of creative artists, thinkers and writers felt that Ambedkarism and Marxism support each other. In other words, they wanted to fight on both class and caste levels. Another group considered Ambedkarism complete and didn’t want any other ‘ism’ to be grafted on to it. Namdeo Dhasal belonged to the former group and Raja Dhale belonged to the later group. The divergence of ideas between these two prominent leaders was evident continuously since the inception of Dalit Panthers which finally culminated in to a split in Dalit Panthers in October 1974.
desperate bid to win over the electorate. This false propaganda was refuted by the Panther leaders at a public meeting which was called at Dr. Ambedkar Maidan in the midst of BDD chawls at Worli on 5 January 1974. All major Dalit Panther leaders and activists announced the boycott of the upcoming by-election at this meeting.

All prominent leaders like Namdeo Dhasal, J.V. Pawar, Raja Dhale, addressed the meeting. The presence of the Congress minister A. R. Antuley and another Congress worker called Alwale at this public meeting definitely raised a few eyebrows. It was rumoured that a private meeting had been held in which the Secretary of the Congress Election Committee had negotiated with a group of Panther leaders, including Raja Dhale, and some election funds and a withdrawal of pending police cases against Panther leaders had been allegedly promised in return for the Panthers’ support for the Congress candidate.

Despite these rumours, Dalit Panther leaders like Dhasal made extremely charged speeches at the public meeting in Worli, resulting in Shiv Sena activists pelting the dais with stones. This led to retaliation from the Dalit activists assembled at the meeting. Violence first erupted here. Many prominent dailyes attributed the trouble at the public meeting to obscene remarks about Hindu Gods and Goddesses made by the Panther leaders.

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411 Circular distributed secretly by Congress Party declaring Panther’s support to its candidate on 3rd Jan, 1974 is cited in Justice S. B. Bhasme Committee Report.
412 As late as in 1984, Namdeo Dhasal in his paper written in Marathi 'Dalit Panther Eka Gana Gaulan' once again raise this suspicion about this private meeting between Congress leaders and a group of Panthers where he observed a well-decorated stage for the public meeting and availability of printed materials indicated a sudden flow of money.
413 This has been reported by Jalandhar G. Kirtikar, who is a retired teacher and has been conferred with Dr. Babasaheb Ambedkar Dalit Mitra award for his social commitment. He is very respected and popular among the residents of the BDD chawls in Worli. Kirtikar was one of the key members of 'Worli Shantata Committee' to keep vigilance of the BDD chawl area which was hit by the riot. His statement is also recorded in the 'Bhasme Inquiry Committee Report'.
A copy of Maratha showing Namdeo Dhasal, Minister of Defence, Dalit Panther Party
The incident was taken so seriously that a Committee was constituted, comprising of five members by Indian Secular Society and Maratha Mandir, to look into the causes of the riot. This Committee reported that speeches delivered at the said meeting were of a completely political nature and were aimed at the policies and actions of all political parties including the RPI. The committee further observed that even Dhasal, who was notorious for his aggressive and sarcastic style, had refrained from making any abusive remarks whatsoever against Hindu gods.\textsuperscript{415}

Raja Dhale and nineteen other Panther activists were, however, arrested following the incident and a peace committee called the ‘Worli Shantata Committee’ was formed which included members from all the political parties except Dalit Panthers. On 9 January, partly in retaliation against these measures, a ‘Yuvak Kranti Dal’ which was another popular Dalit organisation took out a \textit{morcha} to demand the release of Raja Dhale and other Panther activists. Dalit Panthers also joined this march. It was during the course of this \textit{morcha}, which started in Worli and was heading towards Naigaon, that a cement slab was thrown from the terrace of a building at the procession, killing a young Panther activist called Bhagwat Jadhav.\textsuperscript{416} This caused great dissatisfaction within large Dalit sections, and Dhale sat on a day-long hunger strike to protest against Jadhav’s death.

Despite these incidents, the polling for the by-election took place as per schedule on 13 January. The polling percentage was recorded at a historic low at 38% and the C.P.I. candidate, Roza Deshpande won the election, the Congress candidate finishing a poor third. It is quite evident from these results that the Dalit Panther boycott of the elections was hugely successful. This campaign received a fillip from a widespread anti-government and anti-state sentiment amongst the poorer sections, partly due to the failure of the state to meet with the demands of

\textsuperscript{415} Ibid, p.159.
\textsuperscript{416} As stated in personal interview by Arvind A. Pol at his Vimannagar residence at Pune on 3 June 2007.
the textile mill workers and also due to the larger failure of the state in fulfilling its promises to the labourers and Dalits. The tense situation created by incidents of violence and the death of Bhagwat Jadhav also ensured low voter turnout.

The results of the elections notwithstanding, the right wing parties and factions continued to bait and react against the Panthers. Boards proclaiming that any ‘defamation of Hindu culture and religion will be met with severe consequences’ were erected at Jamboree Maidan. Jan Sangh, another right-wing organisation, had also erected boards that asked people to ‘burn their mouths to stop them speaking in vulgar language’. Marmik, the mouthpiece of Shiv Sena depicted Lord Buddha surrendering himself to Dalit Panthers on the front page of one of its issues.417 The Panthers responded in kind by erecting a board at the Matunga Labour Camp, Dharavi, condemning such propaganda and demanding that copies of Marmik be seized or else they would burn them in full public view.

Support for the Panthers came from various ‘democratic and progressive’ political fronts; on 21 January, for example, several youth organisations including the ‘Magova Mandal, the ‘Progressive Youth Federation’, the ‘Samajwadi Yuva Jan Sabha’ and the ‘Yuvak Kranti Dal’ joined a protest march organised by the Dalit Panthers to demand a judicial enquiry into Police excesses and partiality during the Worli disturbances.418 Dhasal addressed the protesting crowd, where he made a remark about ‘being a communist to the bone’, which was quoted out of context and misinterpreted in Maharashtra Times the following day. This news piece further aggravated strong anti-Panther feelings within the ranks of the Shiv Sena.419

The last week of January saw further incidents of confrontation between rival groups of Hindus (Malwanis and Konkanis) and Neo-Buddhists (scheduled

A Copy of Judicial Committee Constituted Under Justice M. B. Bhasme to look into the Worli-Naigaon Riots
castes converts) residing in respective chawls in Worli. Stones, acid bulbs, soda bottles, brickbats, kerosene fire-balls were used during these incidents\textsuperscript{420} and erupted on the pretext of the distribution of a pamphlet by the Communist leader G. L. Reddy which had been authored by Com. Vaidya. This pamphlet had invoked Dalit self-respect and had succeeded in arousing the passion of Dalit youths.

On 5 February, Dalit Panthers organised yet another march to present a memorandum to the then Maharashtra chief minister Vasantrao Naik. This march coincided with one that was brought out by Girmi Kamgar Mazdoor Union and ended at Oval Maidan and was jointly addressed by S. A. Dange, Namdeo Dhasal and Raja Dhale.\textsuperscript{421} Important demands were made in the memorandum, including the immediate suspension of all police officers connected with the Worli incident and the eviction of all police families staying in the BDD chawls and allotting these chawls to Neo-Buddhists. The memorandum further underlined the fact that Dalit Panthers did not have any confidence in the Enquiry Commission appointed by the government of Maharashtra under Justice S. B. Bhasme. Faced with this rebellious stance by the Panthers, the Communist and the Socialist parties formed their separate committees to look into details of the riots.

The next phase of violence started on 9 February when Maruti Tukaram, a police constable’s son, was assaulted by a neo-Buddhist. Residents of various chawls from various factions attacked antagonistic groups in retaliation. The police used tear-gas shells and finally resorted to open firing in which a neo-Buddhist boy was killed. A meeting was subsequently called at the Matunga Labour Camp near Dharavi, where Raja Dhale declared non-cooperation with the ‘Enquiry Commission on Worli Riots’ while casting doubts upon its genuineness and impartiality.\textsuperscript{422}

\textsuperscript{420} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{421} Namdeo Dhasal in a personal interview conducted at his residence at Shastrinagar in Andheri, Bombay on 20 June 2007.
Another incident called the 'Kamble episode' in the 'Bhasme Committee Report' further exacerbated feelings of antagonism. A Dalit youth named Narayan Kamble, who had apparently escaped from the clutches of the police during a confrontation between the panthers and the policemen was arrested once again on 11 April, and was publicly humiliated and stripped; his face was blackened, a tail was attached to his back, and he was paraded around the chawls, a punishment that was definitely not in keeping with the spirit of the Indian penal code! The Commission has categorically observed it as a serious case of police taking law into their own hands.423

Two days later, on 13 April, the neo-Buddhists of the BDD chawls organised a peaceful meeting at Ambedkar Maidan to celebrate Ambedkar Jayanti. As Ambedkar was born at midnight, it was considered an auspicious time and hence Dalits had gathered for 'flag hoisting' and Buddha-Vandana. At the same time as this meeting, many caste-Hindu residents of the chawls also had gathered and provocation started yet again. Large-scale stone-hurling and petty violence has been reported during this incident. The police once again used tear-gas to control the mob and subsequently opened fire which left four people dead and several injured. Bhasme Committee has seen it as a case of religious intolerance of the upper castes.424

Ideology and Perspective

The chronology of these incidents shows that the focus of the struggle by the Dalit Panthers was not just economic, as was the case with Marxist struggles—the group rallied against both centrist and Hindu right-wing groups not only on the issue of underdevelopment, but also on cultural issues. The question of conversion, of Buddhism, of Hindu deities, of Islam were all central to the entire chronology of the riots that happened in Worli and it reflects the Panthers' ideological difference from many other strands of political activism within the subcontinent and abroad.

424 Ibid, p.293.
The Dalit Panther movement was a short-lived one and arose out of the exigencies of the social and political situation within Bombay. It remained restricted to the city and failed to make any substantial headway anywhere else. Its ideology was shaped by the overarching question of resistance to upper caste oppression. As such its ideology and framework can be seen as 'negative'—having been formed in a reflexive way without any conscious and deliberate strategizing. Perhaps this was the major difference between it and other similar movements occurring throughout the world during this period of extreme political turbulence all over the globe.

This was, after all, the period that saw the great student revolt of 1968 in France, the armed revolution of the Black Panthers in the USA and the ongoing struggle in Vietnam, Cambodia and Africa. Perhaps the one common theme across all these struggles all over the world was the theme of violence and armed struggle, which was increasingly being adopted by the marginalised and disgruntled sections. The Dalit Panther too were part of this larger trend within the subcontinent and elsewhere and seemed unrepentant in their advocacy of armed violence.

This 'negative consciousness', both in terms of methods of struggle, strategy and ideology was evident in the interviews carried out with various Dalit Panther activists who survive today. However, some of them did not, surprisingly, seem to subscribe strongly to the theory of violent struggle, though many still adhered to their erstwhile commitment to the theory of armed uprising. Jaidev Gaikwad, an advocate by profession, was not just an important activist and leader, but one of the founder members of Dalit Panthers party in Pune. On being asked whether he still believed in the efficacy of the violent mode of struggle, he noted that: 'The violent mode is not the final remedy, and by and large Dalits believed in
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the Ambedkarite philosophy and wanted a peaceful breakthrough. They believed in parliamentary politics.\textsuperscript{425}

Arjun Dangle, another core activist, underlined the fact that he did not personally subscribe to violence, but believed militancy was necessary for the marginalised to move ahead and on many occasions the oppressed are compelled to take up arms.\textsuperscript{426} He noted, for instance, that many-a-times land belonging to Dalits was taken away by forcibly by the landlords, and the Panthers in such cases helped the community get back their lands without police help. Ramesh Sindhe\textsuperscript{427}, an activist who witnessed the Worli riots believes that ‘revolution, whenever it comes, will definitely lead to the death of many, but the fruits of this struggle will be enjoyed by the subsequent generation, and violence therefore becomes inevitable at times.’

Avinash Mahatekar similarly agreed that the Dalit Panthers were a militant movement. He did not see it as a break rather a continuation of Ambedkarism. He responded:

In the given situation, the Republican Party of India was completely unsuccessful in safeguarding the interests of the Dalits. In fact, a faction also joined hands with Congress. This was the unfortunate time when social tension was at its peak in the entire country in general and Maharashtra in particular. In Parbani Sonargaon, two women were stripped naked and in Dhakli, Gawai brothers had their eyes gouged out by upper castes. Yet, the Republican Party of India leaders were silent. It was a handful of youngsters who finally revolted against the atrocities. The educated Dalit youths were influenced by Black literature and Black panthers and that the Cuban revolution also had an influence on young men. He also noted that though the ideology of the Left influenced Panthers, they did not borrow wholesale from it due to its ambiguity on the issues of class and caste dynamics in India.\textsuperscript{428}

\textsuperscript{425}Jaidev Gaikwad, as stated in personal interview conducted at Nationalist Congress Party office at Pune on 4 June 2007.
\textsuperscript{426} Arjun Dangle, one of the founder members of Dalit Panthers as responded in the personal interview conducted at his residence at Bhandup East, Bombay on 18 June 2007. Dangle’s Poisoned Bread: Translations from Modern Marathi Dalit Literature is of immense help for non-Marathi readers.
\textsuperscript{427} Ramesh Sindhe is an ex-serviceman who worked with Bombay Port Trust. Currently Sindhe is vice president of Bombay unit of Republican Party of India (Athawale). As stated in a personal interview conducted at his residence at Motilal Nagar in Goregaon, Bombay on 17 June 2007.
\textsuperscript{428} Avinash Mahatekar, in personal interview conducted at Republican Party of India office located at Nehru Nagar (Kurla), Mumbai on 19th June 2007.
But there were contending views in the party circle of the Dalit panthers on adoption of violence as a strategy to do away with the atrocities. J. V. Pawar, the founding general secretary of the Dalit panthers emphasised that:

I do subscribe to violence. Unless violence is created, nobody takes cognizance of the seriousness of injustice or of demands and until such recognition is there, basic questions will not get resolved. Violence is extremely necessary to invite the attention of the state; benefits might not become apparent immediately at times but fruits do come sooner or later as it happened in case of recruitment of Dalits in the state police after the Worli riots.\(^\text{429}\)

Though many activists’ version of Dalit Panther ideology might have become diluted over the course of years, it does become apparent from a majority of the testimonies that the Panthers were born in an atmosphere of great disillusionment with the Ambedkarite Republican Party. They attained recognition with an electoral boycott in 1974 which significantly benefited the Communist candidate in the heart of Bombay’s working class area, and the thrust of the Panthers’ movement took them into electoral as well as revolutionary politics.\(^\text{430}\)

**Role of other Political Parties**

The Worli riots needs to be studied from a purely political (in the more narrowly defined sense of party-politics) standpoint in the context of the emergence of the Dalit Panther Movement as a radical group which challenged the politics of the Shiv Sena, Congress and neo-Buddhists from the RPI. Dalit Panthers also advocated a policy of confrontation against upper castes, which set off a trail of frightful consequences. It is therefore important to examine the role of all these political parties in the context of the riots. In discussing the role of other political parties in the Worli riots in particular, it must be noted that almost all progressive parties condemned the Worli incidents.

