Chapter - III

CONSTRUCTION OF POLITICAL IDENTITY OF DALITS: AN OVERVIEW

Struggle of the Dalits in India to acquire the status of equal respect and rights, is not only the struggle to secure material benefits, but also for the achievement of the dignity which every human being in the civilized world is entitled to have. It is a journey of the stigmatized group to shed off the stigmatized identity and get rid of inhuman treatment and ascertain the equal social status. A paradigmatic transformation of the political system in India in the last half of the 19th century and first half of the 20th century, under the British rule, developed political aspirations among the deprived sections of the Indian society. Increasing democratization of the system brought different sections of the society in the political process. Such politicization of the society which was an indifferent observer during pre British period developed political consciousness among these people.

Construction of political identity is inherent in the process of development of political consciousness of groups and individuals. Dalits have undergone such transformation. Construction and consolidation of their political identity happened during the colonial rule which shaped the trajectory of their development in future. Politics was viewed as an instrument of total transformation and political power for social justice became an immediate objective for Dalits.

Present study is focused on the Dalits, a section of the society, the ex-untouchables in India. From the 1850s they were referred to as the "Depressed Classes". In an order to ameliorate their conditions the British Parliament incorporated provisions of reservation of seats in employment as per Government of India Act, 1935, which came into force in 1937. The Act brought the term "Scheduled Castes" into use. A list, or Schedule, (of castes throughout the British administered provinces) was added to the Act by The Government of India (Scheduled Castes) Order, 1936 (Chalam 2007). After the independence, in pursuance of articles 341 and 342 of the Indian Constitution, the lists of scheduled castes and scheduled tribes were notified under the Constitution (Schedule Castes) Order, 1950. It has been
modified or amended or supplemented from time to time. In Maharashtra, 59 SCs have been notified under the Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes Orders (Amendment) Act, 1976.

Present chapter is an overview of the historical process of the construction and consolidation of the political identity of Dalits. The chapter is based on the secondary data available in the forms of books, theses, articles published in various journals and newspapers. It provides outline of various trends and currents in the process of identity construction. Although it has to be read in the context of India, but the facts and data are mostly related to the politics and political identity in Maharashtra.

**Demographic Profile SCs in Maharashtra**

As per 2001 Census SCs/STs together comprise over 24% (250,961,940) of India's population, with SC at over 16% (166,635,700) and ST over 8% (84,326,240). The total population of Maharashtra, as per the 2001 Census, is 96,878,627 of this, 10.2% (9,881,656) are Scheduled Castes (SCs). Out of 59 SCs, Mahar, Mang, Bhambi, Chambhar and Bhangi together constitute 92% of the SC population of the state. Mahar are numerically the largest SC with a population of 5,678,912, constituting 57.5 per cent of the SC population of the state. Of the total SC population, 61.7 per cent are residing in rural area. Mangs have the highest (66.9 per cent) rural population, followed by Mahar (65.5 per cent). Out of total SCs of Maharashtra, 67% are Hindus and 32.9% are Buddhists. There is a small 5,983 (0.1 per cent) Sikh population among SCs. Numerically Mahar is the largest SC in the state out of which Buddhists are 56.2%, Hindus are 43.7% and 0.1% are Sikhs.

The overall sex ratio of the SC population in Maharashtra is 952 females per 1000 males, which is higher than 922 reported for state population as a whole at 2001 Census. Further, percentage of literate persons (those who can read and write with understanding) aged 7 years and above, among SC population of Maharashtra is 71.9%, which is lower than 76.9% reported for state population as a whole. During 1991-2001, the literacy data shows the improvement of 15.4% over 56.5% reported in 1991. Out of the total SC literates, 31.5% are literates without any educational level or have attained below Primary level, 26.3% have attained education up to Primary and 16.6% up to Middle levels. Further, 20.5 per cent reached Matric/Higher Secondary levels and 4.8% reached the level of graduation.

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1 The data is compiled from Census of India. 2001
The work participation rate (WPR) is the percentage of workers (main and marginal) to the total population. WPR among SCs of Maharashtra has been lowered from 42.8% recorded at 1991 Census to 41.9% at 2001 Census. There has been a decline in the main workers\(^2\) from 92.5% at 1991 Census to 81.9% at 2001 Census. This, in turn, has resulted in corresponding increase in the marginal workers\(^3\) from 7.5% in 1991 to 18.1% in 2001. Out of the total workers, ‘agricultural labourers’ constitute 46.1%, which is higher than 45.6% for SC population at national level. ‘Other workers’\(^4\) account for 37.3%. Only 12.9% has been returned as ‘cultivators’ and 3.7% have been workers in ‘household industries’. Thus, there is a slight shift in the category of workers among SC population; the workers engaged in agricultural activities (cultivators plus agricultural labourers) constitute 59% of the total workforce against 64.3% recorded in 1991 Census.

As stated earlier Mahar is the numerically large caste among the SC population of Maharashtra. Politically also it is more active than other 58 SCs. It will not be an exaggeration to state that a movement of the Dalits in Maharashtra is mainly the movement of the politically conscious Mahars. The sample of 90 respondents interviewed for the present study is largely comprised of Mahars (including those who converted to Buddhism). Thus it would be appropriate here to sketch a brief outline of trajectory of political identity construction among them.

**A BRIEF HISTORICAL SKETCH.**

**Ancient References and Primordial Elements in the Political Identity of Mahars.**

Some historical accounts of Mahars relate them to ancient Nagas who had small kingdoms in southern part of the Indian subcontinent (Kathare 2008). According to Joshi Mahadevshastri, in Maharashtra Naga Kings used to carry titles of ‘Maharathi’ (cited in Kathare 2008: 13). According to Kathare (2008: 13-14) in ancient period Naga Kings used to attach ‘Nag’ or ‘Nika’ as the suffix to their names. According to Ketkar (1989:13) similar practice was found during medieval period among Mahars who use ‘Nak’ as suffix to their names.

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\(^2\) Main Workers are those workers who had worked for the major part of the reference period (i.e. 6 months or more).

\(^3\) Those workers who had not worked for the major part of the reference period (i.e. less than 6 months) are termed as Marginal Workers.

\(^4\) All workers, i.e., those who have been engaged in some economic activity during the last one year, but are not cultivators or agricultural labourers or in Household Industry, are 'Other Workers'.
Historical accounts by Robertson (1991: 65), Phule (cited in Khairmode 1992 b: 162), Khanapurkar (cited in Kathare 2008: 15) argued that the name Maharashtra⁵ is historically derived from the word Mahar. According to Bhat Wamanrao, ‘in ancient period Mahar constituted a Nation’ (cited in Khairmode 1992 a: 4). Similar opinion is expressed by Bhagvat Rajaramshastri (cited in Khairmode 1992 a: 1-2). Ketkar (1989:13) made an interesting argument where he linked formation of the Marathi language and the coalition of Mahar and Rattha people which had the effect of formation of a nation called Maharattha. According to him this formation dates back to the second millennium B.C. Kosare (2008: 169), mentioned that in the inscription found in the village Eran of Sagar district of Madhya Pradesh, Satynag who was the general of Shridharvarma called himself as ‘Maharashtra’. According to Kosare this is most ancient direct reference to the name Maharashtra which shows that the general with ‘nag’ as suffix to the name exhibit his lineage to Naga race of central India. The inscription dates back to year 180-181 A.D. (Mirashi 1981: 293). Further, according to Kosare (2008: 168), reference of Maharashtra is found in Mahavansh and Dipvansh, which are Buddhist religious texts written in Pali language, where it is mentioned that in the year 246 B.C. Mahadhammarakshit was sent to ‘Maharattha’ to spread the message of Buddhism. Mangudkar (1963: 188) add to the historical reference to the Mahars with the description of war between ‘Kadamb’ and Mahar in Konkan, in which later were defeated.

