The Discourse on ‘Marathas’ as an ‘Imagined Peasant Group’

By the early 20th century, the effects of the Satyashodhak ‘awakening’ generated a wide range of educational and political mobilization among non-Brahmin communities throughout the Bombay province. The recognition of political opportunities after the Morley-Minto reforms of 1909 (inauguration of local representational government) and later Montague-Chelmsford reforms (Dyarchy) led to organization based on the social imaginary of groups as community (termed as caste). The non-Brahmins most important contribution was that it led to the organization of class-caste identity among the peasants-an awareness expressed in the Bahujan samaj. By 1917 this was reiterated by the political resistance to urban based Brahmin-led nationalism.

At one level the Satyashodhak Samaj was the organizational platform of all non-Brahmin castes but within it community based (caste) associations began to emerge. These caste associations began to define boundaries of inclusion and exclusion and also defined their political goals. It was in the first decade of the 20th century that was crucial for the formation of the all-Province Satyashodhak conferences, that in some ways marked the beginnings of ‘all-India’ (i.e., all-Marathi speaking) conferences of the major non-Brahmin castes.

Thus in 1917 ‘Maratha’s’ supported by Shahu, Gaikwad, Scindia and Pawars mobilised to organize a discourse on who the ‘Maratha’s’ were and it was used as a strategy to forge a united ‘Maratha’ community. Nearly all the educational efforts, hostels and schools, were financed out of local efforts and not by funds from a centralized body. The inauguration of the All India ‘Maratha’ Education Conference (AIMEC) and the disparate organizations active in different part of the Deccan Province manifested in emergence of various imaginings of ‘Maratha’. While the Conference itself appeared to symbolize the process by which ‘Kunbis’ were being assimilated into ‘Maratha’s’ in the twentieth century, newer contradictory inclusive meanings also emanated.
But what was happening to the Non-Brahmin movement and its political interests in the 20th century? By 1920, the Deccan Ryots Association (Deccan Peasants Association) was organized by coordinated initially by a small group of urbanized professional non-Brahmins. It addressed the issues in generalized terms of the Ryot claimed to represent interests of the rural masses. This was done through several means, organizing in terms of the, through the nomenclature of ‘Backward Classes’ and through attempts to politically mobilize through caste associations. It was the Satyashodhak ideology and the intervention of Shahu (through funds) that provided the important networks through which the emerging party tried to establish its base. But this is not to suggest that the Associations did not have schisms-in fact the Association was more of a loose conglomeration of different non-Brahmin communities divided on the basis of caste, ideology and political interests. There were sections within the Association that were more orthodox and tended to support the Nationalist movement-however their political interests ensured their loyalty to the Association’s activities which patronized the colonial state and always displayed an anti-Brahmin stand. The Association was led by members who were urban based and was sparsely represented by the peasantry. As Omvedt (1976) argues,

“The Deccan Ryots Association was the first organization to appear; its Provisional Working Committee was announced in September of 1917. Its initial leaders included three prominent men of Satyashodhak background, A. B. Latthe, Mukundrao Patil, and Ramchandrarao Vandekar; Walchand Kothari, a young Jain of Poona who was coming into politics out of an association with Poona liberal reformers; Narayan Waman Tilak, the most prominent Maharashtrian Christian of the day; S. K. Bole, a Bhandari leader from Bombay; two merchants of Poona, one evidently a Marwari; and G. M. Kalbhor, a leading ‘Maratha’ businessman of Poona. Later two important Lingayat leaders of the Karnatak, P. G. Halkatti, and P. C. Chikodi, and the two leading Maratha lawyers, Bhaskarrao Jadhav and G. D. Naik, joined it. Of this group only Mukundrao Patil was of genuine peasant background.” (Omvedt, 1976: 184-85)

With the British initiating policies of ‘devolving’ some authority to the indigenous actors, the balance of power was deemed to shift in favour of the Brahmin castes in the Deccan. As the field of politics organized by the colonial
state required specific qualifications- only educated urban based intellectuals, former princes, landlords among other were permitted to contest and vote. It was in this context that the members of the Association urged the Bombay government to inaugurate the policy of separate electorates. The Association hoped that this may at least guarantee them some seats in the local bodies and the legislative council.

The Association identified itself with the interests of the agricultural and labouring classes and argued that the preponderance and domination of the educationally advanced castes such as the Brahmins need to be curtailed. The initial canvassing of Associations' objectives and interests took place primarily in the three districts of Ahmednagar, Sholapur and Satara. Mukundrao Patil was a leader who was well liked by the Satyashodhak members and also by the masses; he presided over many meetings in Ahmednagar, and a new branch was instituted here in December, 1917. Ahmednagar was an important site for political mobilization because it was here that the Deccan riots of 1875 emerged. The non-Brahmins here had many decades earlier come up with "Shetji and Bhatji" a term employed to highlight the exploitative practices of members of these communities. (Jagruti, 1918; 13th February;5)

A similar conference of the Association in tandem with Satyashodhak Samaj were held in the Barsi, Sholapur district and it was then that the Association's branch was established here in January 1918. The Lingayat community had a strong presence in the Satyashodhak Samaj. The Lingayat community was largely based in Sholapur and adjoining southern districts of the Bombay Province. This close association of the Association with the Satyashodhak Samaj enabled the Association to use the existing networks that cut across caste and community ties for mobilizing the peasantry. Moreover the Satyashodhak ideology gave the Association the legitimacy to represent all the non-Brahmin castes and communities. Different strategies were employed by the Associations' leadership in order to gain recognition. For instance in 1918, in Bombay and in Bijapur the
district meetings were held under the nomenclature of ‘Backward Classes’ rather then employing the term Ryot.

However the fragility of the Association was noticed when certain sections of ‘Marathas’ led by the AIMEC began to articulate specific interests- such as educational awareness campaigns and mobilized to demand separate electorates for ‘Marathas’. For instance in 1917, Vitthal Ramji Shinde, who was part of the nationalist struggle and also a well known social reformer took the lead in organizing the ‘Maratha’ Rashtriya Sangh (Nationalist ‘Maratha’ Association) in Pune. The same year in November when the AIMEC was held in Belgaum this project of articulating caste specific interest heightened. The conference was presided over by a young lawyer from Vidarbha, called Ramrao Deshmukh who was a aristocratic ‘Maratha’ and who had recently returned from England; this group passed resolutions opposing the communal representation desired by the other non-Brahmin groups.