\(^{429}\) J. V. Pawar in personal interview conducted at Republican Party of India office located at Mantralaya, Mumbai on 20th June 2007.

Socialists and Communists supported and worked with the Panthers. B. A. Kamble noted during the course of an interview that only Marxists were friends of the Panthers and all other political parties including Congress supported Shiv Sena invisibly. The inaction of all factions of Republican Party against social injustice was conspicuous. More than anything else, the life of Dalit Panthers reflects the general disinterest the ruling establishment showed towards the concerns of Dalits. G. G. Parikh, chairman of the Bombay unit of Socialist Party, criticising the state of affairs of that period, stated: 'The disillusionment of the Panthers who were spearheading a movement against the system which kept them under bondage for centuries is one more instance of the gap between the promise and performance of the ruling party.'

This insensitivity was characteristic not only of the ruling party but also of other sections that were thought to be close allies, for example the communist parties in the region. The Communists, after all had their own mass base in the region and the popularity of Dalit Panthers appeared to threaten this—the C.P.I.'s Girni Kamgar Mazdoor Union, which has a substantial support within the working classes of Bombay felt especially threatened by the meteoric rise of Dalit Panther leaders. Noting this, Jalandhar G. Kirtikar recalled that 'CPI and CPM activists, on many occasions during tense situation used to throw stones on Dalit chawls at night and the Dalit residents there used to think that they must be Shiv Sainiks.'

Also, having been a part of the electoral and parliamentary process for long, several factions of the communist movement had become slightly statist and status quoists, a state of affairs that was challenged by the radical Dalit organisation. Ramesh

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431 B. A. Kamble, an activist during his youth days, currently serving as the librarian at B. J. Wadia Library, Fergusson College, Pune.
Sindhe noted that ‘Communists and Republican Party of India supported us but they had got used to the status-quo and always avoided confrontation.’

The elderly and senior leaders of Republican Party of India also failed in protecting the Dalit youth from retribution from Hindu supremacist organisations and the state. It had, in any case, always adopted a moderate position on issues affecting the youth and had even decided to ally with the Congress on the eve of elections. The Dalit Panthers therefore were isolated within a wide spectrum of differing political opinions, and though they might have found sympathisers during troubled times or during riot situations, they were unable to forge long-lasting and permanent alliances with other parties. Instead they were constantly seen as an alien element that threatened to destabilise the body-politic, an impression that was strengthened by their insistence on the use of violence as a legitimate strategy. This alienation was perhaps one of the major reasons behind the relatively short life of the Dalit Panther party.

Administration’s Role

As is the case today, in the 1970s too, atrocities committed against Dalits were quite common and included violent and brutal methods like rape, murder, arson, looting and destruction of property. Organised attacks on Dalit neighbourhoods and ghettos by upper castes were very frequent. The government was not very sensitive to these acts of atrocities as casteism, like racism, was rooted deep in the caste-Hindu psyche. The Maharashtra police had very small number of Dalits in the constabulary and an even smaller number within the higher ranks. In analysing these episodes of violence, the partisan nature of the state becomes very evident, a fact substantiated most recently by the Gujarat riots under the Narendra Modi government.


182
The administration considered the Panthers to be hand-in-gloves with the Leftist forces; hence there was no question of relief measures. In fact, the administration harassed the Panthers as many of them were booked under various charges, a fact that is substantiated by an observation made by Mr Pawar, the founding General Secretary of the Dalit Panther Party. Mr Pawar added that the publication of distorted versions of the speeches of the Dalit leaders in newspapers also set the upper castes against Dalits. The *Indian Express*, for example, published a picture of S.A. Dange with Namdeo Dhasal and Raja Dhale, which created an impression in the mind of the people that two parties were in alliance. Since the local population of Worli-Naigaon area primarily consisted of labourers, mill workers and petty traders, religious considerations mattered a lot to them. This section of the upper castes got infuriated when reports of Gita-burning and anti-Hindu speeches were circulated in the area. Biased and out of context reporting by the mainstream media aggravated the situation. It further helped in confirming the feeling among Dalits that like the police, the press also were against them and that there was no hope of a non-partisan treatment from these state-sponsored machineries.

The police, the most important wing of the state administration in quelling and controlling violent events such as the Worli riots, also failed to prove its neutrality. It was admitted on all the sides that the conduct of the police during the course of the riots was unashamedly partisan and reflected its open hostility towards the Dalit community. A majority of the police personnel recruited in the riot hit areas came from the ‘Maratha’ community, the traditional source of recruitment for the Maharashtra Police. The excesses indulged in by the police were even admitted by the then chief minister Vasantrao Naik.

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437 *Indian Express*, Bombay, 7 January 1974.
439 Ibid.
Disaffected Youth and Black Panthers

The region in which the riots took place was characterised by very poor economic conditions and was inhabited entirely by the lowest classes surviving on minimum wages. The area also had a large number of unemployed school drop-outs, who formed a sub-proletariat (to use a term preferred by Gramscian revisionists) of disaffected youth. Idleness and unemployment is not just a symbol of economic degeneration, it also represents a clear danger for the state and the law-keeping authorities, for these sections possess the time and are inclined to listen to and adopt new and radical positions.

Petty crime has been often noticed within these groups and regions, and street gangs have also been known to exist within them. A slightly similar picture was witnessed in many regions of Bombay, especially the chawls, on the eve of the rise of the Dalit Panthers. Daya Pawar in his collection of short stories called Bees Rupaiye has beautifully portrayed the picturesque life and times in this area of Bombay. Petty crime has been often noticed within these groups and regions, and street gangs have also been known to exist within them. A slightly similar picture was witnessed in many regions of Bombay, especially the chawls, on the eve of the rise of the Dalit Panthers. Daya Pawar in his collection of short stories called Bees Rupaiye has beautifully portrayed the picturesque life and times in this area of Bombay. Political parties too found these gangs helpful, particularly during the elections. One of the most notorious gangs in that area was the ‘Walcott-Gang’, named after the notorious gangster Walcott. Most of the members of this gang belonged to police families residing in BDD chawls. Considerable protection and immunity from the law was therefore available to them.

The young intellectuals, who became spokespersons for the movement, developed an ideology that pooled community resources, building on the powerfully evocative legacy of B.R Ambedkar, and integrating elements from the contemporary struggles of oppressed peoples from America to Vietnam and Southern Africa.442 The question that arises at this point is whether it was the induction of these violent groups that led to the espousal of militant uprising by the Dalit Panthers. It appears, however, that though this might have been partly true,

the use of violence was a conscious decision that was ideologically motivated and derived inspiration from the methods used by the Black Panthers in the USA.

**Bhasme Committee Report**

The Bhasme Enquiry Committee Report observed that even before the formation of the Dalit Panthers in 1972, the Shiv Sena had a considerable hold on such gangs as well as several groups of unemployed youth within the non-Buddhist Dalit community. However, once the Panthers came into existence, many Dalit youths, who were once a part of the Shiv Sena, joined the Panthers, leading to a great loss not only in numbers, but also in physical strength as many of these members were also parts of underworld gangs that had hitherto supported the Shiv Sena. Not surprisingly, this loss caused huge resentment within the ranks of the Shiv Sainiks.443

The Bhasme Committee Report, in talking about these gangs, adopted a very sympathetic attitude, despite the fact that they indulged in violent and illegal activities. It raised the question of dignity and livelihood and saw the culture of violence as being a direct result of the lack of opportunity.444 In the context of Worli riots, the Bhasme Committee Report noted instances of excesses committed by the police while controlling the riots, which led to prolonged tension in riot-torn areas. The report also notes the blatantly partisan nature of the police and its open and explicit hostility against the Dalit community. These police atrocities during the riots led to Panthers demanding recruitment of Dalits in the police force at all levels, while pointing to the large number of reserved posts which were lying vacant within the Police administration.

443 Ibid.
Assessment

It is important to analyse the incidents of this riots closely as they allow us to understand not only the originary impulses behind the creation of this new party, but also the larger aims and ideologies of the party. It is, after all, one thing to have a well thought-out strategy that has been arrived at after due deliberations and debates, and quite another to actually implement these strategies and ideologies on the ground. This chapter has not only hinted at the 'official' Panther position, but also its practical politics, the politics that its various supporters and members subscribed to during troubled times.

The socio-economic roots of this violence cannot be ruled out, especially against the background of the presence of a large number of unemployed and disaffected youth in the Worli neighbourhood which included a substantial proportion of drop-outs from schools. This period also saw several strikes by textile mill workers in Bombay, a historical conjecture not without parallel in Indian history—on several occasions in the past within the subcontinent, economic struggles have coalesced with social/religions ones to produce a unique resistance against hegemonic structures.445

The riots also transformed the socio-political environment of Worli Chawl areas. It completely shook social harmony and disrupted the peace in this area. Of course this ‘peaceful’ situation hid several subterranean and quotidian instances of violence and disenfranchisement which were inbuilt into the structure of every-day life; in this sense, the riots only brought to surface an undercurrent of violence that existed within the social structure. However, mass violence is a very powerful commodity and unleashes in its wake several unexpected trends.

Also, when we look at Worli riots, we must keep in mind that these riots were not an isolated incident, but were a part of a historical trajectory that had been

set rolling many decades earlier. At the level of party-politics, Dalits, led by B. R. Ambedkar, had started swerving away from mainstream Indian nationalist politics even before formal decolonisation of the Indian colony. Tensions between centrist parties like the Congress and Dalit sections, which became apparent during the Worli riots, were only a part of a trend that had started long back. During the 1930s and 1940s, there was a serious clash of leadership between Ambedkar and Gandhi on the issue of Dalits and their rights. Gandhi’s defence of ‘varnashrama-dharma’ clashed with Ambedkar’s ‘annihilation of caste’, while his nomenclature of ‘Harijan’ also became pitted against Ambedkar’s first use of the term ‘Dalit’.446

The ‘Poona Pact’ of 1932 had widened the gap between these two tall leaders rather than bridging it, and the distance between these two leaders reflected the distance between mainstream parties and Dalit parties, a gap that continues to widen till today. In 1946, when Gandhi came to Bombay with a plan to stay in a harijan-basti at Jamboree Maidan near Worli,447 the Colonial administration saw a distinct hostility within the ranks of the Dalit masses due to Gandhi’s opposition to Ambedkar. In fact, Gandhi was made to stay in a barrack meant for English officers near Jamboree Maidan citing security reasons.448

This antagonism against Gandhi reflects the larger dissatisfaction amongst Dalits with mainstream Indian politics. This trend, which started during the colonial period, continued to exist in post-colonial India; indeed, this disaffection was further strengthened and deepened as Dalits realised that their hopes for an egalitarian state were unfounded. The rise of the Panthers has to be seen in this 446 The term ‘Dalit’ although used by B. R. Ambedkar, came to be used in popular parlance much later. ‘Dalit’ is used in Marathi to mask the stigma inherent in the word ‘asprushya’. This is done in difference to political correctness; for asprushya means untouchable—that category of human beings regarded as loathsome by upper castes in India does not legally and constitutionally exist in the Indian republic. (Dilip Chitre, 2007) 447 ‘Harijan’ was a popular lingua for the Scheduled Castes coined by Mahatma Gandhi. After Ambedkar’s conversion to Buddhism along with the masses, mostly Mahars in 1956, they came to be known as ‘Neo-Buddhists. 448 The ploy makes sense when a R.D. Bhandare, a staunch Ambedkarite, who had to resign from Central Bombay Constituency in 1974 to assume the Governorship of Bihar, could only show dissent to Gandhi in private by black flagging him during the Mahatma’s stay in Jamboree Maidan in 1946.
context. The Worli riots too were only a single incident within a chain of events that had its prehistory far back in the past. Also, Worli was not the only incident of its kind in the chawls of Bombay. In fact, these riots technically continued as late as the 1990s, with minor skirmishes and incidents of violence breaking out every now and then periodically.

There is no denying the fact that the worst-affected party in the riots were the Dalits, who were cornered by both the upper castes and the police. Some families had to survive without food and shelter as they lost their basic sustenance in the riots. The biased attitude of the police and the atrocities perpetrated by them on the Dalits during the riot is a fact that has been established and accepted by all sorts of ‘enquiries’ looking into the riots. As a result of this discrimination, as noted previously, the Panthers demanded recruitment of Dalits in the police services at all levels. The government subsequently had to issue a directive making it compulsory to fill up vacant posts in the police force even if the candidates were under-qualified, and this was one of the major achievements of the Panther party as it helped the Dalits gain a substantial presence within the administration.

Despite these achievements, the riots caused much harm to the Dalit Panthers movement which was at that point in its initial phase. Violence during this riot frightened away a section of the Panthers who from the very beginning had Ambedkarite leanings and wanted to adopt democratic and peaceful methods in order to achieve their objectives. Internal conflicts also surfaced during the course of the riots and ultimately culminated in a rift. Namdeo Dhasal on his expulsion from the party noted that there was a growing rift between the Ambedkarite and Marxist factions within the party and recalled that:

“In 1975, all of sudden, Raja Dhale accused me of being Marxist and contended that Marxism and Ambedkarism were mutually incompatible. My own party expelled me as I found myself in minority. Marx and Ambedkar do contradict one another and this debate has been going on since 1938. I was only its last victim.”