The assertions made above highlight few key issues. Firstly, through linkage with Nagas claim of Mahars as rulers in ancient India is endorsed, secondly, through linkage with Maharashtra, Mahars were claimed to be indigenous people of the region, thirdly, relation of Maharashtra and Buddhism claim the in group association with Buddhism. Notwithstanding the doubt over their historical validity, arguments present above are significant since they point towards the case of primordial version of political identity as indigenous ethnic political community with Buddhism as a religion and thus worthy of pride in present time.

**Medieval References and Socially Stigmatized Identity of Mahars**

Accounts available about medieval period provide reference to the Mahars, primarily as a stigmatized caste among the untouchables. Evidences of practice of untouchability against the

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⁵ Maharashtra is a State in the Union of India, formed on 1st May 1960, as linguistic state of Marathi speaking people.
Mahars dates back to first half of the fourteenth century. During this period, Chokha Mela, a famous saint from Maharashtra, Mahar by caste, depicted his condition in his verses that he composed in the form of appeal to the deity Vithoba. Being an untouchable by caste he was not allowed to enter the temple. When he attempted to defy the orders of the king to not to enter in the temple of Vithoba in Pandharpur he was beaten by upper castes. He died in 1338 in Pandharpur (Kathare 2008: 80). One of his *abhanga* reads as:

“In the beginning,
at the end
there is nothing but pollution.
No one knows anyone who is born pure.
Chokha says, in wonder,
who is pure?”

*(Zelliot 2001 a: 270)*

Untouchability was practiced strongly during the period of Shivaji (AD 1630-1707) and Peshwas (1713-1818) in Maharashtra. It was religiously followed by the people and politically enforced by the rulers. The practice of untouchability connotes stigmatized identity ascribed to the group of people by birth in such caste group.

In medieval period Mahars, along with other castes like Mang, Chambhar and Dhor had their settlement outside the village. Directions of these settlements were on the east of the village (Kathare 2008: 21). As per Robertson (1991: 23) in south India wind flows towards East from West. Thus to avoid the wind flow which allegedly carry the pollutants from untouchable Mahars, their settlements were maintained at the east of the village. Such separation of settlements of caste Hindus and Mahars point towards an important aspect of social out group differentiation of Mahars vis-à-vis Caste Hindus. Ambedkar (nd: 49-53) maintained that untouchable Mahars belong to different tribes than touchable Hindus. They were defeated in the early tribal warfare with caste Hindus with whom they had an agreement by which untouchable Mahars accepted to live outside the village and to protect the villagers. In return they received rights to food and shelter from Hindus.

The exclusion was maintained strictly through prohibitions. Jadunath Sarkar confirms the accentuation of ‘caste distinctions and ceremonial purity of daily rites’ *(cited in Kathare*
2008:80) during the period of Peshwas which resulted in destabilizing the foundation of the Maratha Empire. Deshmukh (cited in Kathare 2008: 71) reported various practices of untouchability prevailing during reign of Peshwas. Any type of contact including touch, talk, and shadow of untouchables to the touchable upper castes was considered as polluting. They were barred from entry into temple, water tank and school. Untouchables were ordered to ‘carry an earthen pot, hung from his neck, in which to spit, further he had to drag a thorny branch with him, to wipe out his foot prints and to lie at a distance prestate on the ground if a Brahmin passed by, so that his foul shadow might not defile the holy Brahmin (Ghurye 1969: 12).’ Mahars were forced to sacrifice at the foundation of the forts and buildings (Kathare 2008: 72). Robertson (1991) confirms these observations. Even justice delivery system treated them differently. During Peshwas punishment to the convict was based on the caste of the convict and not on the base of the nature of the crime (Ghurye 1969: 13).

Mahars had certain rights as well as duties towards the village. Regarding their rights a legend is reported (Shinde 2009:154), according to which they were in receipt of fifty two traditional rights, granted to them either by Mohammad Shah II who was ruling in Bedar region of central India in AD 1463-82 or Nizam during AD 1615. Out of total 52 grants, three grants were in the form of authorities, to collect tax on every marriage among all castes from the village; to collect a tax on every dead body from all castes from the village; and to collect octroi tax. Along with these authorities Mahars were given rights to cater their various needs (Kathare 2008:29-30).

Mahars had important role to play in the village life. Being one of the Balutedars of the village, Mahars had various duties to perform. Primarily his duties were, ‘Jaagla’, ‘Veskar’ and ‘Padewar’. Jaagla in translation means ‘the one who serves like village watchman’. The duty was part of village police administration which includes, helping Patil in legal matters; to investigate theft and robberies; to follow thieves; to serve government officers by erecting tents, bring wood to fuel stove for cooking, to massage their horses and serve fodder and water, to serve them as orderly; to give witness in disputes related to agricultural land; to show the land marks; to carry revenue to the Tehsil office (cited in Kathare 2008: 33).

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6 Balutedar means a person who holds a Baluta. Baluta is a part of the produce which traditional serviceman of the village use to get from the villagers during harvest season in return to the service offered to the village. Village administration in region of Maharashtra was looked by Balutedars who were 12 in numbers. Their names were Mahar, Mang, Chambhar, Sutar, Kumbhar, Nhavi, Parit, Lohar, Joshi, Gurav, Sonar and Mulana. These Balutedars provide services to the villagers which were fixed. (Kathare 2008: 32).

7 Village headman.
‘Veskar’ means ‘one who protects the door gate at the village boundary.’ Every Mahar had to perform the duty of Veskar in turns. Veskar had to perform duties like, inquiring visitor to village and informing about the same to the Patil, to protect the village and investigate the criminals, to protect village gate in a day and make rounds during the night, to collect revenue from the residents, to help travellers, to arrange them food, to pass messages, to supply fuel, to make public announcements (herald) (Kathare 2008: 34). ‘Padewar’ was a Mahar person who was especially assigned to serve the village to do all types of work. ‘Padewar’ is not qualitatively different from ‘Rabta,’ which roughly means orderly, the one who was assigned to serve an influential person. Padewar serves the village while Rabta serves a person or a household. Their duties include, to clean house of master or the village, to look after crematorium, to carry messages, to accompany officials, to look after the agricultural work of the master, to throw dead cattle out of the village, to inform the village about death, to arrange for wood for fuel, to accompany master during travel, to clean cattle shed (cited in Kathare 2008: 34-35).

Along with this repertoire of conditions, duties and authority, role of Mahars as soldiers in different armies during this period deserves attention. Being an integral element of State, military involvement points towards the political involvement of groups. In case of Mahars although there is no evidence of an army of Mahars constituted under their own flag, during pre-British rule, their considerable presence in Mogul and Maratha army is documented (Khairmode 1992). Sen confirms this,

“The Brahman could fight shoulder to shoulder with the meanest of the untouchables, the Mahar who is not allowed to live within the village walls. And Shivaji excluded none from his army, not even the Mahar (cited in Kathare 2008: 179).”

In the army of Shivaji Mahars were allotted the duty of invigilating secret ways passing through forest, forts situated on hills. They were also assigned jobs of providing fuel and fodder to the people in forts. One Sidnak Mahar II was a military officer of Nizam of Ahmadnagar during A.D. 1600, who reportedly helped to organize marriage of Shahaji, father of Shivaji and Jijabai, mother of Shivaji. Next two generations of Sidnak Mahar served Shivaji in his military endeavours (Kathare 2008: 183,184). Further, in absence of evidence

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8 Ves = a gateway on the Village boundary sometimes consists of the wall made up of bricks surrounding the village.
presence of Mahars in decision making during this period cannot be established. Military role of Mahars is mostly narrated as loyal to their masters. Although Mahars served Maratha rule in Maharashtra since its inception, this service did not improve their social status. They often suffered discrimination with reference to their lowest social status. Kathare (2008: 211) reported that after the ill treatment during the Peshwa rule many Mahar soldiers joined British Army.

Robertson reported the description of the Maratha soldiers of the armies which joined the Bombay Army. As per the account provided by him

“Maratha infantry was composed of black Christians and despicable poor wretcheer of the lowest caste, uniform in nothing but the bad taste of their masquets, none of which are either ammunition or accoutrements. … The Maratha’s do not appear to treat their infantry with more respect than they deserve… (Robertson 1991:63)”

This account confirms two things, firstly, Mahars had presence in the military of Marathas and secondly, they were treated inferior to the high caste Maratha Soldiers and were not provided with enough clothes and arms. Thorat reported that, “the early Bombay Army of the 18th and 19th centuries was not predominantly composed of Marathas but of Mahars… (cited in Khairmode 1992 a).”