The Pune based ‘‘Marathas’, led by the Jedhe family soon followed this lead in sponsoring a conference in 1917 and a second conference was held a year later in Nasik to set up the ‘Maratha’ League. The ‘Maratha’ interests now began to conflict with those of the Deccan Royts Association. Omvedt (1976) argues

"With the exception of V. R. Shinde himself, the ‘nationalist ‘Maratha’s’, i.e., those associated with the Congress Party, were almost invariably more orthodox men and tended to come from the Konkan, Bombay city or Vidarbha, where high-caste ‘Maratha’s were less willing to accept their common caste identity with Kunbi peasants. As the Congress leader, Ramrao Deshmukh,’ admitted, distinctions between the opposing ‘Maratha’ groups were less clearcut in political terms than in social terms, i.e., attitudes towards Satyashodhak reformism.” (Omvedt, 1976; 186-87)

The internal conflicts within the non-Brahmin umbrella organization i.e. Satyashodhak Samaj were now out in the open. Both groups, one led by ‘Maratha’ interests and the other by the Deccan Ryot Association, demanded separate electorates to protect the interests of the non-Brahmins. While the Deccan Ryot Association pleaded the state to provide for communal electorates
for 'educationally backward classes', the 'Maratha' League demanded seats for 'Marathas'. Thus as long as it was a fight against Brahmins, their interests coincided otherwise the Association had numerous schisms based on caste interests. (Omvedt, 1976)

So as not to sound exclusive, the 'Maratha' League pleaded that the following arrangement be made- ten seats for 'Maratha's, four for Lingayats, one for Jains, four for Untouchables and ten for 'backward non-Brahmin Hindu communities'. But real interests of the 'Maratha's' were disguised, as Omvedt (1976) argues

"...but it showed a well-defined tendency to view Marathas as a higher, elite caste, arguing that one reason for reservation of seats was that Marathas were farmers with vested interests (Patial, Jagirdars, deshmukhs, khots, etc.)' It may be said that this represented the spirit of Kolhapur to the degree that it was opposed to Satyashodhak ideology: the reluctance to assume that caste barriers could (or should) be overcome, the maintenance of separate caste identities with the conviction that each should have its own leadership, autonomy and sphere of action, and the inclusion of Kunbis with Marathas coupled with a high-status Kshatriya' identification of 'Marathas." (Omvedt, 1976; 187)

The colonial state instead of either of the two proposals came up with seven reserved seats for a single category 'Marathas' and Allied Castes'. This act of the state led to further consolidation of the attempts of the elite non-Brahmin sections to claim 'Maratha' as the marker of an upper-caste Kshatriya status. It is pertinent to note that this official category also highlighted, simultaneously, the very real and perceived differences that existed between non-Brahmin castes and growing dominance of 'Marathas' and 'Maratha'-Kunbis within the non-Brahmin fold. (P.Deshpande, 2004)

The colonial state perceived 'Marathas' in a broader sense (as including 'allied communities'). In the end, rather ironically, it awarded seven reserved seats in the Deccan to non-Brahmins (exclusive of Jains and Lingayats) but it awarded them under the terminology of 'Marathas', in which a ' Maratha' was defined as:

"a person belonging to any of the following castes, namely the Mahrattas, Kunbi, Mali, Koli, Bhandari, Shimpi, Lohar, Kumbhar, Dhangar, Bhoi,
Ban, Lohari, Bhavin, and Deloi or Shinde castes, or to any caste which the local Government may, by notification in the Gazeteer, declare to be a Mahratta caste.” (Reforms Franchise, 1920;145)

The AIMEC had in the early decade of the 1920s through their discourse on ‘Marathas’ were endeavouring to make it inclusive of the Kunbis. The colonial strategy to keep the ‘Maratha’ category amenable (through notification) and also the inclusion of many more castes led to resentment within the AISEC led ‘Marathas’. But it is to the credit of the colonial policy that led to the belief that the ‘Maratha’ was the most important caste amongst the non-Brahmin castes. The state also duly recognized and legitimated the idea that ‘Maratha’ was closely tied with the erstwhile jajmani and agrarian system in which ‘Marathas’ were the ‘natural’ leaders of the non-Brahmin caste group.

The over simplification by the state into binaries- Brahmins on the one hand and ‘Marathas’ and allied caste on the other, thus became the primary source of regeneration of ‘Maratha’ identity as the leaders of the Bahujan Samaj. For instance, when in the 1920 Poona city election Vittal Ramji Shinde stood for elections, he inaugurated a party called the Bahujan Paksh (Bahujan Party). Shinde was a prominent man of aristocratic ‘Maratha’ background whose work in founding the Depressed Classes Mission had given him a unique reputation as a social reformer In his election manifesto, he tried to define the Bahujan samaj concept as- those eligible for membership in the party as peasants (excluding Deshmukhs, Jagirdars, Inamdars and such others), small traders (excluding big traders and money lenders), all labourers, all untouchables, and women. (Omvedt, 1976;189)

After fault lines appeared within the Deccan Ryot Association caused by caste based assertion by the constituent non-Brahmin castes (especially the ‘Maratha’ caste) a new political outfit had to be organized. Thus in 1920, a unified non-Brahmin organization was finally established in Pune called the Deccan Brahmineter Sangh which was also popularly called the Non-Brahmin party (NBP). The NBP in its very first meeting suggested the dismantling caste based
organizations such as the ‘Maratha’ League and focusing energies through a single non-Brahmin organisation. A twenty-five member governing board was set up that included thirteen non-Maratha’s, among them Lingayats, Jains, Bhandaris, a Leva Patidar, a Parsi, a Sutar and a Shimpi. The non-Brahmin party became the official political organization of the Bahujan samaj to contest in the Legislative Councils and the District Local Boards.

The Montague Chelmsford reforms of 1919 introduced dyarchy in the Bombay Province—where for the first time a body with a majority of elected members was vested with limited authority over certain transferred subjects such as local self-government, public health, education, public works and agriculture. The major electoral success of the NBP was at the district and Taluka local boards within ‘Marathi speaking areas’ (because the Bombay Provinces’ spatial outreach included Kanerese speaking region in the south, Marathi speaking region in the centre and the Gujarati speaking region in the North). The NBP was able to consolidate its power in the ‘Marathi speaking’ local region and soon came to dominate it overtime. However the NBS could not do the same at the Bombay Provincial level for similar reasons as Omvedt (1976) argues,

“...the Bombay Legislative Council thus represented the most powerful and symbolically important institution in the process of British transfer of limited powers to Indian representatives. However, the basic ‘electoral arithmetic’ of the presidency was such that non-Brahmins could not hope to dominate it. The existence of Gujarat as a Gandhian stronghold, of Muslim Sind and a number of Muslim reserved seats meant that they had at no time any hope of becoming a majority party within the Bombay Presidency as a whole. Out of a total of 86 elected seats, there were only 19 in Marathi-speaking rural districts and one in Poona city in which non-Brahmin numerical dominance could reasonably be expected to offset the superior organization and financial power of Brahmins and their Marwari allies. Six seats in Kannarese-speaking districts where Lingayat anti-Brahminism was a force provided additional associates of the party. Within the Marathi constituencies (including Bombay city) the government had provided seven reserved seats for Marathas and Allied Castes’ which aided the Non-Brahmin and non-Brahmins associated with the Congress Party. With these limitations, the most the Non-Brahmin Party could hope for was to win sufficient representation to provide a basis
for action in alliance with Muslims, Brahmin Moderates and the Government’s ‘official’ (nominated) candidates.” (Omvedt, 1976; 190)