Gangadhar Pantawane: The Man Behind 'Asmitadarsh': A Dalit Literary Revolution

Malaak Shabazz, (Daughter of Malcolm X): A Black Activist In New York City
Noting this growing dissidence, Gangadhar Pantawane\textsuperscript{450}, a pioneer in Dalit literature and politics, stated:

On programmes, there was difference of opinion among members of Dalit Panthers themselves. For instance, whenever the Panthers participated in agitations, and there was intervention of the administration or the police, many members of the Dalit Panthers feared arrest and police harassment and were apprehensive of their career perspective. They lacked a clear cut agenda or political programme. They simply used to go to the villages and threaten the non-Dalits against any atrocities. They failed to chalk out an ideological agenda. And the way the Panthers were criticizing the RPI leaders, the Panthers were criticised in turn for their lack of political programme and agenda. There was a rift in the Dalit Panther leaders Namdeo Dhasal and Raja Dhale. Whether Dhasal admits or not, he was influenced by Communists at one point of time, and was surrounded by Marxists everywhere. And the Marxist leaders were also praising Dhasal for his coming in terms with them. Raja Dhale on the other hand was ‘Kadwa-Ambedkarite’ (means staunch Ambedkarite in Marathi) and he never associated with the Marxist ideas. Thus, a split became inevitable at one point of time.\textsuperscript{451}

The Worli Riots was, therefore, the push that the Panthers needed to gain popularity while at the same time being the wedge that splintered the party into severed factions, leading to its eventual failure. The failure of the party was, in a way, embedded within the seeds of its growth. However, the Panthers were to gain another lease of life during the Marathwada riots, which we will analyse in the next section.

\textsuperscript{450} Gangadhar Pantawane is a pioneer in the field of ‘Dalit-Literary-Movement’. He taught Marathi at Milind College, Aurangabad. In 1968. He started editing a magazine called ‘Asmitadarsha’ which is a Marathi word and it means ‘mirror of identity’, while teaching at Marathi Department of Dr. Babasaheb Ambedkar University, Aurangabad.

\textsuperscript{451} Gangadhar Pantawane, in a personal interview conducted on 17\textsuperscript{th} April 2009, at his residence near Milind College at Aurangabad.
MARATHWADA RIOTS

Marathwada is Burning\textsuperscript{452}

*Know the time, defeat it,*

*O! harness the cart of unity*

*Marathwada is burning,*

*Marathwada is burning.*

One Pochiram Kamble, sweating to fill his stomach,

*Became the enemy of the village—Jai Bheem\textsuperscript{453} was on his lips.*

Accosted in the fields, tied with a rope,

*His hands and feet branded then thrown in the fire,*

*He burned fiercely, the son of Bheem,*

*This is the creation of casteism,*

*Marathawada is burning—*

One daughter-in-law of Bansode, toiling in other’s fields

*Sitting in front of the hearth of darkness,*

*Indebted to the whole village.*

*She was only a Mahar, but mine of beauty,*

*As if gold was in the house of the poor,*

*Her bangles were broken what tyranny!*

*Who will avenge this?*

*Marathwada is burning—*

*The Mahar boys in the school studied and went ahead,*

*They refused to carry the dead cattle, the work of their forefathers.*

*At the time of exams a conspiracy was hatched,*

*One was charged with theft, beaten in the village square,*

*And so was absent from the exams,*

*And on top of this abused as Dhed.\textsuperscript{454}*

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\textsuperscript{452} This popular movement song originally written and sung in traditional epic ballad style, was translated into English by Gail Omvedt. (cited from Barbara R. Joshi’s book *Untouchable: Voices of Dalit Liberation Movement*)

\textsuperscript{453} A common Dalit salutation referring to Dr. Ambedkar; hence an Ambedkarite who has rejected traditional Dalit status.

\textsuperscript{454} A derogatory caste abuse in Marathi.
Marathwada is burning—

One went outside the village; his body was wasted with toil,
He collected pennies one by one,
He too was looted.
We see all these with open eyes,
Still we live our lives,
With our own hand we feed the fire that burns the corpse.
We the people of Bombay and Pune,
How hollow is our pose,
We gossip about revolution but live the lives of eunuchs.
O! beat, smash, cut, break
Whatever comes in our way;
Marathwada is burning, Marathwada is burning,
Marathwada is burning!

The Marathwada Agitation

Marathwada was ruled for more than 200 years by the Nizam of Hyderabad and became politically free after the Telangana movement of 1948. This highly backward region of Maharashtra comprised of five districts: Aurangabad, Parbhani, Osmanabad, Nanded and Beed. According to the 1971 census, out of a total of 80 lakh people in Marathwada, 13 lakhs were Scheduled Castes and 80% of them were below the poverty line. As per the report of Atyachar Virodhi Samiti [Association for Protest Against Oppression], most Dalits in the region were landless labourers and poor peasants owning as little as 1–2 acres of land against

455 The Marathwada Riots: A Report, Atyachar Virodhi Samiti, Economic and Political Weekly, No.14, Vol.19, 1979, p.846. Also, according to the 1971 census, industrial activity was almost nil, with only two persons out of 1,000 engaged in industry compared to 100 industrial workers out of every 1,000 in Bombay. Further, Dalits comprised about 17 percent (9.5 percent Scheduled Castes and 7.2 percent of the population compared to about 12 percent for whole of Maharashtra). About 75 percent of the Dalit population consisted of farm labourers, while 80 percent of the Dalits lived below the poverty line.

456 ‘Atyachar Virodhi Samiti’ was constituted to understand the role of the caste system vis-à-vis class struggle and class organization, and to look into the details of the ‘Marathwada-Riots’. ‘Samiti’ comprised activists from trade unions, students’ and teachers’ organisations including five women activists. The team conducted a detailed field work from 1–10th Oct 1978 and subsequently published a report in EPW.
Dr. Babasaheb Ambedkar Marathwada University, Aurangabad
on 14 April 2009
those of Maratha zamindars who owned 200–300 acres of land. The report of the Samiti suggests an alarming unemployment rate in this region as well as an unprecedented rise in atrocities against Dalits. Combined with this was the growing phenomenon of educated and unemployed youths moving towards cities in search of jobs that subsequently faced both social exclusion and economic deprivation in their new habitats, and these adverse conditions played a large part in radicalising them.

One such large contingent of 2000 unemployed youth arrived in Parbhani on 23 March 1974 looking for jobs. On arrival, they discovered that only 40 positions were available and this, quite justifiably, riled them; a protest was consequently organised to express the sense of grievance and dissatisfaction against the government. The Police stationed to maintain peace, however, decided to open fire at the protesters, leading to the death of two young men at Wasmat. A province-wide agitation was launched to protest against this, which was supported by all political outfits and students’ organisations. The students went so far as to completely boycott their exams, thereby placing their careers and future prospects under considerable threat. As a result of all this, the movement became extremely strong, so much so that even routine exams could not take place throughout the province of Marathwada. It was an agitation led by almost all progressive parties and is popularly called ‘Marathwada Vikas Andolan’ (Agitation for the Development of Marathwada).

Renaming Marathwada University

The issue of renaming of the Marathwada University was the chief immediate cause for the outbreak of the violent agitation mentioned above. Before the merger of the Marathwada region with the state of Maharashtra, colleges in the region were affiliated to the Osmania University in Hyderabad, which was the capital of the erstwhile state. After the merger in 1956, the need was felt to

457The agitation for development of Marathwada had various demands including economic development, rapid industrialisation, expansion of railway facility and representation of leaders of this region in the state ministry.
establish a new university for the region; this university, called the 'Marathawada University' was inaugurated on 23 August 1958 by Jawaharlal Nehru, the first Prime Minister of India.

From among the various names suggested for the new university, including that of B.R. Ambedkar, the 'Palnitkar Committee' selected the name 'Marathwada'. Explaining the choice, the committee reported that 'People in the region have all along associated the university with the name of Marathwada. The name of the University must be such that it will make an emotional appeal to the hearts and minds of the people. The name 'Marathwada' has that advantage.' This was how the Marathwada University came into existence. Till 1978–79, 82 colleges located in Marathwada region were affiliated to this university. These colleges and classrooms became the site where most of the Marathwada agitations originated and were carried out.

These agitations, however, cannot be understood properly without placing them in the context of the chaotic social and political conditions throughout India in general and Maharashtra in particular. This was a time when the country was slowly recovering from the assault of the National Emergency declared by then Prime Minister Indira Gandhi. The Congress Party had been routed in the general elections of 1977 and Janata Party was voted to power not just at the centre, but across most of the states of the Indian Union. The lifting of the Emergency ensured the removal of restrictions on civil rights of individuals, and allowed a new upsurge in the hitherto-suppressed movements demanding equality. However, the new Janata government played the caste card adeptly, and curried favour with the higher castes. Atrocities, therefore, continued to be committed on Dalits and discontent within the working classes was palpable.

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458 The government went so far as to appoint a separate committee called the 'Palnitkar Committee' to suggest an appropriate name for the university which was to be established in Marathwada region.
460 Ibid.
It was against this backdrop that the agitation originated at Aurangabad which later culminated in serious riots in that region. Though this movement had its origins in economic grievances, as outlined above, it also made use of symbolic issues that appealed to the college-going youth. For example, though a proper committee had been formed to deliberate upon the name for the university, it was this very issue that became a rallying point for agitating protestors. At a function held in May 1977 to celebrate the 50th anniversary of the historic Mahad-Satyagraha launched by Ambedkar in 1927, leaders of the Scheduled Castes and Dalit Panthers demanded that the university be renamed after Ambedkar. According to Lata Murugkar, this demand made at the function was accepted by the then Chief Minister Vasantdada Patil. The executive council of the Marathwada University in its meeting on 25 July 1977 resolved to change the name. This was to be discussed subsequently at a meeting of the senate scheduled for October 1977. But a member of the executive committee later stated that the committee had passed the resolution under pressure. The resolution was therefore not moved at the senate meeting and therefore lapsed without being implemented. Perhaps the powers-that-be had no idea of the potential emotiveness of this subject.

It has been suggested that the question of renaming was first raised by Dalit Panthers in the region. However, interviews with several people involved in the protests revealed that this was a result of a genuine upsurge at the popular level, and the Dalit Panthers merely highlighted and adopted an issue that was already very popular and appealing in the region. Kashinath Ranveer, for example, felt that the demand emerged out of the aspirations of the oppressed in this region as there was not a single university in the area named after B. R. Ambedkar, who was the supreme symbol of lower-caste and Dalit assertion. He further reiterated the fact

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461 Ibid
462 Ibid
463 Kashinath Ranveer in a personal interview conducted on 13th April, 2009 at Auragabad. Ranveer was a student of literature Milind College of Arts, and later at Marathwada University. During 1977–79, he was at Jawaharlal Nehru University where he started ‘SC & ST Students Welfare
that it was not just the Dalit Panthers who had raised this demand, but that there were several non Dalit groups too who raised this issue, one of which was the ‘Renaming Action Committee’ formed in Aurangabad.

Gangadhar Pantawane’s experience however tells a different story and appears debatable. He recollects that in Aurangabad, some Dalit professors wanted some facilities in the university, and the ‘executive-committee’ of the university was scheduled to meet. And this group of professors brought out a rally and a protest was lodged; slogans for their demand were raised outside the venue of the ‘executive-meeting’. A few members of the executive committee had to come out to meet these protesting professors and communicated to them that if their demands were not met, they would rename this university in the name of Babasaheb Ambedkar. This was the beginning, and then there was discussion in the ‘executive-committee’. However, if the question of Marathwada was only used as a ‘bargaining chip’ by some enlightened professors, how does one justify the powerful movement that sprung up around the question in the subsequent months? Is Pantawane’s testimony trying to trivialise the entire question, or is it attempting to portray his fraternity in a flattering light?

The question of naming might appear very trivial and insignificant at first glance, but it is linked with much larger and more profound questions. The ‘politics of naming’ has been, of late studied by anthropologists and historians in a colonial context, and they reveal that nomenclature is related at a very intimate level with the extant power-relations within society. Where names have been ascribed through dictates, they can only be changed or overturned through popular consensus. B. S. Waghmare reflects that this was indeed true and that it was not just the Dalit Panthers or some other group that raised this demand.

Association’. As a Dalit student activist, he had participated in the renaming agitation. Currently, he teaches at the Department of English in Dr. B. R. Ambedkar Marathwada University, Aurangabad.

‘Renaming Action Committee’ was popularly called ‘Namantar Krut Samiti’.

Gangadhar Pantawane in a personal interview conducted on 17 April, 2009 at Aurangabad.

It was in fact raised by youths and leaders of Dalit community who offered the added justification that Ambedkar had actually established Milind College of Arts, Nagsenwan Campus and was the first to start an educational institution in the Marathwada region which later became a Mecca of education for Dalits from not just the Marathwada region, but the whole of Maharashtra. Despite being a backward region, Marathwada had substantial progressive forces, which included people of non-Dalit community and who always had sympathy for the cause of the underprivileged Dalits of the region.467 Waghmare says:

When there was a confrontation between Dalits who were pro-renaming and people of the Anti-renaming movement, the leaders from western Maharashtra like Arun Kamble, Raja Dhale and Namdeo Dhasal entered the fray. The role of Dalit Panthers can be understood in the context of various factions existing within Dalit community. Dalit Panthers were in fact known only for a short period when the Republican Party of India and other factions receded into relative obscurity, and these parties had leaders from various communities.468

With the support of these factions and parties, a series of political programmes including protest demonstrations, gheraos, and strikes were organised to bring pressure to bear on the government and concerned authorities for renaming. An ‘all party morcha’ was called on the issue of renaming the university and it was supported both by Dalits and several upper caste activists. Dalit Panthers, in fact, wanted a separate ‘morcha’ under their own banner and did not want to strengthen the existing movement; perhaps it would have been much easier to attain the goals of the renaming movement if the Dalit Panthers had strengthened the ranks. The Panthers did not want to share the credit of the forthcoming victory with other organisations and the movement had to pay heavily for the Panthers’ sectarian act.469

467 B. S. Waghmare in a personal interview conducted on 16 April 2009 at Aurangabad. Waghmare comes from Marathwada region, studied at J.N.U. and is currently teaching at Department of Political Science in Dr. B.R.Ambedkar Marathwada University, Aurangabad.
468 Ibid.
469 Prakash Sirsade, in personal interview conducted on 18 April 2009 at Aurangabad. Sirsade was an activist with ‘Dalit Yuvak Aghade’, and currently teaches English Literature at Milind College, Aurangabad.
Due to the Panthers’ stand, a split occurred within the ranks of the ‘Students Advisory Committee’ which comprised of academics, journalists and intellectuals of upper castes as well. This factionalism provided an added fillip to the supporters of the ‘Anti-renaming group’. Many supposedly progressive political parties like the Janata Dal, CPI, CPI (M), SKP (Shetriya Kamgar Paksha) had to face a vertical split on this issue, and the anti-renaming factions of all these parties came together to form the Marathwada Vidyarthi Kruti Samiti. MVKS gave a call for ‘total-strike’ to express their opposition to ‘renaming.’ Colleges in the entire region remained closed from 12 to 26 September 1977.