A battle held between army of Peshwas and British-Mahar soldiers in which later defeated large army of Peshwas on 1st January 1818 has acquired significant symbolic meaning in bolstering primordial ethnic identity of Mahars in later period. The battle was held on the bank of the river Bhima near Pune. To commemorate the victory British erected a pillar on the battle ground which featured on the Mahar Regiment crest until Indian Independence. The event is interpreted as a revenge of Mahars who were humiliated by Peshwas during their tenure in Maratha Kingdom (Khairmode 1992 a: 10-11).

**Political Identity of Dalits in the Colonial Context**

Colonial period brought material as well as intellectual transformation in the socio-cultural milieu of India. During this period the symbolic and cultural sphere of the Indian social life was questioned and foundation of powerful alternative to the Brahmanical world view was laid down. The Dalit and anti-caste movement represent the tradition of this alternative.
Major elements of political identity of the Dalits were formulated during this period. In this section attempt is made to delineate those elements of political identity which the Dalits in Maharashtra acquired and practiced for more than a century later.

Colonial period was the era of construction of Identities. Religious identities of Hindus, Muslims, Sikhs and Christians were strengthened and caste identities acquired new dimensions. National identity of the subcontinent was in the making. A modern state was founded with the rule of law as a cardinal principle which confronted religious norms, customs and traditions in an order to achieve sovereign status in tradition bound society. Census operations concretised notion of identities and confirmed their presence in terms of population figures.

Technological improvements in the means of communication, transportation and media, along with inflow of intellectual liberal and protest traditions of west provided fertile ground for social movements to transform Indian society. These movements grew in two directions, firstly, towards modernization and secondly, towards revivalism. Modernization involved strengthening of the state vis-a-vis a society, rule of law, industrialization, discarding practices which were discriminatory and inhuman, and secularization of polity. Revivalism was nostalgic about the past of Indian subcontinent which was framed as glorious. Development of oriental historiography during this period helped in this direction. Spirit and essence of Vedas and Upanishads were invoked and an attempt towards its restoration began. Revivalists locate reasons of the problems of the Indians in their failure to follow the Vedic traditions which were depicted as pure way of living for the social organism.

Both streams of thoughts had profound implications on the political life of the Dalits. There was unanimous sympathy among both of them about the problems of the Dalits. Their understanding of the nature of the oppression and solution towards emancipation differed significantly. While modernists were in favour of politicization of the struggle of emancipation from untouchability, revivalists attempted to address the issue at socio-cultural level within the folds of Hinduism only.

In case of the Dalits of Maharashtra and especially among Mahars the modernist version defined traits of their political identity. Revivalist theme represented by Arya Samajists (Jones 2010) from Punjab, Tilak and Gandhi had limited success as compared to modernist
theme of Phule, Shahu, and Ambedkar. Both revivalists as well as modernists were not homogeneous within themselves. There is profound difference between Arya Samajists, Tilak and Gandhi, in the same way as visions of Phule, Shahu and Ambedkar were also considerably different from each other. Writing an editorial preface to the book, *Dalit Visions* authored by Omvedt, Bhattacharya observed that,

“Jotiba Phule saw the caste system as the essence of Hinduism and sought to unmask the culture of oppression that it sustained, the brutal slavery that it sanctified. In his reinterpretation of the Aryan theory, the Aryans emerge as cruel and violent invaders who subjugated an egalitarian society and imposed a hierarchical and exploitative system with Hinduism as its legitimating ideology…. Influenced by Marxism, Ambedkar sought to build a unity of dalits and non-Brahman middle castes which would be both a class and caste unity against the Brahman-bourgeois Congress. (Omvedt 2008: pp. IX-X)”

During nineteenth century Phule emerged as a strong critique of Hinduism. He became most revered figure in the alternative tradition of protest against ‘Hinduism’ as an oppressive class/caste/patriarchal force’ (Omvedt 2008: 5). Contesting a hegemonic Hinduism in the cultural and symbolic sphere was main instrument of the protest. Phule’s notion of ideal religion as ‘Sarvajanik Satya Dharm’ as egalitarian religion based on the rational principles of natural justice was projected in opposition to the Hinduism, which was in the process of construction by Brahmin intellectuals and western scholars. It is due to the efforts of Phule that the Dalit movement acquired the character of a challenge to the hegemony and validity of Hinduism as a religion.

Phule contributed the identity of ‘Bahujan’ which was instrumental in building the coalition of untouchables (atishudras) and non-brahman castes (shudras) in Maharashtra and parts of south India against common enemy of Brahmanical orthodoxy and dominance. He argued that *atishudras* were ‘not only more oppressed but had been downgraded because of their earlier heroism in fighting Brahman domination’ (Omvedt 2008: 19). Omvedt recognizes presence of this sense of a challenge to Brahmanic tradition as an aspect of ‘several new social movements’ that emerged during 1970s and 1980s among backward castes, peasants, women and tribals. In her words,
These movements though not as directly as the dalit movement, came to contest the way in which the Hindu-nationalist forces sought to depict and hegemonize Indian culture. They often linked a cultural critique to a broader critique of socio-economic development and an opposition to the over-centralized political system. (Omvedt 2008: 8)

On the foundation of oriental theories of Aryans invasion of the Indian subcontinent, Phule developed his critique of Brahmanism. He viewed efforts of leading reformist and political organizations of his time, Prarthana Samaj, Brahma Samaj, Sarvajanik Sabha and Congress as elitist, upper-caste hegemonic and deceptive reformists. He interpreted caste ‘as slavery, as vicious and brutal as the enslavement of the Africans in the United States, but based in India not only on open conquest and subordination but also on deception and religious illusion (Omvedt 2008:18).’ Phule’s critique theorized three elements effectively, religious domination, conquest and exploitation.

Phule reinterpreted puranic mythology and provided alternative explanation to the symbols of Hinduism. He laid the foundation of the Dalit historiography by reinventing history from the myths of Puranas, Ramayana, and Mahabharata. He redefined image of Bali Raja, Shivaji as *Shudra* kings with anti-Vedic, anti-Aryan and anti-caste equalitarian message. Anti Brahmin orientation of Phule was unambiguous in his theorization of exploitation of peasantry. He maintained that ‘Brahman rule, or *bhatshahi*, was a regime that used state power and religious hegemony to maintain exploitation (Omvedt 2008: 21).’ Phule’s attack over the cultural sphere of dominance was so strong that G.P. Deshpande argued that,

“Phule …talked about knowledge and power much before Foucault did. In fact, Foucault’s post modernist analysis comes at a time when Europe has literally seen the ‘end of history’ whereas Phule’s efforts were to change the world/society with the weapon of knowledge (cited on Omvedt 2008: 23).”

Phule argued for the use of knowledge, education and science within the modernist framework for the benefit of *Shudra-Atishudras*. He considered these as instruments for dual purpose firstly, to contest Brahmanical deception and secondly, to achieve material advancement.
Phule’s efforts to consolidate the strength of Non-brahman masses resulted in the rise of many low caste Dalit activists in 1920s, who continued his legacy after his death. Kisan Faguji Bansode (1870-1946), a Mahar activist from Vidarbha region of Maharashtra echoed the anaryya (Non Aryan) theme in the initial phase of his activism (Omvedt 2008: 35). Bhagyareddy Varma (1888-1939) organized Adi-Hindu conferences in Hyderabad since 1912 (Omvedt 2008:36). In U.P., Acchutananda organized the Dalits on the basis of an Adi-Hindu identity (Omvedt 2008: 37). In Punjab, Mangoo Ram began an Ad-Dharm movement (Omvedt 2008: 38). This theme celebrates the notion of sons of soil in very subtle form. Accordingly, untouchables along with other non-brahmans were projected as original inhabitants of the land of their residence and on the broader all India level as the original inhabitants of Indian subcontinent who were defeated in their struggle with Aryan conquerors. In other parts of India also the theme was accepted and followed by the regional movements, ‘even the names of most Dalit movements-Ad9-Dharm in Punjab, Ad9-Hindu in U.P. and Hyderabad, Adi-Dravida, Adi-Andhra and Adi-Karnataka in South India-indicated a common claim to being original inhabitants (Omvedt 2008: 35)’. Census operations reflect this trend among different untouchable groups. In Madras presidency, 1931 census shows that nearly a third of the Malas and Madigas reported their identity as Adi-Andhra (Omvedt 2008: 36). The same census reports nearly 500,000 persons as Ad-Dharmis in Punjab (Omvedt 2008: 38).