But what was the social background of these elected NBP members? The NBP council members primarily were landholders, educated individuals and lawyers which meant that they identified with the rural and urban non-Brahmin elite. The landed councilors of the NBP identified with rural landlords and the richer peasantry in opposition to the rural poor. The recognition that the NBP was a party that was dominated by landed ‘‘Maratha’s’ came in the latter elections of 1923 and 1926. As Omvedt (1976) argues,

“This was seen in the memorandums of the Deccan Ryot Association, with its emphasis on ‘prominent men...of the mofussil’ and of the ‘Maratha’ League, which stressed Maratha identity as military men and landholders. When in 1928, N. E. Navle (who was a Maratha and a lawyer by profession) presented the Party’s appeal to the Simon Commission; he made it clear that its rural outlook was limited to the rural upper classes... Navle argued that suffrage should be extended to those paying a land revenue of Rs. 16, and agreed that this would exclude the rural poor” (Omvedt, 1976: 192-93)

The NBP did raise some critical questions regarding the tenants and landless, but these were limited in a sense. As compared with the pre-reform Councils the reformed Legislative Council had an increased representation of Ryots (peasants) and of landholders, although the latter were prominent even before the 1919 Act. The representatives of the Ryots lost no time condemning the laws which secure the interests of the latter. A Bill was introduced in 1925 to question the authority of the landholders of imposing a penalty on inferior holders for default of rent. Inamdars and other large land holders opposed this Bill which was supported by a section of the NBP. In fact the dispute which started between the landed proprietors and their tenants soon reduced itself in the Council to a tussle between the non-Brahmins and the Brahmin land owners. The “Maratha” landlords were not questioned. (Omvedt, 1976)

Another instance of antagonism between tenants and landlords and incidentally between the non-Brahmins and the non-Brahmin castes is to be found in the
resolutions of 1923 for remedying the grievances of Khoti tenants in the Ratnagiri and Kolaba districts— the Brahmins were dominant among khot landlords in the Konkan and among Deccan Inamders. Thus the legislative council became a platform from which the non-Brahmin actors questioned the Brahmin domination in education, land ownership and even religion. As Omvedt argues,

"Nevertheless, while these issues did not really touch the higher level landlords and moneylenders or the rich peasants of the ryotwari areas, they represented a part of the general ‘anti-feudal’ trend of the 1920s in India which saw the agitations of tenant cultivators against landlords." (Omvedt, 1976; 195)

The most controversial bill in the Council was in fact the ‘Joshi Bill’ sponsored by the NBP in 1926, which sought to end any legal claims that hereditary priests had to the performance of religious ceremonies for non-Brahmins who wanted to dispense with priestly services. A report in the Vijayi Maratha sums this up,

"The Joshi Bill has very well exposed the so-called nationalism of both the Extremists and the Moderates. Their Swaraj is the Swaraj of priesthood....The Joshi Bill marks the triumph of the non-Brahmin movement." (Vijayi Maratha, 9th August, 1928)

By the end of the decade the NBP as such had lost its usefulness and the dissolution of this organization occurred in 1930 in Bombay. The ‘‘Maratha’s’ continued to dominate the ‘Marathas’ and other allied caste group’ in Legislative representation. The fact that the ‘Marathas’ as a caste included the Kunbi peasantry and also the landlords amongst them made them universally acceptable. This was one of the reasons that the ‘Marathas’ found political representation later in the Nationalist parties and also Non-Brahmin peasant parties. At the time of the party breakup around 1930, ‘Marathas’ like Keshavrao Jedhe and Dinkarrao Javalkar were leaving the party for the nationalist movement. Similarly, while tensions existed between caste Hindu non-Brahmins and the Untouchables (now with the lead taken by Ambedkar to voice the concerns of the untouchables as separate from the non-Brahmin movement), the alliance more or less held throughout the decade. Iv
The Satara peasant rebellion is perhaps the hallmark of the 1920s peasant mobilization and especially of the ‘Maratha’ peasantry. It was in many ways a typical peasant district, and had almost no landlessness but a very high percentage of fragmented small holdings. (District Gazetteer, 1920) Historically too it held symbolic value for the ‘Maratha’ peasantry as Shivaji’s last descendant ruled from here before being deposed by the Peshwa. The colonial policies had aggravated the agrarian situation in the district and as such the generated a high proportion of poor peasants by 1920s. The crop seasons between 1911 and 1921, was a period of great odds as Satara did not have significant canal-irrigated areas. It is no wonder that most of peasantry in Satara preferred to migrate to Pune and Bombay for work than almost any other Deccan district and also the fact that the highest percentage of military recruitment occurred from this district. (Mann, 1967, R. Kumar 1968)

The Settlement Commissioner for Satara observes:

“The investigation shows that the agriculturists who cultivate with their own hands, and not solely by hired labour, held in the typical villages examined 59.2 % of the total area. But this is a percentage which varies widely. In the villages of the rich plain it is only 38.5 % in the hill villages it rises to 87.9 %.... We must not forget that for the villages of the plain about 62 % is held by landlords who pay the assessment.” (Satara Taluka Papers, 1923; 89)

But who were these non-cultivating owners who control sixty two percent of the land? The earlier settlement reports described ‘non-agriculturist’ landholders as kulkanis in one case and Sowcars or moneylenders and traders in another. (Kothewala, 1923 and Bristow, 1928) Also the Satara Gazetteer (447-616) of the 1880s had described in detail many of the larger villages and towns of the district, showing that especially in the south (including two of the talukas surveyed and most of those affected by the rebellion of 1919-21) there were significant groups of moneylenders and traders, including Brahmins and Marwari-Gujar moneylenders. The Brahmins in this district had a propensity to invest in land, and the bulk of the unskilled labour of the district was constituted by Kunbis, Dhangars, Vadars, Ramoshis, and Mahars. The erstwhile prosperous peasants had
by the 1920s become indebted and now worked as field labourers and tenants on the lands that formerly belonged to them. (Omvedt, 1976)

The revolt of tenants against Brahmin and Marwaris (and occasionally non-Brahmin) landlords in association with the Satyashodhak movement took place first through non-cooperation and boycott of cultivating their lands and providing them services; and later through violence. One of the reasons for the revolt was that the Satyashodhak ideology through the activities of the AIMEC had in some ways already conscientised the masses. Thus, it is not surprising that here if anywhere the Satyashodhak movement would take on the characteristic of peasant rebellion.