On 22 September 1977, the various re-naming groups also organized themselves under the leadership of M. B. Chitins, and formed the ‘Vidyarthi Nagrik Samiti’ and Baburao Jagtap was made the secretary of this group. Hunger-strike, protest-march, press-release and distribution of pamphlets were the main modes of agitation adopted by the pro-renaming faction, and all these modes of protest were peaceful in nature. Leaflets demanding renaming were also distributed in the Vidhan-Sabha. A ‘satyagraha’ was also held on 12 October 1977. Dalit Panthers, at this time acting on their own, also organised a ‘chappal-morcha’ on 2 October 1977. Despite this snow-balling of the agitation, the chief-minister Vasantdada Patil formally announced his decision to not change the name of the university during his visit to Aurangabad on 25 June 1978. Discontent spread within the Dalit community, but though there were plans to intensify the struggle, no violent or unpeaceful means were resorted to.

The agitation took a different turn when the Congress government led by Vasantdada Patil collapsed. Sharad Pawar became the chief-minister on 19 July

470 Ibid.
471 M. B. Chitins, a noted educationist, was Principal of ‘Milind College of Arts’ started by Ambedkar in 1950, and is run by ‘Bombay Education Society’. Chitins, a Brahmin by caste and was known for his progressive ideas.
1978, heading a Progressive Democratic Front (PDF) government. Faithful to his electoral promises, Pawar called a meeting in Bombay as early as 26 July to discuss the issue of renaming. This meeting was attended by MLAs from the entire region, by the Vice Chancellor, and by leaders of all important organisations connected with both the ‘pro-renaming’ and ‘anti-renaming’ movement. At this meeting, Uttamrao Patil introduced a compromise formula in Vidhan Sabha on 27 July to rename the university ‘Dr. B. R. Ambedkar Marathwada University’. However, this led to an intensification of feelings of rivalry between the two factions, leading to a riot which was a direct consequence of the agitation launched by the ‘Marathwada Vidyarthi Kruti Samiti’, the anti-renaming faction. Cotton merchants lavishly financed the agitation and Kurundkar, principal of People’s College, Nanded provided the theoretical framework.

Events of the Riot

Although the riots went on for 67 days, violence was at its peak from 27 July to 10 August 1978. It started with a call for ‘bandh’ (closure) by the MVKS, which also called itself the ‘Students Action Committee’. During the course of the bandh, demonstrators attacked public property in all major towns like Aurangabad, Nanded and Parbhani and caused a destruction of property worth Rs. 2.92 crores in the Parbhani district alone. In rural areas, violence against Dalits took various forms and led to killing of people, molestation and rape of Dalit women, burning of their dwellings, looting of their bustees, shunting them out of villages, polluting drinking-water wells, killing their cattle, refusing to give them work, etc. In Parbhani town, Ambedkar’ statue at Bhim Nagar was broken by upper castes.

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472 Sharad Pawar is a politician who has good friends all across the political spectrum. This has always been so. From his days as a young minister in the Congress government of Vasantdada Patil in Maharashtra, Pawar was much admired not only by his chief minister and several other senior Congressmen but also by opposition leaders. That helped him when, in 1978, without due notice, he defected from the Congress and with the help of the Janata Party formed the Progressive Democratic Front (PDF) government. Every constituent of the Janata Party—the Jan Sanghis and socialists included—endorsed the 38-year-old politician as their chief ministerial candidate.

It is difficult to pinpoint the single-most important factor that led to the riots as they were interwoven with complex factors. In urban areas, the high rate of unemployment among youth of all castes and categories was a very important factor. The feeling of resentment was somewhat exacerbated within the high-caste unemployed youth due to the new policy of providing 20% reservation in education and employment to scheduled castes. Many Mahar youths, who were low-caste but relatively educated, became the targets for this resentment. This back-lash was strengthened due to the weakness amongst the lower-caste groups, who swore allegiance to several different and dissimilar political groups.

Perhaps the first recorded case of violence happened in Aurangabad, when ‘Dasrada’, a Marxist lecturer who taught at Milind College who openly condemned atrocities being committed upon Dalits by the Students Action Committee and supported the renaming of Marathwada University, was beaten up by the members of Students Action Committee. It is not at all surprising though that nobody came to his rescue, not even Mahars—the caste he himself belonged to. From this initial act of violence, riots spread outwards, and from 1 August 1978 riots started engulfing the villages across Marathwada. In the Sugaon village of Kandhar taluka, Janardan Mawade and his friend were murdered and twenty other Dalits were injured badly. In Sonkhed village under the same taluka, a landlord and his musclemen set fire to a Dalit basti and raped two women agrarian labourers. A drunk Babu Potaji tortured and raped Janabai and Kistabai in the Bolsa village of Biloli taluka. One Ramanbabu of Bolsa raped a woman who had given birth to a child just two days earlier. In Yetala village, two Dalit teachers called Zagde and Thatwad were severely beaten up. Pochiram Kamble, a Matang activist was brutally murdered in the Temburni village.

474 Ibid. p.848.
475 Ibid, p.850.
476 Ibid. p.847.
477 Matang is synonymous of Mang, Mahar, Chamar and Dhor are the four prominent castes which fall under ‘Scheduled-castes’ in Maharashtra. As per the 1971 census, the percentage of these four castes was 35%, 33%, 22% and 3% respectively.
In Koklegaon, when a Dalit teacher tried to raise social awareness amongst Mahars by asking them to celebrate ‘Bheem-Jayanti’, the entire village was burnt down and the wife of the teacher was beaten black and blue. The ‘Atyachar Virodh Samiti’ reported a rather heinous crime which haunts the inhabitants of Izzatgaon till now: five women who were running towards the jungle were raped and the breasts of one of them were chopped off and no case was filed against the culprits. Dauterbai Shatiba Lokhande, responding to the prevailing state of affairs, noted that: ‘all the atrocities in Pangri were committed with blessings of police patil.’478 Such experiences were being repeated in several villages like Korgaon, Kaulagaon, Nandgaon, Sodgaon, Halta, Kohgaon, Adgaon etc.

One of the crucial aims of these organised acts of violence was to destroy the unity that existed between the Dalit and non-Dalit agrarian labourers. In the Nanded district, for example, this unity was reflected in the ‘Kashtakari Sangathan’ (organisation of the exploited), which developed rapidly and very soon acquired a stronghold in some 12-15 villages. Agrarian labourers belonging to both Dalit and non-Dalit groups came together to form ‘Self Defence Committees’ in response to acts of violence and equipped themselves with country-guns and bombs. Even where the ‘Kashtakari-Sangathan’ was not physically present, labourers had heard of its activities and militancy and had started becoming somewhat conscious. The riots and violence were targeted at this consciousness and unity and were the greatest where the Dalits/peasants were relatively poorly organised. The Mahar caste became one of the prime targets of these acts as they were seen as becoming culturally and socially aware due to the influence of Ambedkar’s politics.479 What is more, these agitations and acts of violence did not remain restricted to the Marathwada region and spread to the Vidarbha as well. At Nagpur the police had to resort to teargas and firing at a protest march when the mob became violent. Five people were killed in the police firing. The Panther leader Arun Kamble issued a

press statement appealing to Dalits to remain peaceful. Similar statements were issued by ‘Yuvak Kranti Dal’ and the Students Federation of India. 480

Dalit Panther factions led by Bhai Sangare and Avinash Mahatekar were staunch supporter of ‘renaming’. They were dissatisfied with the suggested name of the university and wanted exclusion of the word ‘Marathwada’ with immediate effect. On 3 August, 1978, this group gheraoed the Chief Minister Sharad Pawar for two hours. Consequently, a meeting was called in Mantralaya at Bombay on 4 August 1978. Delegations of Dalit leaders as well as representatives of different sections of people from Marathwada were called for the same.

The purpose was to discuss ways to reduce tensions and to speedily restore peace in the region. The Chief Minister, Sharad Pawar, clarified that the renaming resolution passed by the Vidhan Sabha was only of a recommendatory nature and that the government was yet to take a final decision on the issue. Namdeo Dhasal and Raja Dhale boycotted this meeting. 481 They, however, handed a memorandum to the Chief Minister. The reason cited for not attending the meeting was that the riots were started by communal elements and not by the Dalits and hence their presence was not called for.

On 6 August, the group took out a morcha from Azad Maidan to Mantralaya to demand renaming of the university. In a memorandum, they also demanded the arrest of the casteist members of the ‘Marathwada Vidyarthi Kruti Samiti’ who were spearheading the anti-renaming agitation. An enquiry into the riots was demanded by S.M. Joshi, leader of Yuvak Kranti Dal. 482 The riots affected some 1,200 villages out of 9,000 in the entire Marathwada. About 5,000 people across 1,000 villages became homeless. It left about 25,000 Dalits into a totally helpless and demoralised condition. P. V. Ranade, a noted historian at

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482 Ibid, p.178.
Aurangabad University responded to *Atyachar Virodh Samiti*: ‘The entire episode was government-sponsored. Whenever the ruling class wants to have a riot, they have it. But the period of the riots was a very trying time. Everybody had to come with their clear-cut stand.’⁴⁸³

**Movement after Riots**

The pro-renaming agitation continued. A committee of all groups of Dalits, including Dalit Panthers, RPI Yuvak Republican, Bandkhor Republican, Republican Panthers, was formed under the banner of ‘Boudha Dalit Anyay Atyachar Nivaran Samiti’. Its formation was announced at a meeting held on 9 August soon after the riots. The leaders of the movement demanded that the new name be effected from 14 April 1979, i.e. the birth anniversary of Ambedkar. Replying to this demand, Bhai Vaidya, the then State Minister for Home, explained that though the government was bound to implement the resolution passed by the legislature, it did not want to overlook its fallout.⁴⁸⁴

A morcha of about 4,000 Dalit Panthers led by Arun Kamble was taken to Raj Bhavan on 15th August 1978. A memorandum demanding renaming was submitted. Kamble also threatened that the Dalits would demand a separate ‘Dalitsthan’. There was even talk of taking this issue to the UN. He also demanded that the Dalits should be liberally given licenses to carry arms to protect themselves against atrocities by the upper castes. However, it appears that these measures were only meant to attract the attention of the society and the government and succeeded in alienating the Panthers further from the non-Dalit supporters of the movement. The leaders also lost their credibility as the organisation did not have any mechanism to help the Panther workers who were being prosecuted at different places during the course of the agitation.⁴⁸⁵

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⁴⁸⁵ Ibid, p.177.
After the riots were over, many college teachers and academics such as Avinash Dolas, Nagnath Kotapalle, M. D. Pandye, Bhalchandra Nemade, etc formed the ‘Apadrgrasta Dalit Sahayak Samiti’ for the purpose of helping the riot-affected Dalits in their rehabilitation and for cementing the gap between the Dalits and the upper castes.

Snehlata Mankar was a young Dalit girl studying at Aurangabad, and was an eye-witness of the riots who also participated in rehabilitation of the victims. She notes:

Several villages came under attack. Dalits were attacked invariably where even old aged, women and children were not spared. I was studying in eleventh standard then and residing in Aurangabad. Here at Aurangabad, many victims of the riot were rehabilitated in the Boys’ hostel of Milind College. Most of the students coming here mainly from ‘Vidarbh-region’ were poor and could not afford mess-facility. They used to cook for themselves and it is them who were crucial in rehabilitating riot-affected victims. We girls also helped them in their initial settlement. We collected donations for their medical assistance and other important amenities. Activists of the movement also collected donations for financial support of the victims. Later, the government was also pressurised for such grants. Most of the victims feared going back to their own village even after the riots got over. Many of them settled here and we still have colony namely, ‘Namantar-Colony’ which was started on government land with hutments and later became an urban nuclear habitation. Nanded, Parbhani and Latur were affected the most.

An organisation called Dalit Yuvak Aghade entered the scene at a crucial juncture when riots started and carried on with the work of rehabilitation. One of its leaders, Prakash Sirsade along with Pandrenath Sawant visited many parts of Marathwada. Apart from the immediate help they extended to riot victims, they worked on a report that would highlight the inhumanity and barbarity of violence perpetrated on Dalits. They organised their agitations using Baba Adhav’s slogan ‘One village, one Well’. They also urged the government that barren and silted land be distributed among the landless agrarian labourers. In order to re-invigorate the renaming movement, they also held a meeting of all ‘pro-renaming’ people of

486 Snehlata Mankar in a personal interview conducted at Aurangabad on 18 April, 2009. She has done a Ph.D. at Department of Sociology, Dr. Babasaheb Marathwada University, on ‘Displacement led by riots during Renaming-Movement.’ Her doctoral thesis has been published as a book titled: ‘Namantarache-Visthapit’ in Marathi. Currently, she teaches ‘Sociology’ at S. B. College, Aurangabad.