At this point it is imperative to understand that at the background of these movements is the transformation occurring in the Indian peninsula after the consolidation of British rule. Although Phule developed the identity of Non-Brahman as the original inhabitants of the land, he was speaking primarily in the contest of the exploitation of peasantry in the hands of Brahmin spiritual dominance as well as Brahmin as an agency of British rule who infiltrated the British bureaucracy and continued their hegemonic tradition. By the 1920s when many Dalit movements, as above mentioned, mushroomed in various parts of the country, they were variedly located in different industrial centres. In Andhra and Madras presidency, ‘the commercialized coastal areas produced both a mobile dalit agricultural labourer class and a small educated section (Omvedt 2008: 36)’. ‘In Hyderabad petty bourgeois Dalit group was active in the enforcement of Adi-Hindu identity (Omvedt 2008: 36)’. In Nagpur of Maharashtra, ‘Mahars often had some land and formed forty percent of the workers in and

9 Ad/Adi means original.
emerging textile industry (Omvedt 2008: 35). In Bombay presidency some Mahar ex-
servicemen earlier employed in British army took active interest in the consolidation of the
movement. In the words of Omvedt,

“This new generation of leaders represented a new movement, they organized on
the basis of some mobility of village untouchables- some going into new factories and
industries, some overseas to plantations or as soldiers in the Indian army, others
claiming small holdings of land deriving from traditional village service-claims or
even acquired from factory or other earnings. Spearheading the dalit organizations
was a growing, though still small, educated or semi-educated leadership. Various
activities were taken up in this period. On the one hand, social reform included efforts
to abolish devadasi traditions and sub-caste differences, and giving up drinking or
meat-eating. On the other hand, organizing occurred on economic issues concerning
factory and mill workers and efforts to acquire land. (Omvedt 2008: 38)”

Although Phule provided radical framework of anarya theory for shudras and atishudras to
interpret one’s location in the society, there were other intellectuals emerging within Mahar
and other untouchable communities in Maharashtra who ‘believed in gradualism and rejected
the idea of change through conflict and chose the path of Sanskritisation (Tikekar 1995: 45-
46).’ Gopalkrishna Valangkar from Western Maharashtra, a retired soldier from British Army
published a pamphlet named Vitalvidhvansan (Destruction of Pollution), in 1890 he
established Anarya Dosha Parihar Mandal. In 1894 he organized a Mahar conference and sent
a petition to the government to continue the recruitment of Mahars in Army which was
stopped by the government in 1890-91. Other Mahar leaders, Vithoba Ravaji Moon, Mukund
Shyete, G.S. Savkar, Kalicharan Nanda Gavali, Kisan Faguji Bansode, and Nanasaheb Gavai
also took reformist approach. They sought both, the support from the establishment of British
administration to protect their existing rights, as well as extension of the privileges of the
dominant castes to the socially deprived ones. Further Mahar leader like Shivaram Janaba
Kamble, Mang and Chambhar leader like K.K.Sakat, Vaidane, T.S. Gaikwad, T.N. Shinde,
and R.R. Pawar sought the co-operation of Caste Hindu reformers such as Bhopatkar, Mate
and Shinde (Tikekar 1995: 46). Organizational activities of these early Dalit leaders shows
that independent political consciousness was not developed among themselves. The mood of
their discourse exhibits the concern for their stigmatic identity as untouchable, which was

\[\text{Italics added.}\]
perceived as social in nature and their proposed solutions were of the self help kind. Kisan Faguji Bansode established Sanmargbodhak Nirashtrit Samaj in 1901. In 1910 Mahar Sudharak Mandal was established. In 1915 Gavai formed the Depressed India Association and in 1920 Akhil Bhartiya Bahishkrit-Parishad was held in Nagpur to discuss several problems relating to the depressed classes. *Sanmargbodhak Nirashrita Samaj* issued nine “commandments” that emphasized education of Dalits, improvement in their economic status, prohibition of drinking liquor and eating carrion beef and from embracing Christianity and most importantly, directed them to seek co-operation of Caste Hindus (Tikekar 1995: 46).

Along with the radical theme of Non-Brahman/Anarya identity two more identity constructions were making inroads in the life world of the Dalits. One was the construction of the Hindu identity with nationalist orientation and second was the class identity based on the Marxist line of thinking. In the years ahead Non-Brahman/Anarya identity had to confront with both at different level of their struggles.

In Punjab, Arya Samaj undertook ‘*shuddhi*’ campaign to “purify” Dalits by converting them back from Islam (Jones 2010: 62-68). Such efforts of cooptation of Dalits into the broader and vague construction of Hindu Nationalism formed the core of the strategy of Hindu revivalists like Arya Samaj and Hindu Mahasabha to counter Non-Brahman/anarya construction of the Dalit identity. Towards this direction this group emphasized the symbolic representation of Valmiki and Vyasa as leading figures in the cultural sphere of Hinduism. Thus Hindu Nationalists stressed a Hindu unity encompassing the caste hierarchy. According to Omvedt (2008:40) this led to two fold effect over the Dalits and non-brahmans. Firstly, many low caste groups started asserting for the high caste status as Kshatriyas like Kurmis in Uttar Pradesh. Secondly, many Dalit leaders like M.S. Rajah of Tamil Nadu and G.A. Gavai of Nagpur leaned towards Hindu Mahasabha.

On the other hand, there were efforts by leftist intellectuals to organize mass movement on the basis of revolutionary Marxist ideology. Leftist of this breed ignored anti-caste movement simply by neglecting caste as a reality. They emphasized industrialized workers class as advanced and potent force for the revolution. They did not recognize caste as a mode of exploitation and categorized it as superstructure and hence left to change it automatically when the base of production will change from land to the industry. Such ideological
framework rejected primordial affiliations of caste/religion and did not consider them important enough to take into account while formulating strategy for revolution. Despite of its nature of protest and theorization of exploitation this leftist trend fails to catch the attention of youths among Dalits in the initial phase, although in later period it successfully created crisis of identity within the Dalit movement, specifically in post Ambedkar phase of the movement.

Rise of Ambedkar on the political platform coincided with rise of Gandhi in 1920s. Both of their work led to the process of construction of identity for Dalits at two different ends. During this period new frontiers of Dalit movement were opened by both these leaders. Both of them carried legacy of the past and to the extent maintained continuity with the 19th century construction of political identity of Dalits. Omvedt (2008:43) interpreted Ambedkar’s strategy of autonomy of Dalit movement as ‘autonomy in alliance with non-brahmans.’ While Gandhi continued the line of early Hindu social reformists to consider Dalits as part and parcel of Hindu identity, Ambedkar on the other hand continued the legacy of Phule by maintaining autonomy of the Dalit identity. Gandhi accepted the Varna and rejected the untouchability as a disease which needs attention. Ambedkar condemned out rightly Varna and Hinduism to remove untouchability. Ambedkar wrote, “The out caste is a by-product of the caste system. There will be outcastes as long as there are castes. Nothing can emancipate the outcaste except the destruction of the caste system (cited in Tikekar 1995: 46).” Both of them led strong foundation of politicization of Dalits. Gandhi attempted to politicize them with an objective of incorporating them in to the broader nationalist, anti-imperialist, anti-colonial movement. Ambedkar viewed Brahmanism, not imperialism as the main culprit to be held responsible for the plight of Dalits. Thus with the entry of both of them in the political life of the country, political identity of Dalits appeared visibly.