In terms of extent, then, the rebellion covered a substantial portion of the plains areas of Satara district. Some understanding of developments are provided by citing a case is described in Vijayi ‘Maratha’ which appears atypical only in that it occurred in a village extremely close to Satara city.

"Magistrates Mercilessness; Peshwai Tyranny against Poor Peasants in the British Raj"; ...Karanje is a village that is part of Satara city. Land is good, and since it is near the city it is very natural that Brahmins should cast their eyes upon it. ‘Maratha’ land began to be grabbed by the Brahmins: the priestly game had begun. Then Satyanarayan pujas became plentiful in the village. Quarrels and disputes came as the harvest of the seed of Kulkarni tricks, and non-Brahmins suffered. Religious superstition, ignorance, illiteracy, poverty resulted in terrible indebtedness... Brahmin land rent had greatly soared—they were taking 2/3 and 3/4 of the crop and the rest went to the moneylender! No profit remained to the peasants-then they decided they did not want such a low contract on Brahmin lands. In this way the Satyashodhok Samaj freed them from every type of Brahmin slavery...Then a criminal case was brought against the leaders...There were accusations that on 1 December 1921 fields had been burned and crops carried away, that women were insulted. But there were no witnesses.” (Vijayi Maratha; 17th April, 1922; 1)

The subtle state support to the rebellion is best understood through the District Collector, E. E. Moysey, reference to violence involving the peasants,

“I am far from denying that crimes have been committed against Brahmins, but experience gained in the enquiries shows that acts of
violence have been committed against them not as Brahmins but as unpopular landlords or moneylenders, and that Brahmins in a village against whom no grievance has been felt have generally been allowed to live in peace... A movement is now developing not to pay more than half the gross produce as rent instead of the 2/3 or 3/4 as has been the custom hitherto. Most of the non-cultivating, landlords being Brahmins, they believe that the movement and the consequent boycott of their lands... is directed against them as a class.” (District collector of Satara report, 1922; 5).

The Satyshodk Samaj activists who arranged tamashas (local form of street plays) frequently gained support from “Maratha” cultivators- in terms of housing, food and other miscellaneous services. In connection with the general power struggle, the peasants of Satara were for the first time able to get at least a degree of higher-level support. Brahmins had the advantage of a legal system that gave them full rights against their tenants and one that was further heavily staffed with Brahmin magistrates and clerks. Against this, non-Brahmins could appeal to relatively friendly British administrators, such as Moysey, the Collector, who had a reputation of being friendly with non-Brahmins, and Baskerville, who had testified in the Karanje case on behalf of the tenants. Satara, furthermore, had evidently the only ‘Maratha’ deputy collector in the presidency in Duduskar, who had been involved in ‘Maratha’ educational organizations and was accused of favoring the Satyashodhaks in allowing tamasha performances to be held. (Gokhale, 1935 in Jagrut Satara; 107-108) As Omvedt argues,

“The rebellion also illustrates the interaction of cultural and economic factors in revolt. Cultural interests of anti-Brahminism helped to provide some upper-class support that made it possible for lower classes to rebel in Satara. But the significance of cultural rebellion goes beyond this. While the motive of the uprising was at base economic, the special role of cultural tradition has to be taken into account. The power of an elite (and Brahmin landlords were the highest elite of India’s traditional caste structure) is based on religious sanctions and long-accepted prestige, i. e., cultural hegemony as well as economic and political power. Poor peasants required a sense of right on their side and an ideology that rejected this status.” (Omvedt, 1976; 222)
Period from 1930 till 1947

In this period the "Maratha" actors such as Keshavrao Jedhe, Shakarrao More, Javalkar, Jadhavrao tried to influence the production of colonial discourse on the "Maratha’s", through campaigning before census operations. They attempted, through conferences and articles in various newspapers just before the census survey of 1931, to persuade the broader Kunbi population to return itself not as Kunbi but only as "Maratha":

“All literate Maratha people know that in the census times many illiterate villagers call their caste ‘kulvadi’ or ‘kunbi’ rather than Maratha. Except for Leva Kunbis in Khandesh, all those who call themselves ‘Kunbis’ or ‘kulvadis’ in Maharashtra, Konkan, Berar etc. are of Maratha caste. Only out of ignorance do people not call themselves Marathas. Educated ‘Maratha’s should clearly inform any ignorant Maratha... The days of the rule of wealth have gone and the day of the rule of numbers has come: we hope our educated Maratha society will remember this.” (Satyavadi 22nd February 1931)

In the 1930s, younger non-Brahmins, increasingly unhappy with the Non-Brahmin party’s loyalism and influenced by socialist ideas, established links with Gandhian Congressmen and entered nationalist politics. Jedhe’s efforts in particular led Congress membership to soar from 45,915 members in 1936 to 1,56,894 the next year. Rural participation was certainly higher during Civil Disobedience and the Quit India movements than in the non-cooperation struggles of the 1920s; official daily and weekly reports from across Maharashtra suggest that this move of non-Brahmins towards nationalism was certainly crucial to the Congress’ success in rural mobilisation. The Congress tapped into the rural networks built by the non-Brahmin movement in the 1920s: following Jedhe’s move, to cite just one example, the party was able to capture an unprecedented 10 out of 11 district local boards in Bombay in 1935. (O’Hanlon, 1986)

From the 1930 civil disobedience campaign onwards, Jedhe became a nationalist leader, touring with Gadgil throughout the Marathi speaking provinces. Gandhi’s success in dealing with peasant issues and his means of Satyagraha began to attract the young non-Brahmin activists towards the Nationalist cause. Jedhe
along with his close Pune associates such as Shankarrao More, Shripatrao Shinde, and Baburao Jagtap, non-Brahmin Satyashodhak leaders like Keshavrao Bagade, A. B. Latthe and Bhaurao Patil among many others. Many older non-Brahmin leaders remained loyalists or independents, but they frequently encouraged younger leaders to join the national movement. Even in Vidarbha, where the non-Brahmin movement merged officially into Congress only in 1938, Jedhe played an important role: he and Gadgil were chairman and vice-chairman respectively of a non-Brahmin conference in 1932, and Jedhe was invited to preside over the final meeting in which non-Brahmins resolved to merge with Congress. Jedhe and Gadgil were elected together to the Central Legislative Assembly in 1934, and for a long time Jedhe was the only non-Brahmin on the Maharashtra Pradesh Congress Committee. (Omvedt, 1976)

This was also the period when two important movements arose- the first was the communist movement and the second the Dalit movement under the leadership of Ambedkar. The ‘Maratha’ leadership only sparingly participated in both these movements and continued to pursue their interests through the Congress even though it was dominated by the Brahmins. The reasons for this were twofold. The first was that the ‘Maratha’ leadership had by the early 1930s realized that with the Kunbis being included within the ‘Maratha’ fold they had the support of the largest group in the peasantry. The second reason was ideological- the ‘Marathas’ could not join Ambedkarite movement because they still professed a ‘kshtriya’ ideology (simultaneously with the peasant imaginings). Also the ‘Marathas’ recognized the opportunities that the Congress offered. Similarly the ‘Marathas’ did not get involved in the communist party agenda as it would go against their landed interests. The fact that the Congress could offer a socialist vision also prodded the ‘Maratha’ peasantry to side with the Congress rather than with the Communist party.