487 Pandrenath Sawant was a reporter of ‘Shree’ a local Marathi-weekly of Marathwada region. It had a circulation of about 1, 50,000.
Maharashtra including both Dalits and non-Dalits at Mangwad in Bhir district. They started a ‘Dalit Sahitya Sammelan’ in January 1979, of which ‘Kamleshwar’ was elected the president. M.N. Wankhade, a teacher of English who later became principal of ‘Milind College’ and was in the U.S. for a long time, helped energise the Dalit Literary Movement. M.B. Chitnis was also one of the major Dalit literary figures who participated actively.

The Vidyarthi Nagarik Samiti decided in its meeting on 27 July 1979 to organise a ‘Satyagraha’ on 6 December 1979, the ‘Mahaparinirvan Din’ (Ambedkar’s death anniversary), at Aurangabad. It was further decided to organise a ‘Long March’ of supporters of the re-naming movement from all parts of Maharashtra. All the marchers were to converge at Aurangabad on 6 December. The decision to organise the ‘Long March’ and Satyagraha was taken to demonstrate anger against the delaying tactics of the Government in implementing its own decision.

More than 30 organisations participated in the Long March. Baba Adhav gave an ardent call to people to join the March. Marchers from Pune under his leadership left Pune on 28 Nov 1979 which was Mahatma Phule’s death anniversary. The biggest procession consisting of thousands of Dalits started from Dikshabhumi, Nagpur under the leadership of Jogendra Kawade, secretary of Ambedkarite Professors’ Association. ‘Ambedkar Yuva Pratishthan’ also joined the march and ensured mass participation from the Vidarbha region.

Other organisations and political parties to join ‘Long March’ from various parts of Maharashtra were: ‘Yuvak Kranti Dal’, ‘Bhimsena’, CPI, CPM, ‘Lal Nishan Party’, ‘Chhatra Yuva Sangharsha Vahini’, Forward Bloc, Youth Wing of Janata Party, etc. In Bombay, an organisation called the ‘Vidyapeeth Namantarwadi Kriti Samiti’ was formed which mobilised the support of these parties in the city.

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488 Kamleshwar was a noted writer in Hindi, who passed away recently. ‘Kitne Pakistan’ is one of his best creations.
489 Prakash Sirsade, in personal interview conducted on 18 April 2009 at Aurangabad.
490 Dikshabhumi is a place in Nagpur, where Ambedkar held a mass conversion to Buddhism along with his supporters on 14 October 1956.
The trade unions controlled by CPI (AITUC), CPM (CITU) HMS and ‘Sarva Sharmik Sangh’ also decided to participate in the renaming agitation.

The organisers of the ‘Long March’ and Satyagraha had taken care to ensure peace. The participants were given badges. It was decided to fix a new name plate with the inscription ‘Dr. Ambedkar Marathwada Vidyapeeth’ next to the original nameplate in order not to allow any pretext for instigating violence by opponents. The leaders claimed that it was the biggest demonstration of civil disobedience with over a lakh of people voluntarily taking part and courting arrest. They compared their March with the ‘Washington-March’ organised by Blacks under the leadership of SNCC and progressive Whites in the US during the peak of the Civil Rights Movement.

The PDF government led by Sharad Pawar was dismissed in February 1980 after the return of Indira Gandhi to power at the centre. During the period between 1980–1982, various organisations like the ‘Dalit Yuvak Aghade’, ‘Yuvak Kranti Dal’, ‘Dalit Panther’ etc. continued to agitate for renaming of the university and took out processions, organised dharnas and meetings in support of their demand. But by this time, the attitude of confrontation had almost disappeared. A large conference was organised by the ‘Namantarwadi Kriti Samiti’ in Bombay on 15 August 1982. The renaming issue was again raised during the 1982 monsoon-session of the Assembly and was put to vote. However, because of lack of support it was lost. A majority of opposition party members were absent (only 12 out of 31 were present) which indicated even the opposition’s lack of interest in the issue of renaming.

**Issues and Opinions on Renaming of University**

In interviews conducted recently with several people who were part of the renaming movement, it was found that they continued to be convinced about the legitimacy of the renaming movement. For example, Gangadhar Gade noted that: “to rename Marathwada University as ‘Babasahab Ambedkar University’ is the
question of Dalit self-consciousness and all the Dalit brothers will unitedly fight for this struggle.\textsuperscript{491} B. D. Kobargade of Republican Party of India argued that “like Benaras Hindu University and Aligarh Muslim University, the Central Government should also make Marathwada University as Babasaheb Ambedkar Buddhist University.”\textsuperscript{492} Several intellectuals also supported the pro-naming demand, including Baburam Jagtap, G.B. Sardar, ex-President, ‘Marathi Sahitya Sammelan’, a reputed Marxist scholar and critic, Vijay Tendulkar, a well-known playwright, V.V. Shirwadkar, Narayan Athawale, Chairman, ‘Patrakar Parishad’, Mohan Dharia and Mrinal Gore. According to 1975 figures, in the Marathwada University, out of 75,000 students, 22,000 were Dalits and the demand for renaming was in a way legitimate. Chitnis called it a ‘Sanskar Kendra’ for Dalits. The renaming, therefore, was to be seen as an act of reverence towards Ambedkar. It was also pointed out that no one took objection to the renaming of the Madras University after Ramaswamy Naicker or of Madurai University after Kamraj, both of whom belonged to Kshatriya Varna.

In retrospect, we see this movement gave impetus to the expression of Ambedkarite thinking, but might not have achieved any other concrete results. Although renaming happened in 1994, it is to this day being run by upper caste people. Ambedkar’s name has been given to the university and that symbolic aspiration has also been fulfilled. The whole power structure remains the same and even till date adequate representation has not been given to the deprived sections. Till today, most of the appointments in the university go to the dominant Maratha community.\textsuperscript{493}

\textsuperscript{491}Gangadhar Gade was secretary of Maharashtra Dalit Panthers. He is general secretary of Maharashtra unit of Bahujan Samaj Party; he contested parliamentary elections from ‘Amravati’ in 2009 on a BSP ticket.


\textsuperscript{493}B. S. Waghmare in a personal interview conducted on 16\textsuperscript{th} April 2009 at Aurangabad.
'Anti-renaming' leaders pointed out that the Dalit leaders who were demanding the change in name were from outside Marathwada and Dalits from the region in fact opposed the change. They clarified that their opposition to renaming should not be construed as disrespect to Ambedkar and that they would fully support any move to raise a separate monument in his memory in Marathwada in the form of a technical university or international law study centre. Nor was their agitation against Dalits. They alleged that the Dalit leaders were taking undue advantage of the Protection of Civil Rights Act (PCR).\textsuperscript{494} According to Bhalerao, the obscene and abusive language used by Dalit leaders and their utterances against Hindu gods widened the right between Dalits and non-Dalits on the question of renaming.\textsuperscript{495}

Response of other Political Parties

Most of the political parties as a matter of public posturing supported the renaming. But internally, a majority of them opposed it and why they opposed has to be understood by us as academics. The logic for their opposition was that while they did not deny the social and educational contribution which Ambedkar had brought to this region, this area had a great cultural significance as it was liberated from the clutches of Nizam of Hyderabad; since the people of this area had fought for it, they shared a great emotional attachment to the Marathwada region.\textsuperscript{496} They argued that this was an attack on regional aspirations of the real inhabitants of this region by western Maharashtrian leaders. Many questioned why the Bombay University could not be named after Ambedkar, whose contribution to the university has been unparalleled and where he taught for such a long time as a professor.\textsuperscript{497} Perhaps this argument was justified from one perspective, but it might

\textsuperscript{494} The PCR (Protection of Civil Rights) Act passed during Indira Gandhi's government was 'Harijan-Act' earlier. Later, during V. P. Singh's government, it became 'Atrocities-Act'.
\textsuperscript{496} Ibid., pp.845-52.
\textsuperscript{497} B. S. Waghmare in a personal interview conducted on 16 April 2009 at Aurangabad.
have been a premeditated rationale for avoiding naming the university after a Mahar leader.

When the demand for renaming first came up, it received a cordial response from the then ruling Congress Party. The PDF led by Sharad Pawar which came to power after the fall of the Congress government also supported the demand in order to establish a good rapport with the Dalit population of the Marathwada region. Janta Party, which was a constituent of the P.D.F., supported the move. The Socialists however were divided into two groups, one was supporting the move of renaming and the other opposing it.

The CPI's position was ambiguous. While the party condemned atrocities at its Manmad conference, an influential leader of the party, V. D. Deshpande strongly opposed renaming and supported the anti-renaming agitation.\textsuperscript{498} The peasants and workers parties also showed similar inconsistency at the two levels. Lal Nishan CPI (M) and CPI (ML) supported renaming, but failed to do anything when the massive onslaught on Dalits was on. Except CPI (M), CPI (ML) and Lal Nishan, all parties took opportunist positions.\textsuperscript{499} One Left party called the 'Peasants and Workers Party' which supposedly fashioned itself after the ideology of not just Karl Marx, but also on the teachings of Mahatma Jotiba Phule and Ambedkar, chose quite surprisingly to oppose the renaming movement.\textsuperscript{500}

Gangadhar Pantawane, highlighting the different roles played by these political parties, noted:

Marxist leaders also had supported this movement, but numerically they were very few. And as history shows, Marxists never took up the problem of 'untouchables' and were proved to be wrong in doing this. And I totally disagree that the non-Dalits did not support the movement. Socialist like Govindbhai Shroff and others were always in support of upliftment and empowerment of Dalits. But they had a different opinion on the renaming issue. They argued for 'Marathwada-identity' preceding and being more appealing culturally than the association with Dr. Ambedkar, whose contribution to this region was well acknowledged. They always were in the support of Ambedkar's ideology, they also provided initial support to this movement in principle, but once the violence was instigated by


\textsuperscript{499} Ibid.

\textsuperscript{500} Ibid.
some members of Dalit Panthers, they went against the renaming. Yet another point which broke this unity between Dalits and non-Dalits is that the Panthers were using filthy language against non-Dalits. And after renaming finally happened, the Panthers tried to take the credit. Thus, the Panthers weakened the renaming movement in one sense.\(^501\)

The Rashtriya Swayam Sevak Sangh (RSS) strongly opposed the renaming move.\(^502\) Govindbhai Shroff, a Marxist (a great educationist, his work is highly acknowledged by people of Marathwada region) and Anant Bhalerao, (editor of ‘Marathwada-Daily’) a socialist, were both against renaming. To both of them, ‘renaming’ was mere symbolism.\(^503\) Govindbhai Shroff was, till the end, against renaming and he argued that the name of the Marathwada leader Swami Ramanand Teertha\(^504\) should have been given to the entire university. When the university was renamed, it was decided that it be split into two parts: (a) Dr. B. R. Ambedkar Marathwada University at Aurangabad and (b) Swami Ramanand Teertha Marathwada University at Nanded.\(^505\)

Panthers and other Dalit Leaders

The move for renaming was initiated by the Kamble group of Dalit Panthers. Initially, all Dalit leaders backed the renaming demand. But when the Kamble group agreed to the joint forces, many of them opposed it. When the renaming was being delayed, Panther groups of Nanavare and Sangare became restive and pressed the demand by holding meetings in northern and western suburbs of Bombay, which were their strongholds. They gave inflammatory speeches instigating their followers to adopt violent measures on the issue of

\(^{501}\) Gangadhar Pantawane, in a personal interview conducted on 17 April 2009, at his residence near Milind College at Aurangabad.

\(^{502}\) Organiser, a weekly journal of RSS, August 27, 1979.

\(^{503}\) B. S. Waghmare in a personal interview conducted on 16 April 2009 at Aurangabad.

\(^{504}\) Swami Ramanand Teerth (1903–1972) was an educator, social activist who became a historical figure for his role in Marathwada liberation movement from the clutches of Nizam of Hyderabad. Marathwada University had a sub-centre located at Nanded. When the renaming was announced at the backdrop of riot-hit sensitive Marathwada region, in a balancing act, the sub-centre was converted into a full-fledged University in the name of Ramanand Teerth.

\(^{505}\) Prakash Sirsade, in personal interview conducted on 18 April 2009 at Aurangabad.
Jaidev S. Gaikwad, Dalit Panther, President, Pune Chapter

Prakash Sirsade, Dalit Yuvak Aghadi, Aurangabad
renaming and exhorted them to join the ‘Long March’. Their volunteers tried to obstruct traffic near Sion Circle in Bombay on 29 November 1979. Sangare and Mahatekar group of Dalit Panthers stealthily entered the cabin of the then Minister Uttamarao Patil, on 1 December 1979 and gheraoed him.

‘Dalit Yuvak Agahde’ definitely had differences with Panthers on many issues, they were all for the renaming. Prakash Sirsade opined:

The movement for renaming was mainly carried out by the Dalit Panthers. Republican Party cannot be given any owing advantage on this issue. Dalit Panther by then had become the major organisation of Dalits at least until 1981–82. When we talk about the style of their functioning, I have a difference of opinion with them, but they were always forerunning the movement. The assembly had decided to rename it as 'Dr. Ambedkar Marathwada University' in order to avoid any confrontation on this issue. Arun Kamble, when asked by the press about his opinion on this, we all expected him to be sticking to the original demand of the Panthers. But he plainly conceded saying ‘I accept whatever the house has decided.’ And it was then, that the riots started by ‘anti-renaming’ group all over Marathwada saying ‘we do not agree with whatever the assembly has decided.’ What I believe is that even if Kamble had refused to accept this decision, riot would have happened in that case also, but there could have been this option of including ‘Marathwada’ in yet another renaming to contain anti-renaming group and riot could have been avoided. This political blunder of Kamble not only made us to suffer during the riots but for seventeen more years. In politics, making fire brand speeches does not fetch anything, one requires a strategy also. When Arun is in Bombay, I am in Aurangabad, we are safe. But our people in the villages are exposed to all sorts of dangers. I believe whatever idea I have; whatever view I have, I must express them only after confirming that my views is not going to harm my people in the remotest of villages. And the Panthers never gave a serious thought to this. This is illustrated from the fact that the moment the riots started, the Panthers were to be seen nowhere.”