In the political career of three decades Ambedkar was instrumental in delineating the core of political identity of Dalits which lingered on the Dalit politics after his death also. He developed this core with both essentialist and constructivist strands of Identity. On essentialist ground he defined Dalits in the historical sense. His theory of origin of untouchability tracked the historical roots of the Dalits to the Buddhism and even to the Nagas of ancient India. He defined them as political class in ancient India, which ones ruled politically and was intellectually and was materially superior to the Brahmins. Against the non-Aryan theory of Dalit-Shudra identity he developed theory of conflict between
Brahmanism and Buddhism. In an order to locate historical roots of identity of Dalits as well as shudras he wrote four books\textsuperscript{11} in which he rejected the non-Aryan identity theory. In a sense he located primordial roots of the political identity of the Dalits. At the end of his life he joined the historic link between untouchables and Buddhism with his ceremony of conversion that he organized in Nagpur on 14th October 1956. Thus, by exploring this ancient past he underlined essential identity of the Dalits as Buddhists as well as a political class. On constructivist ground he criticised Gandhi, Congress and Indian leftists, who in his view ignored the role of caste and religion as an instrument of exploitation of lower castes, especially untouchables. During his period anti-Gandhi, anti-Congress and anti-Communist elements of political identity of the Dalits were developed and pose certain essentialist dilemmas to the Dalit movement in future.

Although Ambedkar theorized the Dalits as broken men who were Buddhists of Ancient India in an essay written before 1920s, till the year 1935 he was searching for the solution of the problem of untouchability within the framework of Hinduism. In 1935 he made his famous announcement that he was “born a Hindu but would not die a Hindu”. His decision was mainly due to two factors, firstly his frustration after Mahad Satyagraha of 1926 to get right to drink water from the public well for the untouchables. Secondly, his bitter confrontation with Gandhi during 1931 round table conference and subsequent fast of Gandhi in opposition to the separate electorate to untouchables of India. Poona Pact was signed in 1932 between Gandhi and Ambedkar, which settled the dispute of separate electorate for untouchables and accepted reserved seats for them. Gandhi initiated campaign against untouchability with establishment of Harijan Sevak Sangh. But the overall failure of Gandhi to address the issue of untouchability in the political campaigns of Congress led to the disillusionment of Ambedkar about Hindu reformism.

Not only in the politics of mobilization but on theoretical level also his approach clashed with that of Gandhi on the question of caste and untouchability. Gandhi interpreted caste within the functionalist framework of organic theory of society developed in \textit{Vedas, Upanishads, and Smritis}. He accepted \textit{Varna} and \textit{Ashrama} as ideal institutions of Hindu society that celebrate dignity of labour based on a hereditary place or ancestral calling. As against this

\textsuperscript{11} His two books \textit{Who were the Shudras?} (1946) and \textit{The Untouchables} were published in his life time and \textit{Revolution and Counter Revolution in Ancient India} and \textit{The Untouchables: Children of India’s Ghetto} were published posthumously.
Ambedkar maintained that caste in India is not simply a division of labour but it is also a division of labourers. Ambedkar highlighted exploitative character of the Caste.

Both of them constructed political identity of Dalits which was far different from each other. ‘For Gandhi integrity of Hindu society with the untouchables as its indissoluble part was a central and emotional question (Omvedt 2008: 44)’. Gandhi employed *Harijan* as a term to label Dalits. Ambedkar rejected such construction of identity of Dalits and employed different terms like *Bahishkrit*, *Depressed classes*, *Asprishya*, *Dalits* to denote the element of sufferings as well as exploitation. As stated above this exploitation was the result of political defeat due to triumph of Brahminism over Buddhism. Thus Ambedkar carefully avoided any reference to the claim which may associate Dalits with Hinduism.

Gandhi sought politicization of Dalits within the nationalist movement, but Ambedkar attempted their political empowerment to wage war against casteism in an order to annihilate it and win social justice for them. Thus Gandhi offered a cultural identity of Hindu-Indian and rejected any possibility of autonomous Dalit identity. He fitted them in the nationalist Hindu construction of identity. Ambedkar projected Dalits as an identity which is not only culturally different from Hindus but also politically a class in itself. His demand of separate electorate highlights this notion.

Ambedkar’s understanding of exploitation inherent in caste system brought him close to Marxism but kept away from leftists in India. ‘The main barrier between him and left was the argument of the left that the main contradiction was with imperialism and that the congress represented an “anti-imperialist united front” (Omvedt 2008: 45).’ In 1936 he floated Independent Labour Party (ILP), a worker-peasant party with a red flag, which became the biggest opposition party in the Bombay Legislative Council. ILP was a broad political front of non-brahmins as well as Dalits. It led struggles against capitalists and landlords along with agitations against caste oppression (Omvedt 2008: 45). It combined the anti-caste radicalism with class struggle. Two campaigns highlight this point. As reported by Omvedt, he organized,

“anti-landlord agitation in the Konkan region of Maharashtra which brought together Kunbi and Mahar tenants against mainly Brahmin (but also some upper-caste Maratha) landlords, climaxing in a march of some 25,000 peasants to Bombay in
In the words of Omvedt (2008: 47),

“Ambedkar’s position here was that at the caste level, brahmanism was the main enemy, just as capitalism and landlordism were the main enemies in class terms. He consistently argued for the left and non-brahman/dalit forces to come together to form a political alternative that would fight both the Indian ruling classes and imperialism.”

It is imperative to note that till this time the context of developments was defined by the inevitable sovereignty of British Crown over India. Events during World War II brought dramatic transformation in the context. Complete freedom of India was now seen as possible and Ambedkar sensed these changes. In 1940s British Parliament engaged in the discussion with various stakeholders of India’s independence regarding future constitution of the free India. With ILP as a political outfit, Ambedkar found difficult to convince British Parliament regarding political representation of Dalits. As a solution he dissolved ILP and in 1942 founded All India Scheduled Caste Federation (AISCF). ‘His goal now was to get whatever concessions he could from the British out of an independence he now saw as inevitable (Omvedt 2008: 47).’ He accepted the position of Labour minister and then Law minister in the Nehru government. And finally accepted chairmanship of the drafting committee of the Constitution Assembly of India. During 1940s he addressed Dalits and Muslims as minorities and Hindus including non-brahmins as a “majority” (Omvedt 2008: 50).

After independence Ambedkar’s anti Congress and anti-Hinduism stand resurfaced. Both the positions were maintained by him after his long research work on the question of caste and real experiences with congress in his political career. Towards the end of his life, he attempted to materialize these positions with two major actions. Firstly, he organized mass ceremony of untouchables in Nagpur to convert them to Buddhism. Secondly, he floated an idea of united front of opposition under the flag of Republican Party of India (RPI).

His idea of RPI was that of the party of labourers, peasants and Dalits to counter hegemonic, bourgeois congress and to provide strong alternative to it on the line of two party systems in
United States and England. Towards this direction his All India Scheduled Caste Federation (AISCF) participated in the ‘Samyukta Maharashtra Samiti (SMS), organized to fight for a Marathi-speaking state and which was actually the first full left-democratic front of opposition parties (Omvedt 2008: 51)’ and also organized a massive land satyagraha led by Dadasaheb Gaikwad and communist peasant leaders in 1956 and 1965. At the end of his life he had discussion going on with prominent leaders of his time like Ram Manohar Lohia, Dange and P.K. Atre regarding future RPI as a joint front of socialists, communists and Dalits. A day before his death he drafted two letters one for P.K. Atre and another for S.M. Joshi regarding his proposed Republican Party (Pawar 2009: 3).