While Jedhe was forming a relationship with Gadgil, his militant Satyashodhak colleague and a ‘Maratha’, Dinkarrao Javalkar, was becoming involved with the working class movement and with Communists in Bombay city. Javalkar emerged
The Communist Party of India (CPI) founded in 1920 began efforts to build a party organization in India. M.N. Roy made contacts with Anushilan and Jugantar groups in Bengal. Small communist groups were formed in Bengal (led by Muzaffar Ahmed), Bombay (led by S.A. Dange), Madras (led by Singaravelu Chettiar), United Provinces (led by Shaukat Usmani) and Punjab (led by Ghulam Hussain). The British colonial authorities had banned all communist activity, which made the task of building a united party very difficult. Between 1921 and 1924 there were four conspiracy trials against the communist movement.

The communist movement in the Bombay Province remained within the working class and failed to make an impact on the peasant movement at least until the late 1940s. The primary reason for this was the approach followed by the communist leaders. The early communist leaders in Bombay Presidency led by Dange believed that the first step of the party should be to organize the industrial working class and only later should the party target the peasant and landless classes. The other reason was that the communist party represented an intellectual urban based Brahmin dominated organization. With this kind of a reputation it had become difficult to haul in the Non-Brahmin activists. The non-Brahmins activists considered the communist party to be antithetical to its interests.

Thus the communist party began its mobilization in Bombay city amongst the labouring classes. Even here it found it difficult to mobilize the ‘Maratha’ workers initially. Among the ‘Marathas’ of Bombay, distinctions between actors who claimed to have aristocratic heritage and those with mere peasant heritage came to the fore. Also regional barriers such as distinctions between ‘Marathas’ from the Konkan and ‘Marathas’ from the Deccan continued to be important well into the 1920s. Thus the earliest ‘Maratha’ organizations represented separately the ‘Deshashtha’ and ‘Konkanastha’ ‘Marathas’; these had managed to unite in
1912 in the ‘Kshatriya Maratha Dnyatisamaj’, but this remained an organization dominated by aristocrats, with its office in the wealthy area of Girgaum and with activities including preparation of lists and biographies of Kshatriya ‘Marathas’. In contrast, a ‘Maratha’ Samaj founded in 1896 included reformist leaders like R. S. Asavale, Bapurao Avte, Laxmanrao Thosar and Vasudevrao Birze, this organization considered *Din Bandhu* and *Barodavatsal* as affiliated newspapers and aimed at unity, education and social reform, but evidently did not survive for long. Instead localized organizations, including organizations of Marathas from one district, continued to predominate. (Omvedt, 1976)

In Bombay, two major labour movements emerged- one was the Girni Kamgar Mahamandal which was upper class, non-worker leadership based organization and the other was Girni Kamgar Union (GKU) mill committees of 1928-29. The other was the Communist movement known to the workers as the Lal Bavta or ‘Red Flag’ union.

The Girni Kamgar Mahamandal came to the fore as a mill workers’ organization during the 1923 strike. At this time it claimed a membership of 900 in 17 mills, but grew to a strength of 3500 - 4000 in 1926 and 1927. Two non-manual workers were initially involved as leaders: Mayekar, a Bhandari clerk and storekeeper who had organized a rather nominal Girni Kamgar Sangh in 1919, and D. A. Bhatavdekar, a Brahman jobber. Most of its other members were actual laborers and mainly ‘Marathas’ and allied castes.

Most important of these militant worker leaders were A. A. Alve, a member of the Vani (local traders) community, and G. R. Kasle, a ‘Maratha’. Both had been originally tenant farmers in the Konkan, and though driven by poverty to seek work in the mills maintained their relations with the villages; Alve had made attempts to form tenant organizations. Both had come up from the ranks as workers but had previous political experience. Kasle had attended the first All-India Trade Union Congress and Alve had taken part in Congress campaigns during the non-cooperation movement but had become disillusioned. lvii
This was a period in which radical tendencies in rural areas were being wooed by a seeming responsive Congress leadership symbolized by Gandhi and activated by men like N. V. Gadgil. Though the Communists had no rural basis to counteract this, they had established an urban basis alliance with similar militancy among the working class, but this was temporarily thrown away. And upper class non-Brahman and Congress leadership was ready to move in. When Nehru visited Bombay in 1930 after serving as president of the AITUC in Nagpur, Govindrao Shinde presided over the mass workers meeting that honoured him. Mansingrao Jagtap, who also spoke at the meeting, recalls it as having been a non-Brahman, anti-Communist effort.

Javalkar a close associate of Jedhe was the only exception, who wanted to inaugurate a peasant movement using the organization of the CPI. However He was unsuccessful in establishing an organizational base around Poona, where the Jedhes were dominant, but important beginnings were made in the Nagpur-Vidarbha area. Here, where he had earlier established contacts, he began to draw a younger group of non-Brahmans around him. One member of the group reports that at that time the ideology of the Communist party and notions of a kisan-kamgar or shetkari-kamgar (peasants-workers) party were catching hold, that Javalkar was forming a group within the non-Brahmin Party to develop it into an organization with a well-defined constitution, an anti-capitalist ideology, and a new flag featuring a plough as its symbol. Bhole (2010) argues that the notion of a ‘peasants and workers’ party in one sense looked back to the just recently rejected Comintern policy of forming Workers’ and Peasants’ Parties; in other ways it forecast the actual formation of such a party nearly twenty years later (the Shetkari Kamgar Paksh) by the very non-Brahman leaders who had originally joined Congress in the 1930s. In 1930, before Congress hegemony had really been established in the Deccan, the formation of such a party might have made a more significant impact. (Bhole, 2010)

The ‘Maratha’ leadership under the ageis of Jedhe and his colleagues not only distanced themselves from the Communist parties in the early 1930s but also from
another political and social movement led by Dr. Ambedkar. As a leading Indian scholar, Ambedkar had been invited to testify before the Southborough Committee, which was preparing the Government of India Act 1919. At this hearing, Ambedkar argued for creating separate electorates and reservations for Dalits and other religious communities. In 1920, he began the publication of the weekly Mooknayak (Leader of the Silent) in Mumbai. Attaining popularity, Ambedkar used this journal to criticize orthodox Hindu politicians and a perceived reluctance of the Indian political community to fight caste discrimination. His speech at a Depressed Classes Conference in Kolhapur impressed Shahu, who shocked orthodox society by dining with Ambedkar. Ambedkar established a successful legal practice, and also organised the \textit{Bahishkrit Hitakarini Sabha} to promote education and socio-economic uplifting of the depressed classes. In 1926, he became a nominated member of the Bombay Legislative Council. By 1927 Dr. Ambedkar decided to launch active movements against untouchability. He began with public movements and marches to open up and share public drinking water resources; also he began a struggle for the right to enter Hindu temples. He led a Satyagraha in Mahad to fight for the right of the untouchable community to draw water from the main water tank of the town. He was appointed to the Bombay Presidency Committee to work with the all-European Simon Commission in 1928. This commission had sparked great protests across India, and while its report was ignored by most Indians, Ambedkar himself wrote a separate set of recommendations for future constitutional reformers. (Zelliot, 1990)