Namdeo Dhasal strongly opposed the call given by the leaders like Kawade and Adhav for the ‘Long March’, calling it the ‘Wrong March’. He argued that the ‘Long March’ would deteriorate the situation further, resulting in more atrocities on Dalits who were already facing the wrath of riots. Dhasal made an appeal to all progressive thinkers to come together and create a new university on their own in Konkan, where the educational ideology of Ambedkar could be implemented and realised and through which it would be possible to annihilate casteist feelings from society and establish in its place democratic, rational and humanitarian values. He reiterated that merely renaming of a government-aided institution would not be a

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506Prakash Sirsade, in personal interview conducted on 18 April 2009 at Aurangabad.
true memorial to Ambedkar. He appealed to the people to understand the limitations of emotional issues and to come together to agitate on material issues like poverty, unemployment, etc.

The ‘Mass Movement’ led by Raja Dhale was opposed to Long March, noting that it was merely a strategy of some political parties to create discontent in the Dalit community, so that it would benefit those parties in the ensuing elections. They cautioned people that the March was impracticable and wastage of Dalit power. RPI (Gavai group) had declared its moral support to the ‘Long March’ but did not take part in it. However, they decided to observe ‘dharnas’ and take out ‘morchas’ at district and taluka levels to police stations and revenue offices during the period 26 November to 6 December 1979.

Assessment

Marathwada riots were not at all spontaneous. They were planned and organised by anti-Dalits. This planned offensive was led by upper caste capitalists, landlords with the support from their allies: police, patils, sarpanches and goondas. There were many loopholes like red-tapism and corruption involved in whatever little help for rehabilitation was coming for the riot-affected Dalits. A Dalit construction worker confessed to member of Atyachar Virodh Samiti:

Sharad Pawar’s government is talking much about rehabilitation. They will rebuild our shattered huts; we will work harder and get back our corn, utensils. But our sisters and wives had to lose their dignity by being raped and sexually tortured. Are we going to get this back?507

The educated and salaried middle class of Dalits also looked cynical. Generally there was a feeling of disappointment and helplessness, while Dalit youths belonging to Dalit Panthers and Mass movement showed an urge to combat casteist onslaught. Posters of Mass Movement depicting atrocities on Dalits in poetic and emotional language were canvassed mostly in cities, towns and sometimes in villages as well. In many villages, Dalits were blaming student leaders for their conditions.

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507 Atyachar Virodh Samiti, op. cit, p.848.
A Dalit villager in Koklegon, confessed:

They are giving fiery lectures, demonstrating in cities, and here we have to suffer because of retaliation against us. Dalit student leaders don’t come to our rescue when atrocities are being committed against us.508

For many, the renaming movement was a cultural movement. The teachings of Ambedkar became the basis of this movement. The blame for the subsequent riots lies completely on the shoulders of the caste-Hindus and not the Dalit students who organised the peaceful movement. Pantawane noted that ‘The event of the riots that followed during the renaming movement was against the ethos of Babasaheb Ambedkar. Violence was targeted against Dalit community and it was calculated to oppose renaming. All castiest forces united on the basis of rumours like: ‘all degree-certificates will carry a photograph of Buddha and Ambedkar and everybody will have to accept that!’509

The media of the region was thoroughly opposed to the renaming demand. The opposition was spearheaded by Marathwada. Other papers like ‘Godatir-Samachar’ (pro-Congress) and ‘Prajvani’ (pro-Janata) supported the agitations against renaming and gave wide publicity to the agitation in the cities and towns while suppressing the news about atrocities on Dalits in the rural areas.

The emotiveness of Ambedkar as a symbol of Dalit rights can be felt even today, long after the agitations and riots on the issue of renaming has ended. More recently, when Ambedkar’s statue was demolished in Kanpur (Uttar Pradesh) in November 2006, there was riotous situation in Nanded and Aurangabad. Four people were killed and as many as 60 were hurt. Such incidents reveal the deeper anti-Dalit malaise that exists within out society, and perhaps this also reflects on the failure of the Dalits to mobilise together and agitate for their rights. Left-leaning parties with pro-Dalit ideologies have also failed to make the masses politically more conscious. Gail Omvedt rightly points out the failure of the Left to build democratic anti-caste movements. She further adds that this weakens the

508 Ibid, p.847.
509 Prof. Gangadhar Pantawane, in a personal interview conducted on 17 April 2009, at his residence near Milind College at Aurangabad.
Marathwada University at Aurangabad; Inaugurated by the Prime Minister Jawaharlal Nehru on 23 August 1958

Marathwada University after 'Renaming' was approved on 14 January 1994
attack on orthodox Brahmical-Hinduism and efforts to build an alternative
democratic and usually more secular culture.\textsuperscript{510} However, it must be noted that
during the re-naming riots, those areas where the Left-leaning parties were stronger
countered fewer cases of violence and atrocities against Dalits. In Nanded
district, for example, several villages like Sujlegaon, Hangergaon, Borgaon, etc
where \textit{Kshetkari-Sangathan} of CPI (ML) had a stronghold, both Dalits and non-
Dalits were prepared to fight back the onslaught by upper caste landlords.\textsuperscript{511}

Finally, the issue of renaming actually proved to be a mere symbol and led
to few material benefits, though there is no denying the usefulness of powerful
symbols. There was a plan to establish a library in the name of Ambedkar where
research done on his life and his teachings across the world would be treasured.
The University also had a plan of unveiling of a life size statue of Ambedkar in the
University campus which remains unfulfilled till date. The university was finally
renamed on 1 January 1994, but even after 15 long years, a small demand of a
'statue' is yet to be met with. The university administration could have at least
started a reference library in the name of Ambedkar; they could have also organised
some research into the vision and politics of Ambedkar. New York City also has a
statue of Ambedkar in the Columbia library University library.\textsuperscript{512} So, even the
Americans have given this tribute to Ambedkar for just being an alumnus of
Columbia University. It is pity that in a country of his birth, whose ‘Constitution’
has been penned by him, his name becomes grounds for a political warfare. This is
merely a symptom of the larger misguided nature of most mainstream (or relatively
mainstream) political parties today, and is true not only of centrist and right-wing
parties, but also of many Leftist organisations who fail to completely understand
the significance and reality of caste.

\textsuperscript{511} Atyachar Virodh Samiti, \textit{op.cit}, p.848.
\textsuperscript{512} Prof. Gangadhar Pantawane, in a personal interview conducted on 17 April 2009, at his residence
near Milind College at Aurangabad.
Caste, Class and the Indian Left

Bhojpur
Dear Geeta,

Bhojpur and Delhi are not separated merely by a thousand miles, but also by five thousand years. You must have heard of exploitation, disease, lawlessness and everything. There is all that here and much more. Here I am on the run, an extremist in the eyes of the law, member of a banned party attempting to galvanise the people who have been subjugated for centuries. It's really complicated, Geeta! Let me try and explain, one day the harijans where we worked, a thakur son had raped one of their women. They had all gathered outside the thakur’s house, well! to chop off his balls. The feeling was overwhelming. To my naïve mind, it seemed that the revolution was at hand. And suddenly the f***ing landlord had the heart attack. The lower caste villagers who were screaming for his blood a minute ago, was suddenly overcome by some ancient dutiful urge to save him. After all, he and his family have been their masters and lords for centuries. So a jeep was dispatched to summon a doctor. Being a lower caste, the only doctor they knew was also a lower caste. So here is a problem. The landlord’s son didn’t want a lower caste doctor to touch his father. But the father, who was dying, did not give a damn. At that moment he would have eaten goat-shit if the doctor had asked him to. This strange compassion of the villagers towards their oppressor in his moment of need, taught me something. What? I am still trying to decipher. Please try and understand there is no place for you here. I'll write to you again.  

Siddhartha.

Politics in modern Maharashtra has been the affairs of three main caste players: Brahmins, Marathas and Mahars. Social life is determined by ritual, customs and respective jatis. Brahmins occupy less than four percent of the total population in the state. Chitpavans and Konkanasthas were main sub-castes in

513 This is the text of a letter written by Siddharth Tayabji to his comrade and girlfriend Geeta Rao. This plot has been borrowed from the film ‘Hazaron Khwaishen Aisi’ by Sudhir Mishra. The film released in 2005 is set against the backdrop of Emergency era in India. The film portrays three protagonists: Siddharth, Geeta and Vikram. Siddharth, moves to Bhojpur in Bihar with a dream of bringing revolution which will end caste-based discrimination; bring social justice and overhaul society for the better. Geeta makes big in life by any means possible. Geeta plays the character of a London-returned south Indian girl who finds Naxalite rhetoric fascinating, but is not convinced if she can subscribe to it completely. Siddharth writes his experiences to Geeta who is in Delhi. This text is cited to illustrate that ‘class’ in India is so overlapped with caste and vice versa.

514 Iravati Karve, a known sociologist described Juti as an endogamous unit. Its members generally have one or more interconnected family occupations and they used to have a rank relative to all similar groups.
Brahmins claiming their ancestral origin in the areas of Konkan and Dhesasthas. They were beneficiaries of important economic, social and cultural privileges not just during the time of Peshwas\textsuperscript{515} rule from Pune, but also under the British since the first half of the nineteenth century.

Marathas, classified as ‘intermediate-caste’, according to caste census of 1931 were the most numerous caste group and they still are. According to E. V. Enthoven, Marathas were categorised in three main categories: Marathas, Chiefs and landowning and fighting Marathas. They all claim Kshatriya origin.\textsuperscript{516} Maratha Kunbis (cultivators) and other occupational castes like Kumbhars, Lohars, Mali, and Nhavi were all part of this ‘intermediate’ category. Malis (gardeners), the caste to which Jotiba Phule belonged, took to gardening as a profession and gradually became a separate community and came to be categorised as shudras.

Most of the artisan caste groups identified by Enthoven were closely tied with Maratha-Kunbis as under ‘watan-system’ more popularly known as ‘balutedari-system’\textsuperscript{517} in Maharashtra. Hereditary succession to a ‘watan’ among family means an occupation as family property. A set of twelve caste groups getting this offering instead of their services were called ‘bara-balutedar’. They were Sutars (carpenters), Lohars (blacksmiths), Chambhars (leather workers), Mahars (village servants), Kumbhars (potters), Parits (washermen), Nhavis

\textsuperscript{515} The word ‘Peshwa’ is originally a Persoan word and means ‘foremost’; it was introduced in the Deccan by the Muslim rulers. Peshwas were the Brahmin ministers to the Maratha Chhatrapati kings who began commanding Maratha armies and later became the hereditary rulers of the ‘Maratha-Empire’ of central India from mid of eighteenth century to first quarter of nineteenth century when they finally came under the dominion of the English India Company.


\textsuperscript{517} ‘Balutedari-System’ represents a practice of caste-defined village economy which got consolidated since the first later half of the first millennium according to eminent Marxist historians like D.D. Koshambi and R. S. Sharma. This is known as ‘Jajmani’ in northern India and ‘Ayagar’ in southern India. (Gail Omvedt, Dalit and the Democratic Revolution: Dr. Ambedkar and the Dalit Movement in Colonial India, New Delhi: Sage Publications, 2004, p.43).
(barbers), Mangs\textsuperscript{518} (rope makers), Joshis/Bhats (astrologers/genealogists), Maulanas (superintendent of mosques), Guravs (temple watchmen) and Kolis (water drawers). Of these, balutedarsMahars, Mangs and Chambhars were ranked as untouchables. These three along with other lower castes like Dhors were called ‘Ati-shudras’.

Untouchability among the untouchable castes have a persistent phenomenon of discrimination among themselves. Those who are on the upper side of the social ladder do not want those below them to even let them draw water from their own wells. As Dheds discriminate against Bhangi, so do Mahars against Mangs and Chambhars.\textsuperscript{519} The ‘exploited’ as a whole category is not a homogenous unit in itself. There are in-built contradictions among various castes within the Scheduled Caste category.

Dalit labourers therefore face dual discrimination (both oppression and exclusion), one from the landed peasants and other from the lower caste-Hindus but upper in the hierarchy. Owen M. Lynch, an American anthropologist, states that so deep are the beliefs that the untouchables themselves discriminate among one another as a consequence of which they fail to unite for their own betterment. He reiterates that no better example of Marx’s false consciousness can be cited.\textsuperscript{520}

The concept of Class-Caste has been a matter of rigorous debate in Indian politics particularly when the role of Indian Left is concerned with respect to the solution of caste-based discriminations; implementation of caste-based reservations and attempt for mobilisations of ‘economically backward category’ irrespective of caste affiliations. The first and foremost task, therefore, before any deliberation on this subject would be to understand ‘class’ as a concept:

\textsuperscript{518} Mangs were also called Matang and resided in most parts of Maharashtra but not in considerable concentration. They produced and sold several types of ropes, bamboo baskets, etc.
Class as many have argued is not a fundamental concept of Marxism; the analysis of exploitation, of surplus value, of forces and relations of production, are much more basic. Nevertheless ‘class’ has become, socially, almost an identifying concept of radical socialist movements and of Marxist analysis. Socialists are those who believe that ‘all history is the history of class struggle’; Marxists are those who theorize by giving a ‘class analysis’ which deciphers the meaning of political and social events in terms of the interests of the bourgeois, proletarian, petty bourgeois, etc., groups involved.\textsuperscript{521}

E. V. Ramaswami Periyar represented a radical non-Brahmin movement in Tamil Nadu. He got disenchanted by the Congress with what he described as ‘Brahmanic-leadership’. He constantly clashed with Congress leadership, including Gandhi over proposed reservation to the untouchables in the legislature. In 1929, he formed the Self-Respect League to oppose Brahman priesthood, to abolish caste and for liberation of women. In 1932, after a tour of the Soviet Union, he and his colleague Singravelu through their paper ‘Kudi-Arasu’ expounded socialism and materialist interpretation of history by which a broad unity of lower castes could be made.