On 14th October Ambedkar organized a mass conversion ceremony at Nagpur. Nearly eleven lakh Dalits mostly from Mahar community from Maharashtra but also from all over India followed him. The event underlined that, ‘for Ambedkar, and for the militant Dalits who followed him, Hinduism remained in the final analysis a religion of caste that had to be renounced and destroyed if the masses of India were to win liberation (Omvedt 2008: 51).’ The conversion offered to the SC people a new social identity, ‘a new image as that of a self-willed, self-propelled and dignified individual with the capacity to enjoy his basic rights as at par with others, i.e., advanced sections of the Hindu society (Punalekar 2001).’ Sirsikar observed that,

“In their social behaviour they became more self respecting and began to discard their servile attitude towards the high caste Hindus. In several villages they gave up their traditional functions imposed by the Hindu social system. The Bhangis for instance refused to carry sewage and the Mangs stopped removing dead animals. Many of them also broke the age-old feudal relationship with the high-caste land-owning aristocracy (Sirsikar 1995: 197).”

Ambedkar radically interpreted Buddhism. His reinterpretation of Buddhism exhibit his concern for social justice and equality. He attributed his concern for freedom, equality, and justice to Buddhism and not to French revolution.

Ambedkar's reinterpretation of the decision of young prince Siddhartha Gautama to renounce the world at the age of twenty eight reflects the political orientation. Instead of accepting the version that young prince Gautama renounced the world due to his painful encounter with an
old man, a sick man, and a dead man, he attributed the decision to the unresolved conflict between Shakya and Koliyas clan over the distribution of water of river Rohini. It is evident that the dispute was political as it was about the control over river water. Being a prince of Shakya, it was logical then to believe that Gautama must have got involved in the arbitration over the dispute. Further his proposal to peaceful arrival over the dispute fell to deaf ears among Shakyas and in protest he decided to renounce the world. This liberal reconstruction and new interpretation of the event highlight the point that Ambedkar finds in Buddhist history and principles, solutions to the worldly problems which are largely political. This can be believed because of the academic orientation of Ambedkar which was in the study of political economy, anthropology, law from the finest universities of the world of his time. Thus, political in Buddhism becomes visible when one reads Ambedkar in the context of his struggle for the emancipation of Dalits and to clear their path for the social justice and equality through the construction and reconstruction of Indian religious, social and political life.

Ambedkar in his book, *The Untouchables: Who they Were and Why they Became Untouchables* (1948), linked origin of untouchability to the disappearance of Buddhism in India. According to him untouchables were past Buddhists who were defeated by Brahmans around AD 400 and were labelled as untouchables due to continuation of the practice of beef-eating by Buddhists and declared stigmatized as ‘impure’. Thus his decision of conversion to Buddhism is in real sense a decision of reconversion to the original religion to which untouchables were belong to in past before defeat by Brahmanism. This he explained painstakingly in his *Revolution and Counter Revolution* (Beltz 2005: 70).

**Post-Independence Political Identity of the Dalits**

Post Independence period transformed the context of the struggle of Dalits for their emancipation at national level. British left India and the subcontinent was partitioned to form two sovereign states of India and Pakistan. Although the Constitution of India pronounced India as a secular state, in practice, religion and caste continued to play vital role in the governance and politics. The developments of post Ambedkar period exhibit the dynamic nature of political identity of Dalits. Anti Hinduism and Anti-Caste elements of political identity of Dalits were visible in the event of conversion to Buddhism. Religion, Caste, Class and Language offered alternatives to Dalits to project themselves as a political...
subject/category. For a brief period at the end of 1950s, language too offered an alternative political identity to the Dalits in Maharashtra. While religion and reservation policy were the issues in the Dalit discourse since Ambedkar’s time, linguistic issues intrude later and remained dormant which need some exploration.

**Language and Political Identity**

While other alternatives emerge out of the core principal of the emancipation from the exploitation inherent in the caste structure and subsequent annihilation of the same structure, the role of language is restricted to an instrument to achieve some immediate objectives. Primary among them is to win political allies against one party dominant system of congress in Indian politics.

Although, taking a federalist position with strong centre and opposition to big states and linguistic states as divisive for union, Ambedkar’s basic formulation regarding reorganization of states in India run counter to the idea of linguistic state of Maharashtra. Despite of this at the end of the life he unambiguously exhibited his support to the formation of Samyukta Maharashtra. His idea of joining the Samyukta Maharashtra Samiti (SMS)\(^{12}\), a unified front of political parties to fight for the unilingual State of Maharashtra, including Bombay for Marathi speaking people, was planned on the level of party politics. In his strategy it was a step towards the formation of a single opposition party, as a viable alternative to the Congress party.\(^{13}\) At one hand AISCF joined SMS and on the other Ambedkar continued his discussion with prominent socialist and other leaders to form a single opposition party.

AISCF, after death of Ambedkar (6\(^{th}\) December 1956) contested general election of March 1957, as a constituent member party of SMS. In the election held on 9\(^{th}\) and 11\(^{th}\) March 1957, AISCF won 6 parliamentary seats for Lok Sabha\(^{14}\). From the Marathi speaking areas it won 17 seats for State Legislative Assembly, in addition to which it won 13 seats in State Legislative Assemblies of other states (Punjab: 5, Mysore: 2, Andhra: 1, Gujarat: 2 and Madras: 3 ) (Pawar 2009:27). As a member party of SMS, in 1957, AISCF contested election

\(^{12}\) Samyukta Maharashtra Samiti was an alliance of the opposition parties in the Marathi speaking region, formed in Pune on 6 February, 1956, demanded that the Marathi-speaking areas of Bombay, Hyderabad and Madhya Pradesh be included in the State of Maharashtra.

\(^{13}\) The impact of this strategy can be felt in nearly all the opposition fronts in the national governments where RPI was a assumed political member.

for Bombay Municipal Corporation on 14 seats and won 12 seats (ibid: 33). Table below shows the importance of the AISCF in SMS.

Table 3.1
Comparative performance of SMS and AISCF in 1957 elections

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Election</th>
<th>SMS</th>
<th>AISCF</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1957 Lok Sabha</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1957 Bombay State Assembly</td>
<td>161</td>
<td>17</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1957 Bombay Municipal Corporation</td>
<td>72</td>
<td>12</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: Pawar (2009)

Thus in 1957 in a bid to form an alternative to Congress, AISCF coalesced with SMS in Maharashtra over the issue of linguistic State. In a discussion with Prabodhankar Thakare, Dr. Ambedkar assured the same (ibid: 37). After the fulfilment of the objective of the establishment of Samyukta Maharashtra, SMS disintegrated. With the dissolution of SMS, a brief encounter with linguistic identity was over.

After this, involvement of Dalits in the linguistic issue was negative in nature. In 1960s Shiv Sena emerged as a champion of Marathi speaking people, with its militant tactics to assert Sons of Soil position. Relationship of Shiv Sena with Dalits was of hostility. As observed by Sirsikar, “Whether it was the controversy over the ‘Riddles of Hinduism’, or any other issue, Shiv Sena has been extremely hostile to Dalits. (Sirsikar 1995: 189)”

**Buddhism as a Marker of Political Identity**

Immediately after the death of Ambedkar, Buddhism emerged as a marker of political identity of Dalits. Ambedkar viewed Buddhism as a spiritual force. Although Ambedkar himself never claim to be politically motivated in his decision to convert en masse to the Buddhism, political implications of the decision were felt immediately. Ambedkar’s hope that all of India would become ‘Prabuddha Bharat’ implied political slogan for both the supporters as well as opponents. As reported by Pawar, on 17th June 1956, Yashwantrao Chavan, then Chief Minister of Bombay State, addressed to the State Assembly,

“In an order to warn the opposition side, I would like to bring to their notice that, this decision to accept new religion is not motivated by religious reasons only. I have a
report of the speeches of leaders, on the basis of that, they want a nation. Thus opposition side should be cautious. (Pawar 2009: 84)”

Political implication of Buddhism for RPI was very evident. RPI was established on 3rd October 1957, which was a day, Dassera in Hindu calendar, on which on 14th October 1956, Dr. Ambedkar organized conversion ceremony in Nagpur. Between 24th November to 30th November 1958, 5th World Buddhist Conference held at Bangkok, which was attended by a delegation of Bhartiya Boudha Mahasabha mostly constituted of political leaders of RPI (ibid: 64-65). Thus RPI emerged as a political party of the Buddhists from Maharashtra.