By the late 1920s Ambedkar had become one of the most prominent untouchable political figures of the time. He had grown increasingly critical of mainstream Indian political parties for their perceived lack of emphasis for the elimination of the caste system. Ambedkar criticized the Indian National Congress and its leader Mohandas (Mahatma) Gandhi, whom he accused of reducing the untouchable community to a figure of pathos. Ambedkar was also dissatisfied with the failures of British rule, and advocated a political identity for untouchables separate from
both the Congress and the British. At a Depressed Classes Conference on August 8, 1930 Ambedkar outlined his political vision, insisting that the safety of the Depressed Classes hinged on their being independent of the Government and the Congress. (Zelliot, 1990)

In this speech, Ambedkar criticized the Salt Satyagraha launched by Gandhi and the Congress. Ambedkar’s criticisms and political work had made him very unpopular with orthodox Hindus, as well as with many Congress politicians who had earlier condemned untouchability and worked against discrimination across India. This was largely because these “liberal” politicians usually stopped short of advocating full equality for untouchables. Ambedkar’s prominence and popular support amongst the untouchable community had increased, and he was invited to attend the Second Round Table Conference in London in 1931. Here he sparred verbally with Gandhi on the question of awarding separate electorates to untouchables. A fierce opponent of separate electorates on religious and sectarian lines, Gandhi feared that separate electorates for untouchables would divide Hindu society for future generations. (Zelliot, 1990)

When the British agreed with Ambedkar and announced the awarding of separate electorates, Gandhi began a fast unto-death while imprisoned in the Yeravada Central Jail of Pune in 1932. Gandhi’s fast provoked great public support across India, and orthodox Hindu leaders, Congress politicians and activists such as Madan Mohan Malaviya and Palwankar Baloo organized joint meetings with Ambedkar and his supporters at Yeravada. Finally Ambedkar succumbed to the pressure.

In all these contestations of Ambedkar with the Nationalists, the ‘Maratha’ leadership remained aloof. It was only during specific societal interventions that questioned and weakened Brahmin domination that they participated- such as the Satyagraha at Mahad in 1927 and the temple entry at Parvati in Pune in 1929.
Period from 1947 to 1960

The ‘Maratha’ leadership in the late 1920s had impressed upon the peasantry, the importance of forming a single united peasant caste having common objectives and aspirations one of which was to challenge Brahmin domination. Thus the Kunbis enumerated themselves in the 1931 census of the Bombay Presidency as ‘Maratha’s. By late thirties a few ‘Maratha’s joined the Indian National Congress but a majority of them remained outside it. And yet by early forties in some provinces within the Presidency (especially Satara) members of ‘Maratha’ and Kunbi castes participated in large numbers in the nationalist struggle by forming peasant committees (formed the Toofan Sena in Satara district). The organisations such as the various peasant committees such as Toofan Sena were the precursors to the Peasants and Workers Party (PWP) established in 1948. This party grew out of another party called the Brahminetar party (a non-Brahmin party) founded in 1920 with the objective to organise the non-Brahmin castes (Bahujan Samaj) vis-à-vis the Brahmins. It had the background of the non-Brahmin movement and the ideas of Phule. The Brahminetar party organised the non-Brahmin castes to confront the Brahmin leadership who by now had come to dominate the Nationalist movement. (Bhole, 2010)

The Peasants and Workers Party (PWP) consisted of medium and small peasants predominantly belonging to the ‘Maratha’ community. The leadership of the PWP consisted of ex-Congressmen who were not comfortable with the urban based Congress party dominated by Non-Marathi speaking and Brahmin elements. They perceived that since the Congress party leadership was urban based, the interests of the peasantry could never be promoted. The PWP acquired importance in the late 1950s through active participation in the Samyukta Maharashtra Movement (SMS) that emerged, to demand a separate united unilingual State for the Marathi speaking masses.

The PWP remained a party of small and medium peasants and was influenced by left and Marxist ideology. In 1949, the Navjivan group (which was a splinter
group of the CPI) joined the PWP. As the PWP was dominated by 'Marathas' (and at this point of time 'Maratha' also came to connote a peasant imaginary) most of the issues revolved around protecting interests of the medium and small peasants. No wonder Bhole (2010) argues that the rural based leadership of the PWP highlighted the problems of the small and medium peasants and yet at its core it remained a political party that in fact represented the interests of the 'Marathas'. Thus we can conclude that the establishment of the PWP by the 'Maratha' elite was the first step that led to the emergence of the 'Maratha'-Kunbi caste cluster as a political bloc.

Y.B. Chavan records in his memoirs that the Congress' entry into these institutions through the nomination and election of non-Brahmin Congressmen was crucial to the party's rural base; importantly, it paved the way for 'Maratha' rural leaders to gradually displace older, Brahmin Congressmen. (Chavan, 1984; 172, 176, 229) The non-Brahmin movement, despite all its caste and economic differentiation, had always shown a greater inclination towards voicing rural issues and grievances than the urban, Brahmin Congress; its pro-peasant rhetoric in this mass phase went a long way in giving the Congress party itself a rural face, and the 'Marathas' an edge in the new nationalist politics. It was this new nationalist rural 'Maratha' leadership and its networks built through non-Brahmin activism that spearheaded the parallel government of Satara during the 1942 Quit India movement. The movement thrived on underground networks and overwhelming popular support from the local peasantry, with one of the largest concentration of 'Maratha's. It also propelled younger 'Maratha' leaders such as Nana Patil and Chavan himself, with their experience of grassroots political activity, into prominence in the Congress party in the 1940s; this experience and contact with rural networks was crucial to the 'Maratha' predominance in electoral politics following Independence.
Land reforms and its impact on the ‘Marathas’

In the period immediate to independence India was overwhelmingly agrarian. The situation in the countryside was characterized by deep poverty and in some regions was sharply polarized between the landlords and the marginal peasant and the landless. Thus in the years immediately following India’s independence, a conscious process of nation building looked upon problems of land with a pressing urgency. Three important components of land reform were deemed to be major policy interventions with the objective of ushering in a socialist pattern of rural development through redistribution of land. These included: (1) the abolition of intermediaries; (2) tenancy reforms; (3) fixing ceilings on land holdings. (Bhuskute 2002)