Bhagat Singh, who was leader of Hindustan Socialist Republic Association (HSRA), had declared that the issue of discrimination of any person by another person across the globe is driven by one’s class position only and that it could only be ended with radical transformation of the existing society. His understanding of how religion often becomes a barrier to human consciousness and a source of one’s weakness and misery has been beautifully elaborated in his booklet \textit{Why I am an Atheist}? Bhagat Singh wrote on 6 June 1929:

\begin{quote}
The whole edifice of the civilization, if not saved in time shall crumble. A radical change, therefore, is necessary and it is the duty of those who realize it to reorganize society on the socialist basis. Unless this thing is done and exploitation of man by man and of nations by nations is brought to an end, sufferings and carnage with which humanity is threatened today can not be prevented.\textsuperscript{522}
\end{quote}

Even Ambedkar was highly troubled by the dilemma of whether a mobilisation be based on caste or class. As early as in 1930, Ambedkar in his

address to the Depressed Classes Conference, had declared changing the name of his paper from ‘Bahishkrit-Bharat’ to ‘Janata’ (which meant the people). Since then under a Brahmin editor, G. N. Sahsrabudhaye started targeting atrocities of capitalists and landlords. Marxism always had remained a subject of commentary and debate among Dalit cadres as reflected in articles published in Janata as well as in Bahishkrit Bharat. Here is a poem illustrating radical thrust of Dalit’s aspiration of combining class and anti-caste rhetoric:

_Bhils, Gonds, Dravids, their Bharat was beautiful,
They were the people their culture was theirs, their rule was theirs;
The Aryas infiltrated all this; they bought their power to Bharat
And Dravidians were suppressed...

- Brahmins, Kshatriyas, Vaishyas, all became owners
- Drinking the blood of slaves, making the Shudras into machines.
The Brahmins, Kshatriyas and Banias got all the ownership rights.
All these three call themselves brothers; they come together in time of crisis.
And work to split the Shudras who have become workers.
‘Congress’, ‘Hindu-Mahasabha’, ‘Muslim League’ are all agents of rich,
The ‘Independent Labour Party’ is our true house...
Take up the weapon of ‘Janata’
Throw off the bloody magic of the owners’ atrocities,
Rise workers! Rise Peasants! Hindustan is ours,
Humanity will be built on labour,
This is our birth right._

In 1937, after the Khoti-abolition Bill was tabled, a march of peasants to Bombay was organised. Indulal Yagnik, a peasant leader and S. A. Dange, a communist leader were the speakers in the final rally. Ambedkar joined the communists in organising peasants and a rally of more than 3000 poor farmers was held waving red flags at Chari on 17 October. B. T. Ranadive and G. S. Sardesai joined the addressed the gathering.

The pinnacle of the protest was a march of more than 20,000 peasants to Bombay Council Hall on 12 January 1938. Ambedkar himself presided over the meeting and his speech (a part of it was published 15 January 1938 issue of Janata) reflects his growing radicalism: "...really seen, there are only two castes in the world, the first that of the rich, and second that of the poor. Besides that there is a middle class. This class is responsible for the destruction of all movements."  

Within six months time however, Ambedkar took on the issue of Marxism in the 25 June 1938 issue of Janata. Though the article had earlier appeared in 1936, it came up with a cover story attacking the base-superstructure analogy of Marxism. He clarified that if one had to change the economic relations of society, then the existing social, political and other institutions would have to be destroyed. Ambedkar also sensed a suspicion in the approach of socialists when they declared that untouchability was not a problem since 'under this sytem there shall be no differentiation and victimisation'.  

The Congress Ministry of Bombay Province introduced the Industrial Disputes Bill which under ill-conditions made strikes illegal. The strike therefore was organised by Indian Labour Party, Moderates and Communist Party together on 7 November 1938. The participation of the Dalit textile and municipal workers was so huge that the number went up to 1,00,000. The event turned violent and in a clash with police, two workers were dead and 633 got injured. Later, in an attempt to create a political alternative to the Congress, Ambedkar established Scheduled Caste Federation in 1942.  

With a series of failures in electoral politics, disenchantment and frustration out of working in the Congress ministry and defeat of Scheduled Caste Federation (SCF) in the 1952 general elections, Ambedkar realised that the problems of Dalits,
be it social, political, or ethical, could not be solved within the framework of religion and caste. A scientific outlook, class consciousness and a completely atheist approach alone could add an edge to the struggles of the Dalits. Ambedkar for this purpose, therefore, wanted to transfer the then existing Scheduled Caste Federation (SCF) into a broad-based political party. However, this did not happen during his life time.

Yashodhara Dalmia has opined that the rights Ambedkar fought for did not provide any real power to his people. Not only did his achievements leave the majority untouched, but it created a schism between leadership and the people, with those in power having a vested interest in keeping the untouchables backward.\(^{528}\) Ambedkar’s belief that modernisation would bring about Dalit equality did not take into consideration the fact that in India modernisation would not necessarily spread to rural India, like it did in Europe and America.

A fresh debate on the subject got momentum in the early 1970s. The role of the Indian Left parties became even more challenging in the post-Ambedkar era. It came as a challenge because very recently, Indian Left [official parliamentary left C.P.I. and C.P.I.(M)] had to openly suppress the ‘extremist-naxalites’ which had a considerable mass-base among the lower castes. These at the same time provided an important opportunity also, as with the coming of the Dalit Panthers, they had the option of building a broad unity on caste and class issues. The first generation of educated Dalits which grew witnessing the horrendous killings of Kilvenmani\(^ {529}\) in Tamilnadu to the massacres of Belchhi\(^ {530}\) in Bihar, showed unprecedented

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\(^{529}\) ‘Kilvenmani’ is situated Eastern Thanjavur district of Tamilnadu. In 1969, Communist Part of India had organized a campaign for landless agriculturalists demanding higher wages following a rise in overall production resulted by ‘green-revolution’. More than forty Dalit agrarian labourers were chased and burned to death by a gang aided by local landlords.

\(^{530}\) ‘Belchhi’ in Patna district of Bihar witnessed one of the most heinous crimes of humanity in modern times. On 27 May 1977, eight ‘Harijans’ and three ‘Sonars’ (goldsmith) were shot by Kurmi (dominant O.B.C. caste in U.P. and Bihar) landlords and thrown into burning fire, while some of them were still alive. It was even more stunning that a twelve year boy was part of the victims who jumped many a times out of the fire and each time he was pushed back to the fire unless he finally
courage to stand for themselves motivated by teachings of Ambedkar to ‘educate’, ‘organise’ and ‘agitate’.

Dalit Panthers are generally blamed for being the party of urban youths and that too comprising of mostly Mahars and championing their rights. But this problem had also bothered Ambedkar in his own attempt to organise and consolidate the lower castes. In 1927, he appealed to Mang (whose antagonism to Mahars is well known) inhabitants to participate in the temple entry movement in Amravati, but was disappointed with their response that they were not willing to dump their own traditional (Hindu) practices. It is not surprising therefore, that even from Mahar community emerged a leader G. A. Gavai who was educated himself in V. R. Sindhe’s mission and was active in a group opposed to Ambedkar.531

It was 1936, when the first elections for the ‘provisional legislative assembly’ were to be held as per the provision of the Government of India Act, 1935. Ambedkar formed the ‘Independent Labour Party’ (a worker-peasant party with a red flag) and fielded candidates from the Scheduled Castes as was appropriated by the ‘Poona Pact’.532 It is astounding to note, however that out of a total of ten candidates, nine were from Mahar caste and one was Mang.533 It was also alleged that Chambhars of Maharashtra never considered themselves to be the part of Ambedkar movement.534 Vimal Thorat, however, does not agree fully; rather she put forward a political reason to this. She feels Jagjivan Ram had a...
stronghold both inside and outside Congress party and Chambhars of Maharashtra also considered him to be their leader.\textsuperscript{535}

There was yet another leader from Chambhar community in Maharashtra, Pandurang Nathuram Rajabhoj.\textsuperscript{536} He started his activism by joining 'Asprushya Nivarak Mandal' (Untouchability Abolition Society) started by his Brahmin teacher Sripad Mahadev Mate in 1917. It was here that he got an opportunity to observe untouchable families closely. During the Ambedkar Mahad Satyagrah, he witnessed the vigorous resistance of the caste-Hindus and was seriously injured. In 1928, Rajabhoj started Dalit-Bandhu,\textsuperscript{537} (Friends of Untouchables) a newspaper primarily focusing on the problem of Chambhars.

We see, therefore, a thorough disunity among the ‘Scheduled-Castes’ even during the leadership of Ambedkar who was considered to be the tallest leader of the community. An even more intense debate started during the late 70s when Marathwada was burning with caste and class animosity. Omvedt, in her early 1978 writings on Marathwada riots, apparently deploys Marxist categories, while arguing against what she terms to be ‘reductionist-Marxism’ on the part of the communist Left.\textsuperscript{538}

Omvedt is suggestive of the fact that the overt practice of caste discrimination remains a major hindrance in the creation of ‘class unity’ irrespective of class lines. She has argued that the Left parties should have attempted a broad-based movement aiming at the abolition of caste-based discrimination. And if there already exists an organisation for fighting against caste oppression, then it becomes the responsibility of the Communists to support such a movement. She is of opinion that conflict during in Marathwada was an expression


\textsuperscript{536} Rajabhoj was born in a relatively prosperous Chambhar family in Nashik district.

\textsuperscript{537} H. Kotani (ed.) ‘Caste System, Untouchability and the Depressed, (Delhi: Manohar Publishers, 1997) as cited in Masao Naito, Anti Untouchability Ideologies and Movements in Maharashtra from the Late Nineteenth Century to the 1930s, pp.208–09.

\textsuperscript{538} Gail Omvedt, ‘Class Struggle or Caste War’, Frontier, 30 September 1978., p. 30.
of the class forces but she warned at the same time regarding downplaying of caste undertones.539

The Left has not neglected Dalits. Communists in fact have stood by them under attack, defied social customs, broken down social barriers, in their own lives and in the lives of others. Wherever Dalit agricultural labourers have been organized on a village level in a way to give them the strength to really defy the economic and social oppression of the village rulers, it has been by Communists—so much so that in Thanjavur, the CPI (M) has been known as the “Pullan-Parian Party” and in Bhojpur, the CPI (ML) has been identified as the party of Harijans. The Communist record in the past has had its moments of achievement and there is no doubt now that in many places Marxists-Leninists and other revolutionary forces have built a solid base among the poorest sections of the rural toilers, Dalits and Adivasis.

But this has been insufficient—insufficient to break the barriers of caste, to create the kind of wide scale class unity across caste lines that are necessary to generate a massive revolutionary force. Agricultural labour unions in the country-side often breakdown on the caste issue or remain limited to one caste, community; worker’s unions unite people of different castes on economic issues but fail to unite them in their neighborhoods and on socio-political issues. And if caste remains the main barrier to class unity, the failure to break it is related to the failure of the left to build democratic anti-caste movements or relate constructively to such movements when they arise among the low castes themselves.540

While Gail Omvedt’s critique of the different Marxist parties’ approach in dealing with the question of caste may be correct, her approach of attributing the same inadequacies to the very concept of class itself is fraught with problems. Though she is correctly paraphrasing the Marxist definition of class in her analysis, she has failed to comprehend the full scope and meaning implied there in. For Marx, production is always a social rather than an economic category. Similarly, the Marxist phrase of ‘ownership of means of production’ is far more loaded than is commonly sought to be interpreted.

To put it simply, who owns what means of production’ is certainly not the outcome of merely economic processes rather it is the outcome of interplay of wide range of extra-economic social factors and historical processes. For instance, the emergence and existence of landowners as a class with their attendant control over land (means of production) is the outcome of religious, caste, community powers

539 Ibid.
540 Ibid, pp. 35–36.
and not merely economic. Similarly at the other end of social spectrum, the existence of landless labourers as a class (who owns no means of production) has been the outcome of historical and social processes where institutions of religions, caste, communities, etc have been invoked to deprive this section of the population from any means of production.

Omvedt provides further illustration and notes that it would be inaccurate to say that between a family of Marathas and a family of Mahars, each owning an acre of land and working mainly as wage labourers, the ‘class’ status is the same while they differ only in terms of ‘caste’. She puts forward another example from urban Bombay, where in the weaving department of textile mills, Dalits were tacitly denied employment till the late 1970s on the plea that due to lack of automation, workers had to hold the yarn between their teeth when broken and hence considered polluting. And this has happened in spite of the fact that most of the Bombay textile workers had rallied behind the Communists.

With the examples cited above, she has tried to prove that caste contradiction in society is more fundamental as it may continue to exist even after class equality is attained. But this does not explain the phenomenon why there should be class exploitation within the same caste-category. Omvedt’s own formulation however fails to illustrate whether ‘class-position’ of a Mahar owning an acre of land and a Dhor owning one acre of land can be equated, even when it is established that both of them are ‘Scheduled-Castes’.

G. K. Lieten elaborates the problems which the Left faces while taking a position as Omvedt suggests aligning with ‘anti-caste movement’. One that it can be branded as a caste party which has the potential danger of alienating other oppressed section. Two, the struggle for status amelioration of one particular caste can create antagonism with other castes with a similar status or a higher caste.

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belonging to the same class status.\(^{542}\) Taking Omvedt’s own account of Thanjavur and Bhojpur, Lieten states:

As a matter of fact, it is solely the Communist movement which has so profoundly understood the Indian context that in the areas where it is strong, caste has lost its strength. It is possibly the greatest achievement of the Communist Parties that in these areas the caste-system has been undermined to a considerable extent, both in its operational and functional aspects. It is by now common knowledge that Bengal and even more Kerala, which till recently represented the most rigid and extreme caste system has made incomparable progress in this respect.\(^{543}\)

We see that the events in Marathwada for sure have reminded the Left Parties in India that caste factor cannot be taken for granted. S. G. Sardesai, member of National Council of the Communist Party of India stated the position of the party as in why caste question has remained a perennial problem to deal with for the Left parties when their primary target remains preparing masses for the class-struggle:

This is difficult, not only because it is not part of our tradition. It is difficult also, because the issue can not be presented in a simplistic manner as one of struggle in the usually understood sense of the term, or just rousing the exploited against the exploiters. Since there are rich and poor, exploiters and exploited in all castes ....it is clearly not a question of rousing the harijans against the caste Hindus ... it is an issue of raising the democratic, humanist consciousness of vast masses who are not exploiters, who in fact, are the victims of the caste prejudices, by feelings of superiority and inferiority among themselves.