Issue of Reservation
In first decade of independence reservation policy was only applicable to SCs from Hindus and Sikhs. Owing to this the converted Buddhists were constitutionally debarred from any benefit of the reservation. Because of the fear of loosening of reserved seats in general elections of 1957, many AISCF leaders were not in favour of the conversion in 1956 (ibid: 25). In general election of 1957, Bhayyasaheb Ambedkar, son of Ambedkar, refused to contest from Central Mumbai Lok Sabha seat because the seat was reserved for SC category. Bhayyasaheb justified his decision by an argument that after conversion to Buddhism he does not consider himself as SC, and thus he refused to contest from the constituency which was reserved for SC category (ibid: 26). Similar incident was reported on 18.12.1971 by D.T. Rupwate, a leader of RPI in the weekly ‘Sadhana’,

“On 16.10.56 there was a conversion ceremony at Nasik. On that day in the meeting of AISCF, Maharashtra regional body, there was a big argument over the suggestion that, all those who converted to Buddhism should not stigmatize Buddhism by contesting elections on SC reserved constituencies (ibid: 34-35).”

Land Satyagraha
In May 1959 RPI passed a resolution regarding distribution of the forest land to landless labourers. Subsequently on 27th June 1959, in Mumbai, RPI demanded for nationalization of land and its distribution to landless labourers. On 30th July 1959 in Nandurbar Tehsil, struggle for the rights of landless labourers started jointly by RPI and communists. After four months of stiff resistance to the Satyagraha, government accepted 15 demands of the satyagrahis in the month of October (ibid: 12). Despite of promise from the government
nothing concretely followed by the administration. Owing to this till 1964, RPI leadership took follow up of the demands at various levels. Finally from 6th December it organized nationwide satyagraha for ten demands, in which upto 30 January 1965 total 3 lakh 60 thousand satyagrahis participated (Pawar 2006: 89-101). The struggle of the Dalits for the land rights under RPI and communist leadership highlight the complex character of the political identity. It was the coalition of the exploited against the oppressive structures of caste as well as class.

**Sub Regional and Sub Caste Identity within the Movement**

Despite of the success of RPI firstly as an ally of SMS in 1957 elections as well as its successful leadership of movement of land satyagraha in 1959 to 1965, with socialists and communists (under the leadership of Nana Patil), under the leadership of Dadasaheb Gaikwad, the party soon fractionized into different groups. Although the RPI remained only party of Mahars in Maharashtra, it factionalized in sub regional and sub caste feuds between leadership (Pawar 2009, 2006). From among them Gaikwad, Rupwate, Gavai, Bhandare and Morya joined congress. B.C. Kamble controlled one section and Khobragade decided to remain independent for some time before joining Congress (Singh 2009).

**Dalit Panthers Comprehensive Projection of Exploitation and Struggle**

Dalit Panthers, a militant organization of Dalit youth was founded in 1972 in Mumbai by young poets and writers, in its Manifesto answered the question of Dalit identity.

> “Who is a dalit? Members of scheduled castes and tribes, neo-Buddhists, the working people, the landless and poor peasants, women and all those who are being exploited politically, economically and in the name of religion (Joshi 1984:141-46).”

Dalit Panthers was founded against the backdrop of rural and urban tensions marked by increasing atrocities against the Dalits in the villages and mounting frustration of the educated jobless Dalit youths from their dissatisfaction of the fraction ridden and ineffective RPI leadership in Maharashtra. It was a radical organization inspired from the militant Black Panthers’ movement in the United States (Sirsikar 1995: 196).

On the eve of the Lok Sabha bye-election in the central Bombay constituency on 5th January 1974 large scale riots broke out between the Dalits and caste Hindus, in BDD chawls of Worli, Mumbai. It is said that the immediate cause of the riots was that Raja Dhale, the then
president of the Dalit Panthers, used abusive language about Hindu mythological figures (ibid: 200) in a meeting organized in a nearby ground to explain and justify the decision of the boycott of the bye-election. In response to the call of Panthers, nearly 80,000 scheduled caste voters reportedly stayed away from the poll. As a result Congress-RPI candidate was defeated by CPI candidate Mrs. Roza Deshpande (ibid: 200). The boycott of the bye-election was called to protest against the continued ill treatment of the Dalits by the upper caste Hindus, with the connivance of the government (ibid: 199).

Panthers radically challenged the prevailing social and cultural system in India. It was the organization of youth as the average age of leaders as well as regular followers was within the range of 20 to 30 years (ibid: 204). The distinct identity which it possessed was owing to its militant attack on Hindu religion and culture, and loyalty to Buddhism (ibid: 205). They challenged Hindu domination by demolishing the symbols of Hindu religious order and faith by burning Bhagvad Gita, hurled shoes at the Shankaracharya of Puri in Pune who defended Chaturvarnya system. Panthers supported a Marathi play “Ghashiram Kotwal” when the Brahmins in Pune protested against it and demanded a ban on it because the play depicts the moral degeneration of the Brahmin community during the period of Peshwa rule (ibid: 203). Panthers accused the government for eulogizing Hindu gods and goddesses, in the school textbooks, thus creating psychological impact on young minds in favour of the Hindu religion and their indoctrination about caste Hindu superiority (ibid: 203).

Dalit Panther was in the forefront of the movement to rename the Marathwada University after Ambedkar. In 1978, the Maharashtra legislature passed a unanimous resolution in favour of renaming the university as “Dr. Ambedkar Marathwada University”. The university had large percentage, around 30 percent, of scheduled caste students, primarily due to the presence of colleges under the auspices of the People’s Education Society, established by Ambedkar in Aurangabad. The decision was taken as a tribute to Ambedkar whose establishment of Milind College in 1951 in Marathwada, which was then the Nizam’s State of Hyderabad, pioneered higher education to the area which was long neglected (Zelliot 2001:132). The decision led to burning of more than 1,000 huts of the Mahars and the neo-Buddhists in Marathwada region (Sirsikar 1995: 206). The incident exhibited the deep seated hostility towards the scheduled castes in the minds of the high castes. The violence was organized and selective against Mahar and neo-Buddhists only (ibid: 206). The entire period marked a crucial phase in the history of movement of Dalits (Mankar 2008)
Dalit Literature

The movement of the Dalit Panthers was the natural and logical outcome of the growth of Dalit Sahitya (literature) in the 1960s (Tikekar 1995: 54). The literature reflects the anger, frustration, alienation and the desire to revolt, of the downtrodden. It contributed to greater political awareness among the scheduled castes and reinforced the efforts of the Dalit Panthers to create a new identity for the downtrodden (Sirsikar 1995: 203). According to Omvedt ‘for the young Dalit poets, economic and cultural exploitation were interwoven from the beginning… Their poetry… spoke of caste, of Buddha, of Brahmans, of Shambuk and Eklavya just as it spoke of poverty and the meaningless of parliamentary democracy (2008:77).’ Young Dalit writers, Namdeo Dhasal, Raja Dhale, Arjun Dangale, Daya Pawar, Baburao Bagul, and Laxman Mane revolted against the mainstream Marathi literature and shattered the hegemony of dominant literary values of the white-collar Brahmins.

According to Punalekar (2001: 239) the Dalit literature is deeply concerned with identity formation and its assertion to regain the self confidence and self-worth of the marginalized sections. According to Raja Dhale (cited in Ratnakar 1997: 5) the term Dalit Literature (Dalit Sahitya in Marathi) was first time employed in a letter written by a poet Yadav Piraji Tappal on 2nd October 2010. Since 1960s, Dalit Literature flourished in Maharashtra along with a debate over its identity. The term Dalit was not accepted by many writers. At least six identities as alternative to each other were projected to name this literature of protest. These are Dalit Literature: by Keshav Meshram, Dr. Sharankumar Limbale, Daya Pawar; Ambedkarite Literature: by Dr. Yashvant Manohar, Dr. Yogendra Meshram; Non-Brahmin Literature: by Sharad Patil; Buddhist Literature: by Vijay Sonawane, Bhausaheb Adsul; Literature of Phule-Ambedkar Motivation: by Raja Dhale, Prof. Gautamiputra Kamble; and Bahujan Sahitya: by Baburao Bagul, Anand Yadav (Ratnakar 1997: 4).