What were the implications of the land reforms of mid 1950s on the growth and consolidation of the ‘Maratha’ in the erstwhile bilingual Bombay Presidency and the Marathwada and Vidarbha regions that constitute present day Maharashtra? In 1947, three broad types of land tenurial systems: the Zamindari, Ryotwari, and Mahalwari prevailed in the different constituent regions of Maharashtra, namely, Marathwada, Western Maharashtra and Vidarbha. While the dominant type of land tenure in the Bombay Presidency had always been Ryotwari, which was based on a direct relationship between the cultivator and the state, at independence, a multitude of intermediary tenures, including political Inams or fiefdoms called variously as Malgujari, Izardari, Khoti, and Jagirdari, controlled large parts of Marathwada, Vidarbha, Konkan and some parts of Western Maharashtra. (Brahme, 1979)

The Ryotwari land tenurial system introduced during colonialism in Western Maharashtra and Konkan regions continued in 1950s. In this system the actual cultivators of the land were by and large recognised. Also, the land holding pattern (i.e. average agricultural land per rural person) in this region was not grossly skewed as in the others. Land was well distributed and members of the ‘Marathas’ owned most of the land, as they constitute the largest proportion of
population of this region. Marathwada, before its amalgamation into Maharashtra was part of the Nizam territory of Hyderabad. The Jagirdari from of tenurial system existed in this region.

The Jagirdars or Zamindars (land owners of large tracts of land similar to feudal lords possessing fiefdoms) predominantly belonged to the Brahmin and ‘Maratha’ castes and held vast tracts of land given to them by the erstwhile rulers of this region for their military support and also as rewards by the Nizam (the erstwhile ruler of Hyderabad State prior to its capture through police action by the Indian government in 1956). During the colonial period the British government institutionalized their claim over ownership of land. They served as revenue collectors, for the colonial masters and in return received a small proportion of the revenue. However after independence in 1950 this system was abolished and almost the entire region was brought under the Ryotwari system. Contrary to the popular expectations the Ryotwari system furthred in legitimizing the land ownership claims of the Jagirdars/Zamindars as this system as seen earlier epitomized the principle of private ownership.

Similarly, in Vidarbha the Malgujari (another from of Zamindari) system existed. They were the middlemen appointed by the British to collect taxes. They collected revenue of the whole village and paid a stipulated portion to the government. The government vested the proprietary rights of the whole village in this Malgujar. As a result all the cultivators of the village automatically became the tenants of the Malgujars. Soon after independence this system was abolished under the ‘abolition of intermediaries act’ (Bhuskute, 2002, Brahme, 1979, Roy 1989; 291).

Keeping in mind the skewed nature of agrarian practices laws were enacted in the Bombay Presidency, Central Provinces and Hyderabad States in the same time period designed to abolish the interests of the varied group of intermediaries. The legislation significantly reduced forced labour, serfdom, and other forms of oppression prevalent in the provinces, and compelled the Jagirdars/Inamdars to
give up land to the erstwhile large tenants, most of whom belonged to the 'Marathas'.

A section of these beneficiaries augmented their social status and, more gradually, increased political power. The abolition of intermediaries led to the formation of a new entrepreneurial class of large tenants who predominantly belonged to the 'Marathas'. This mobile section of large tenants now allied with the erstwhile land owning class (who were the elite 'Maratha' members) and shared power by entering electoral politics and thus became the elite. Overtime this 'Maratha' elite section supported the promotion of commercial agriculture like the cultivation of sugarcane crop. They also sponsored institutions like the co-operatives and pressurized the government into taking a pro-agrarian stance. It is important for us to remember that only the large and medium tenants benefited out of the abolition of intermediaries, the small and marginal peasants were left out of this process of consolidation. (Brahme and Upadhya, 1979)

The Land Tenancy act promoted the interests of the large and medium tenants. The losers were the small tenants and share croppers. This class to a great extent overlapped with the elite section of the 'Maratha'-Kunbi caste cluster. Thus the abolition of intermediaries and the land tenancy act led to further stratification amongst the 'Maratha' and Kunbi caste, by forming a new class of landed elite. (Brahme and Upadhya, 1979, Bhuskute, 2002)

An estimate by Brahme and Upadhaya (1979) suggests that the owner-cultivators with holdings large-size categories and the medium were disproportionately drawn from the rich 'Maratha's. A class division thus became conspicuous between the rich and poor 'Marathas'. Thus it becomes clear that after the land reforms of the 1950s a section within the 'Maratha' caste emerged as the rural economic elite. Further later land reforms also demonstrate that the rich 'Maratha' elite consolidated its economic position by early 1960s and later translated this dominance into political hegemony.
What is more, the ‘Maratha’ elite were aided by the loopholes in the Maharashtra Agricultural Land Reforms (Ceiling on Holdings) Act, 1961, which was enacted to serve the common good through the imposition of a maximum limit on the holding of agricultural land in the State, the acquisition of land in excess of the ceiling, the distribution of surplus land to the landless and other persons. The Land Ceiling Act was skillfully manipulated by the entrenched ‘Maratha’ elite in order not to displease the landed gentry that constituted the bulk of its support base in the State. Rather it resulted in consolidation of land in the hands of the rich ‘Maratha’ peasantry, many of whom soon due to their economic prosperity entered politics and became part of the State leadership. Thus legislation regarding abolition of intermediaries and land tenancy led to the emergence of a new landed ‘Maratha’ elite, which later protected and promoted its interest through the land ceiling act. This is borne by the fact that in 1952 the Bombay Presidency legislature consisted of only 21% of landlord and cultivators and soon enough by the year 1962 the percentage increased to 41% of the total legislature.

This elite consolidated its political position by participating in the Samyukta Maharashtra Movement and mobilising the ‘Maratha’ peasantry. In fact the mobilisation for the Samyukta Maharashtra acted as a catalyst in the formation of the ‘Maratha’-Kunbi political bloc which came to dominate the politics in Maharashtra in later years. (Lele, 1990, Khekale, 1999)

‘Marathas’ in Samyukta Maharashtra Movement (SMM)

The Samyukta Maharashtra Movement emerged at the eve of independence and demanded the creation of a separate administrative unit for Marathi speaking people in the Bombay State. The latter consisted of two regions, one Marathi speaking and the other Gujarati speaking with Bombay as the capital. The Non-Marathi speaking elite dominated Bombay city.

The SMM became popular in the mid fifties with the passage of the State Reorganization Act of 1956 that recognized the need for creating States on lingual grounds. S.M Joshi, a Socialist from Poona, took over the leadership of SMM in
1956 and gave it a new direction. The leadership demanded State intervention to address rural problems, which until then was neglected at the cost of urban development. Subsequently, when it realised that the State leadership was not forthcoming, it enlarged its demand to campaign for the formation of a unilingual State of Maharashtra with Bombay as its capital.