The communist parties, nonetheless, have also realised their weaknesses in handling the ‘caste-question’ effectively and therefore to correct the past wrongs by combining the ‘cultural-issues’ with the ‘economic-issues’ as is reflected in these words of B. T. Ranadive, Polit Bureau member of Communist Party of India (Marxist) and President of the Centre of Trade Unions:

It has to be admitted that there has been certain neglect in the ideological struggles against caste and communalism and the CPI (M) for its part has decided in its recent Plenum to resume a widespread struggle against feudal and semi-feudal ideologies. The common consciousness generated through the economic struggle can not be pushed forward without such struggle and direct intervention of the movement on caste oppression.\(^{544}\)


Dipankar Gupta makes a valid point that the ruling class either remains silent or also wages a war against such democratic movements. But his arguments, made from the crude Marxist position, are highly problematic. Does clash of economic opportunities necessarily mean that it is class war, because participants are not responding from their respective class positions? Engagements in the riots are not based on class in any case. In other words, participants are not participating in conflict by responding against the bourgeoisie class/bourgeoisie state structure to solve their crisis of reduced economic opportunities. Individual living experience and memory made active masses act along non-class lines against each other rather than unitedly acting against the bourgeoisie structure.

Dipankar draws another point of defence in favour of his argument, where he attacks Dalit movement as a so called 'cultural-revolution', which by its very nature and class character is ill equipped to remove untouchability. As Mahars consider those below them as unclean, their movement therefore at best is 'a vehicle for self-assertion of Mahars alone’. He further adds that this trend of disunity or practice of hierarchy is exacerbated with each caste having their own legendary leaders. While Ambedkar was Mahar's hero, Mangs consider Annabhau Sathe as their principal leader.

546 Dipankar Gupta, op. cit., pp. 16-17.
547 Anna Bhau Sathe was born on August 1, 1920 in the village of Wategaon near Sangli in a family belonging to Matang/Mang community. Poverty had prevented Sathe from obtaining formal education. Despite lack of formal education, Sathe wrote some novels in Marathi, one among which was Fakira (1959). Fakira received a state government award in 1961. There are 15 collections of Sathe’s short stories. Besides novels and short stories, Sathe wrote a play, a travelogue on Russia, 12 screenplays, and 10 ballads /powade. Sathe wrote directly from his experiences in life, and his novels celebrate the fighting spirit in their characters who work against all odds in life. The state government issued in 1998 a collection of his works under the title 'Lokshahir Annabhau Sathe Nivadak Sahitya'. To generate social awareness, he organised stage performances of ‘powade’ and ‘tamasha’ (ethnic dances chiefly performed by women which are popular in rural Maharashtra). He produced 14 tamasha shows. In the late 1940s, the then Home Minister Morarji Desai of the Bombay state government had banned tamasha shows, but Sathe courageously defied the ban by renaming them as ‘lokanatya’. People in Maharashtra conferred the epithet ‘Lok Shahir’ on Sathe. Sathe was an important mobiliser in the Samyukta Maharashtra Movement. He used the medium of powade to great effect in that movement. Sathe was attracted to communism and had visited Soviet
In Maharashtra, the Left parties failed to reach out to the radical Dalit movement. Those that did (such as the CPI (ML) led by SN Singh) alienated the Dalits by insensitive cultural references (such as to Ram and Ravana).\textsuperscript{548} She concludes,

\begin{quote}
Having denied the reality of caste except as an illusory part of the superstructure, it is no wonder that communists have never initiated and led a democratic movement aimed specifically at abolition of caste discrimination—a movement that might not be immediately directed to overthrow of state power but one that would clearly cross the bounds of trade unionism and begin a political thrust into the lives of the toiling masses.\textsuperscript{549}
\end{quote}

On the one hand, she says class struggle is not a mere economic struggle, it is a bid 'for state power'; a comprehensive struggle that confronts the class enemy at various levels—'social, cultural, economic, religious, and political.' On the other hand, she asks that communists build 'a democratic movement aimed specifically at abolition of caste discrimination—a movement that might not be immediately directed to overthrow of state power.'\textsuperscript{550} This is confusing: is she for a class struggle that, in the course of its struggle for state power, does not confine itself to economic (trade union) issues alone, but builds alliances with and in fact leads every struggle against every aspect of discrimination and exploitation?

Or is she for a struggle \textit{specifically at the abolition of caste discrimination}, in that it is \textit{not} aimed at overthrow of state power; i.e. it is \textit{not} within the framework of class struggle, which Omvedt correctly defines as, ultimately, a bid for state power?\textsuperscript{551} The former is compatible with the class struggle as conceived by some communist streams. The latter position is flatly incompatible with communist practice, since in fact it asks that the class struggle be suspended, or at least not be prioritised, in favour of a struggle \textit{specifically at abolition of caste discrimination}.

\textsuperscript{548} Gail Omvedt, 'Class Struggle or Caste War', \textit{Frontier}, 30 September 1978, p.38.
\textsuperscript{549} Ibid, p.36.
\textsuperscript{550} Ibid, \textit{p.36}.
\textsuperscript{551} Gail Omvedt, 'Marathwada: A Reply to Dipankar Gupta' \textit{Social Scientist}, Vol. 8, No. 86, September, 1979, p. 57.
\textsuperscript{551} Ibid, p. 57.
discrimination. In fact, the former is actually borne out by the experience of the communist movements in India that have accorded priority to the anti-feudal and agrarian tasks of democratic revolution.

For instance, it is well documented and widely accepted that the CPI(ML) movement in Bhojpur made its first mark by taking up issues of social dignity—against the ‘doli-pratha’ of sexual exploitation by feudal forces; asserting the right to sit on the same level as the landlords, etc..., alongside issues of land and wages. In such a case, it would be quite misplaced to argue that the land and wage struggles were purely economic and unrelated to the assertion of social dignity (izzat-maan-samman), or that the struggles against social oppression had no bearing to the land-wage struggles appropriated by the same class of people. These struggles certainly had a large factor in the social and political assertion of the landless Dalits of Bhojpur.

Omvedt, in various writings, appears to endorse the Marxist position that abolition of caste is part of the agenda of democratic revolution; that caste is a powerful survival of feudal relations, and therefore the communist ‘democratic revolution’ is called for which must release labour from its feudal fetters and unfreedoms, most importantly caste. Omvedt also cites the fact that caste discrimination is evident even in the states that have displayed a higher level of capitalist development, to argue that ‘we reject the implication that full development of capitalism in India (even if possible) would abolish the material base of casteism.’

In the Marxist-Leninist conception, a democratic revolution is actually a revolution intended to ensure unfettered capitalist development. In such countries, the bourgeoisie, fearfully contemplative of the freedom of the working class from feudal fetters, actually strikes a compromise with feudal forces rather than

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eliminate the latter completely. It is therefore the working class in alliance with the peasantry that must achieve this democratic revolution. In India, the CPI (ML) parties especially stress the 'semi-feudal' character of Indian capitalism, where the bourgeoisie has struck a strategic alliance with feudal forces, and call for an 'agrarian revolution', to complete the democratic revolution in India. These parties also take 'annihilation of caste' as an important item on the agenda of the democratic revolution.

The same fact—that states which are supposedly 'success stories' of capitalist development such as in Punjab display feudal features, is cited by CPI(ML)-type parties as proof of the 'semi-feudal' character of Indian capitalism. 'Even in a state like Punjab553, universally acknowledged as one of India's most capitalistically developed states, do we not see feudal features like usury and semi-bondage taking a heavy toll in the midst of the ongoing agrarian crisis?554

The democratic revolution led by workers and peasants as distinguished from the 'landlord path' of capitalist development initiated by colonial powers and favoured by the ruling class can actually steer in unregulated capitalist development that can annihilate caste in its wake. When capitalist development retains its feudal-casteist features, as it we see in India today, it does not follow that 'full development of capitalism' is incapable of getting rid of these feudal survivals; rather it proves that capitalism in India today is unhealthy, crippled and distorted. Omvedt's assertion that even 'full development of capitalism' cannot eradicate the

553 Bant Singh is a Dalit resident of Mansa district in southern Punjab. He had been helping to organise the landless labourers for the Left wing 'Majdoor Mukti Morcha'. His eldest daughter was raped by the local landlord and his aides in 2002. In 2004, the District Court giving a historic decision convicted three people. Pressures were built on him for withdrawal of the case. Bant Singh became a regular target of the upper caste assault. His elder brother Hansa Singh was forced to flee from the village because of the threats issued by the upper castes. Finally on 7 January 2006, he was attacked and was brutally beaten up so badly that two of his arms and one leg had to be amputated. Singh still sings revolutionary songs and organises agrarian labourers under the banner of All India Agrarian Labourers Association. (Amit Sengupta, 'Bant Singh Can Still Sing', Tehelka, 4 February 2006.)

554 Dipankar Bhattacharya, Notes on Party Programme, Communist Party of India (Marxist-Leninist) Liberation, Liberation.
material base of caste contradicts her treatment of anti-caste struggles as essentially part of the agenda of democratic revolution.

Kavita Krishnan while clarifying the position of one of the Communist Party of India (ML) group finds the slippages in the Gail Omvedt’s sweeping criticism of the left parties in dealing with the caste question:

What Omvedt appears to overlook in her critique of Communist practice, is that in fact the Communist parties like CPI and CPI(M) whose practice she examines more closely, may not be neglecting caste only because they relegate it to a ‘super-structural’ and superficial dimension. Rather, it may be attributed to the fact that these parties have downplayed the persistence of feudal remnants in India, taking issue with the ‘semi-feudal’ characterisation of Indian capitalism. Omvedt has, in her more recent writings, taken issue with the Left position against globalisation and liberalisation, arguing that Dalits should support these since these may in fact open up more spaces for the Dalits. Ironically, this stance of hers is in line with the CPI (M)’s own recent formulations, which defends the aggressive pro-corporate anti-peasant policies of its State Government in West Bengal by arguing that it is capitalism which can turn the peasants into industrial proletariat and free them from feudal fetters. These positions represent a distortion of the Leninist concept of democratic revolution. For one thing, Omvedt divorces the ‘anti-feudal’ task of democratic revolution from its equally crucial twin—the anti-imperialist task. The same mistake is often made by Dalit theorists who argue that colonialism benefited the Dalits.

Such formulations ignore the crucial distinction made by Lenin between democratic revolution as led by the bourgeoisie (landlord path) and that led by workers and peasants (peasant path). As one CPI(ML) formulation puts it, ‘The latter deals a decisive blow to feudal remnants and paves the way for the most rapid and free development of productive forces and capitalist relations while the former gives a long lease of life to feudal remnants and leads to a very slow, distorted and painful development of capitalism.’ Colonial rule entrenched the landlord path of capitalist development—protracted and painful, making no clean break with feudal fetters.

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555 Kavita Krishnan in a personal interview conducted on 27 August, 2009. Kavita is a Central Committee member of the Communist Party of India (Marxist-Leninist) Liberation.
556 Ibid.
Capitalism as ushered in by the Indian ruling class in independent India, especially in times of globalisation, is invariably dependent on global capitalism, and in alliance with feudal remnants. And the last decade and a half of liberalisation has shown the devastating effects of this process on the weakest sections of Indian society: whereby Dalits and Adivasis are the worst hit by hunger and by primitive accumulation in the form of corporate land grab; any job opportunities opened up in this phase have been invariably casualised, ill-paid, insecure; and feudal shackles show no signs of weakening.

Assessment

While looking at analyses of scholars, we must keep in mind the implicit political agenda that might have coloured their interpretation. Traditional Leftist interpretation is likely to emphasise or reduce a particular phenomenon of oppression to its class roots or trying to emphasise class angle in such cases. Dalitist theorists would like to emphasise on or reduce the cause of oppression to mere caste factor alone. Both the schools of analyses in their attempts to give primacy to their respective ‘ideologically pre-determined agenda’ often miss the exact ‘dialectic’ of interplay of caste and class factor in a particular case.

Caste remains a valid category of investigation to understand how has it managed to blur the class consciousness as suggested by the Marxists and made the victims of class-oppression engaged in caste-conflict. This style of analysis has also provided ammunition to these commentators who accuse Marxist category of class as ‘economist’ and hence incapable of capturing India’s specific realities. But this is a grossly misunderstood position about the concept of ‘Class’ as conceived by Marx. For Marx, the act of production is not just economic but a social phenomenon. So are his ideas about mode of production and class.

For instance, Marx defines specific classes in terms of ownership of means of production and ownership of the means of production by a particular class is a result of various economic and social processes. The idea of ‘class’ in Marx
conjures up all the social factors that are embedded in the control of productive resources that a class exhibits. While analysing the class of landowners, we have to accurately identify all economic and social (ideological and religious) weapons to maintain its control over land. So if a correct class analysis has to be done, it cannot but contend with the aspects of caste which has been used to keep the class control and oppression alive. Caste oppression has a strong economic roots, it is not just cultural.\textsuperscript{557}

And any struggle against class oppression has to take into account the multiple routes which are allowing class oppression to prevail. It is therefore also important to see the various caste dimensions which have gone into shaping differing control over means of production. For instance, if we take up the agenda of landless labourers, we will have to deal with all the social and cultural factors which had been used to create and perpetuate a section of society as landless labourers.

A correct struggle in this context therefore, must address the inescapable aspects of caste without reducing it to an exclusively ‘caste’ or ‘class’ question. Therefore, neither ‘Caste-symbolism’ nor ‘Class-Reductionism’ can solve the problem of landless labourers in a comprehensive manner. The question of social and political empowerment of any section of our society must be tackled simultaneously, with the issue of solving the fundamental question of their control over the means of production.

\textsuperscript{557} Tapas Ranjan Saha, who teaches Economics at Aurobindo College, University of Delhi, has been of immense help in drawing the contours of these conclusions. A discussion with him helped in dissecting and the analysing the various aspects of Class and Caste vis-à-vis Indian Left critically.