The debate over naming of the Dalit literature represents complex dynamics of the political identity construction of Dalits. Along with existing identities of Bahujan, Non-Aryan and proletariat this debate opened up avenues for new political identity constructions which were the outcome of post-Ambedkar search of identities. Broadly these were ideological and religious. Ideologically some authors personified and named it after Ambedkar and Phule-

\[15\] Italics added.
Ambedkar; some authors called it Buddhist. Thus, broadly two new elements were added with political ideological construction as well as newly found religious assertion.

**Ambedkar as a Symbol of Political Identity**

In the literature and in the life worlds of Dalits, life and work of Ambedkar acquired central location. Dalit writers ‘owe their critical imagination and struggles for identity assertion to the teachings of Ambedkar and his zest for Dalit liberation (Punalekar 2001: 223).’ Their ‘novels, short stories, poems and autobiographical narratives refer to Ambedkar using various epithets such as Uddharak, Muktidata (liberator), Margdata (pathfinder), Bodhisatva, Maha-Manav, Refuge, Guru and Fakir (ibid :224).’ Very often Ambedkar and Gandhi were juxtaposed as rivals. They attacked the term Harijan, as employed by Gandhi, as a conspiracy to hoodwink the untouchables (ibid: 225). Zelliot (2001 b: 137) observes that, “Gandhi’s ‘Harijan’ (people of God) is an object of pity… Ambedkar’s ‘Dalit’ is a man or woman filled with pride and self-respect…The multifaceted Dr. Ambedkar stands for both qualities: pride and self-respect.’

Presence of his persona in the form of statues, his writings and naming of places was viewed as assertion of the Ambedkarite identity of Dalits. Statues of Ambedkar in the position mostly with black suit and a copy of a constitution of India in one hand and one hand raised with figure pointed as well as his busts made up of plaster of Paris or bronze are found in all over India. Zelliot observed that,

> “Wherever there is need for a government to declare its commitment to equality or to appease a section of its people or a dalit locality which wishes to declare its pride and belief in equality, a statute of Dr. B.R. Babasaheb Ambedkar appears. And so significant is this image that it is both a statement of pride and progress by those who follow Ambedkar and a challenge to those who find Dalit upward mobility a threat (ibid 2001 b: 137).”

Major events in the recent past of the Dalit Movement in Maharashtra involve the image of Ambedkar. In July, 1998 in Ramabai Nagar slum of Mumbai, desecration of the statue of Ambedkar triggered massive protest and subsequent police firings which resulted in death of eleven Dalits (Gaikwad 1999). As a response, Dalits shut down the city of Mumbai. After the incident two Dalit leaders who tried to enter Ramabai Nagar to offer condolences were turned
away violently by mob of Dalits (Zelliot 2001 b: 132). Incident of Khairlanji happened in the year 2006. An incident is marked as major outburst of the Dalits in Maharashtra as a response to an atrocity committed against a Dalit family in Bhandara district of Maharashtra on September 29, 2006. Following to it in the same year in the month of November-December 2006, the desecration of a statue of Ambedkar in Kanpur (Uttar Pradesh) fuelled violent protests by the Dalits all over the Maharashtra which was actually viewed as a result of outcry over Khairlanji incident.16 17

Naming of places after Babasaheb Ambedkar also symbolically played crucial role in post Ambedkar period in mobilization of Dalits. Politics of naming of the places soon started after the death of Ambedkar. Although Ambedkar himself was against ‘purush-bhakti’, devotion to man, for his followers his image was not of god but of a man, who made possible whatever is good in their lives (Zelliot 2001 b: 134). On 22nd March 1960, Bombay Municipal Corporation passed a resolution of naming of a prime road in Mumbai, starting from Byculla to Kings Circle. In justification of the resolution it was argued that many significant events in the life of Ambedkar happened around the same road like his marriage, his residence in Parel, his office near Damodar hall, the strike of Municipal workers in 1946, his deliberations with Kasturba Gandhi during Gandhi’s fast in Yervada, pune, and his Buddha Bhushan Printing Press (Pawar 2006: 89). A grand ceremony to that effect was organized by RPI on behalf of Bombay Municipal Corporation on 14th April, 1960 on the occasion of Birth Anniversary of Dr. Ambedkar (Ibid 23-25).

A massive mobilization of the Dalits in the name of Ambedkar was observed when Government of Maharashtra, first, published his unpublished writings in 1987 titled ‘Riddles in Hinduism’ (1987) and then subsequently withdrawn the same in response to the opposition from Shiv Sena. The book contained Ambedkar’s unpublished writings which criticised some of the ‘puzzles’ in Brahmanical Hinduism, specifically regarding the godly images of Rama and Krishna. Ambedkarites organized large march through the Fort area of Bombay, which resulted in lifting the withdrawal. More than in support to the content of the book, it was the ‘insult’ to the name of Ambedkar that was the reason of the protest of the Dalits (Zelliot 2001 b: 133).

17 “Khairlanji to Kanpur”. The Indian Express. 2006-12-02.
Image of Ambedkar in the identity construction is strongly employed by his followers in a day to day greetings of them to each other as ‘Jai Bhim’ (victory to Bhim), a shortening of Ambedkar’s first name, Bhimrao (ibid 134). It can be seen on the blue colour headbands of Dalit activists. Greeting each other as Jai Bhim is not only used as a gesture of tribute to Ambedkar but it also symbolizes the solidarity to the movement that he organized for the liberation of Dalits.

To celebrate/observe the major events from the movements organized by Ambedkar, every year the Dalits in large number visit some of the important places related to Ambedkar’s life and organize programmes. Ambedkar’s birth anniversary is celebrated every year on 14th April, in large numbers in Dalit colonies. On 6th December every year to commemorate his death anniversary lakhs of the Dalits from all over India visit his Samadhi called as Chaitya Bhumi at Dadar, Mumbai. Thousands of them every year visit Bhima Koregaon, a village near Pune to pay tribute to the Mahar soldiers who laid their life and defeated massive army of Peshwas in a decisive battle from British side. Ambedkar ones visited this site and paid tribute to those soldiers. Taking clue from his visit every year on 1st January, thousands of Dalits visit this site where a pillar is erected by the then British administration in the memory of those soldiers. Similarly they also visit every year a site of the first Satyagraha organized by Ambedkar to win civil right of drinking water at Chavadar water tank at Mahad and where he publicly burned Manusmriti as a symbolic gesture to denounce Brahmanical Hinduism. Apart from this, every year Dalits in large numbers also celebrate the birth anniversary of Buddha in the month of May. At many places common celebrations are organized to celebrate birth anniversary of Buddha as well as Ambedkar. Thousands of Dalits converted to Buddhism also visit Diksha Bhumi in Nagpur to celebrate the Vijaya Dashami/Dassera, a day on which Ambedkar with his lakhs of followers organized conversion ceremony on the 14th October 1956 which was incidentally a day of Dassera.

In post-Ambedkar period, Ambedkar as image of liberation, dignity and self respect emerged as a crucial element of political identity of Dalits. From his representation in the Dalit literature to his place in a cultural sphere of the Dalit life worlds his presence is ubiquitous. As observed by Zelliot,

“There are many meanings to Ambedkar. Inspiration for the educated, hope for the illiterate, threat to the establishment, creator of opportunities for Dalits and
discomfort for the elite…Some say Ambedkar is the only pre-independence leader who has continued to grow in fame and influence throughout the contemporary period (ibid 140-141).”

It is can be concluded from the preceding pages that in twentieth century political identity of the Dalits evolved as an independent entity. The stigma of untouchability associated with social identity of Dalits pave way to organize them for their rights and carve niche in the multifaceted social and political landscape of the collective life in India. Rise of Ambedkar crystallized the collective emancipatory identity and shaped its political future. In the next three chapters the data collected from the respondents has been presented and analysed in the backdrop of the present chapter on historical overview.