The demand for the formation of a separate Marathi speaking State was grounded on recognition that there existed an extreme economic disparity between rural Marathi speaking masses and urban non-Marathi speaking elite. The rural situation in the bilingual State of Bombay in the decade of early 1950s was dismal and it was worse in the geographical area that constitutes present day Maharashtra (Gadgil Report, Government of Maharashtra, 1960:1-2). Thus the SMM advocated an agrarian path of development in order to reduce rural inequalities. This recognition led them into direct conflict with the existing urban-based non-Marathi speaking elite in the Congress party (Pendse, 1965).

Consequently the SMM leadership formed a political party called the Samyukta Maharashtra Samiti (SMS) which united disparate non-Congress political parties such as Praja Socialist Party (PSP), Communist Party of India (CPI), Peasants and Workers Party (PWP), Republican Party of India (RPI), Jan Sangh and found support from groups such as landlords, peasants and landless along with the industrial worker (Phadke, 1979 and Lele, 1990; 167).

As Lele argues

"In Western Maharashtra a recognition had come during this period among Maratha (and Brahmin) elites both inside and outside the Congress, that in the final analysis none of the various interests in Maharashtra could be fostered fully while power was being shared with leaders from Gujarat and, Bombay and Karnataka.” (Lele, 1990: 167)

The socialists who were mainly Brahmins dominated the SMS in the initial period (1956 to 1958) of its existence. By the end of 1958, the reins passed on to the PWP dominated by the ‘Maratha’s and the socialists took the back seat. The ‘Maratha’ leadership broadened its base and appeal such that the peasantry
entered the movement in great numbers. It also led the movement to become radical and confront the urban-based elite of the Congress party in Bombay. Henceforth the movement targeted the urban based non Marathi speaking elite more vehemently and coined a new slogan of self identity: as movement against ‘Shetji and Bhattji’, (the Shetji’s were the traders or the Marwaris, Gujarati’s and other business elite based mainly in Bombay and the Bhattjis’ represented Brahmins who were part of the Congress leadership, which did not agree with the idea of forming a separate Marathi State).

This identity got further heightened when Morarji Desai, a Gujarati (the then Chief Minister of the bi-lingual Bombay State) with the support of central government attempted to pass a legislation making Bombay city a centrally administered territory, thereby ignoring the demand of SMS to make Bombay the capital of Maharashtra. The Marathi speaking masses were now mobilised in rural and urban areas to articulate their displeasure by organising rallies (Pendse, 1965)

N.D Patil, a well-known socialist leader in an interview reminisces about the political uncertainty of this period,

“The situation in Bombay had become highly explosive by the late 1950s. Strikes and bandhs had become a very common phenomenon. The industrial workers and casual labourers were largely Marathi speaking and the owners were mainly non-Marathi speakers like Gujarati’s, Marwaris, Parsi’s, and Sindhi’s. The growing economic disparity was one reason for the emergence of a strong identity discourse that subsequently precipitated into an agitation for a separate Statehood.”

The situation was further accentuated due to the growth and spread of Maha Gujarat Movement demanding a separate Gujarat with Bombay as its capital. When both sides realised that they had common interests the leaders of the Maha Gujarat Janta Parishad (Gujarat Peoples Congress) and Samyukta Maharashtra Samiti met in Pune and proposed the idea of separate States. (Pendse, 1965)

As mentioned above, the formation of the SMS was critical in the formation of the ‘Maratha’-Kunbi bloc. A key role in this formation was played by PWP, which represented the interests of this caste by articulating a programme for rural
development and promotion of rural leadership. A well thought coherent ideology of agrarian development proved a challenge to the Congress leadership, which became isolated politically. For through the PWP, the SMS had penetrated the rural areas and garnered support of the ‘Maratha’-Kunbi caste cluster. No wonder in the elections of 1958, the SMS defeated the Congress party (113 seats to 43) in Western Maharashtra. This was a triumphant moment for the Marathi speaking mass as for the first time they were able to defeat the well established Congress party. Though the Congress party performed poorly, it was able to form the government. However, this was a weak regime and thus when the party had to choose its leader; it decided to support a ‘Maratha’, Yashwantrao Chavan over other contestants (Lele, 1990; 168).

The election of Chavan turned out to be a stroke of fortune for the Congress. Y.B. Chavan earlier part of the PWP had played an active role in the freedom struggle. He came from a modest peasant background, was influenced by socialist and left ideologies and was politically ambitious. Within PWP, then dominated by established leadership, Chavan found it difficult to rise up. He thus saw an opportunity for rapid political advancement by joining the Congress Party and used his peasant appeal to make efforts to stem the PWP tide in favour of the Congress. As noted above the overwhelming support of the peasantry won the western Maharashtra region for PWP and SMS. (Lele 1990:52-55)

Chavan was the Chief Minister when the State of Maharashtra was formed on May 1, 1960. Though this was the victory of the SMS, the Congress attempted now to show that it was their efforts that gave the Marathi speakers a separate State with Bombay as its capital. Chavan further bolstered this perception by inviting the leaders of the ‘Maratha’-Kunbi caste from the PWP that dominated the Western Maharashtra region, together with ‘Maratha’ leaders from other regions such as Marathwada and Vidarbha, to join the government and the Congress Party and to ensure that the government remains sensitive to the cause of rural development. He also revolutionised the core principles of the party by
integrating the ideology PWP, that of agrarian development with the Nehruvian notion of development (Lele, 1982, 1990). In 1960 Chavan declared,

“Our Five year plans should stress on rural development. The priority of the State is to rejuvenate the agriculture sector. With this in mind, we have to modernize the agriculture and provide impetus to small-scale industrial growth. The above-mentioned goals will be given the utmost importance by the development authorities of the State. Agriculture based industrialization through the co-operatives would be the main goal of the State.” (Translation of a quote by Yashwantrao Chavan in Krishi Audyogic Samajachi Panchvees Varsh, Patil J.F and K. Patil 1985; 12)

This strategy of Chavan reaped benefits to the Congress party. The Congress won the elections in 1962 with an overwhelming majority. Two notable implications that can be drawn from Chavans’ actions - firstly by inducting leaders of the SMS and PWP by offering them positions of power in the government, and the party structure, he undermined the ‘Maratha’-Kunbi support of the PWP and SMS, which had by then become a threat to the Congress. And secondly, by accommodating some of the important ‘Maratha’ PWP leaders as well as some of the Socialist leaders, he was able to reduce the “urban” influence within the State Congress party. The ‘Maratha’ elite soon began consolidating power by entering the Congress party and by capturing important offices within the Co-operative and Panchayati Raj institutions. These three structures overtime became the institutionalised avenues of power. These structures were intrinsically interwoven into each other.