Consolidation and Rule of the ‘Marathas’

With the inauguration of the State of Maharashtra in 1960 a new political elite took over the reins. The peasant groups coalesced and fashioned a political bloc under the banner of ‘Marathas’ now displaced the erstwhile Brahmin and bourgeoisie (Shetji and Bhatji) elements in the Congress party. It was especially through the Samyukta Maharashtra Movement that the forceful expression of these peasant groups got organised first through the PWP and later through the State Congress party. This socially networked peasant group is popularly called as the Maratha-Kunbi caste cluster in the social science discourse. (Lele, 1982)

The ‘Marathas’ (‘Maratha’ caste cluster) through the Congress party took control of the state and fashioned new channels of political recruitment. They also organised new modes of distribution of resources. With the ideology of agrarian expansion as the primary developmental model, the Marathas inaugurated several state institutions to fulfil this objective. For instance, the co-operative movement was strengthened through state support, agricultural universities and colleges were inaugurated, animal husbandry and agricultural extension departments were expanded both in terms of man power and resources and agricultural industrialisation through the inauguration of processing units and agricultural training was part of this vision. (Baviskar, 1980)

The formation of State of Maharashtra was not an easy affair. It meant the amalgamation of distinct historical-cultural territories i.e. the former Nizam ruled territory (Marathwada) and the former Central Provinces (Vidarbha) together with the Marathi lingual territories of former Bombay Presidency. This merger meant that new actors got involved in the struggle for power and newer networks were organised. It is in this context that the ‘Marathas’ of Western Maharashtra seized state power. Lele (1982, 1990) argues that networked groups in other parts of the State and within the Western Maharashtra began to contest the ‘Maratha’ dominance over state resources. He further posits that the ‘Marathas’ of Western Maharashtra organised ways to accommodate these contending interest groups through the process of ‘patriarchal’ (within the ‘Maratha’ group) and ‘partimonial’ (with other interest groups). But accommodationism was not
enough if the ‘Marathas’ had to maintain rule over long periods of time. The question then is, how did the ‘Marathas’ manage to acquiesce other contending social formations? Lele (1982, 1990) argues that it is through hegemony that the ‘Marathas’ reinforce group solidarity by disseminating the ideology of a ‘common’ past.

It is in this context that Lele (1982, 1990) argues that this hegemony binds the disparate groups called ‘Maratha’ into a unified political bloc. This bloc according to him constitutes 31% of the total population of the State. Further, he contends that this political bloc is tightly knitted through kin relations, common historical relations, common cultural practices, common memories and experiences. Political scientists such as Palshikar (1994, 1996, 1998, 2002), Vora (1994, 1997, 1999, 2001) and Deshpande (1998, 2004) are informed by this logic.

In the post colonial period the field of power was structured through the democratic state in which electoral fortunes determined who would capture power. In this electoral system, one political party became the dominant party i.e. the Congress party. Scholars such as Kothari (1970), Frankel (1990), and Kohli (2001) have examined how power was structured through the ‘Congress System’.

Lele (1990) has argued that after independence in the bilingual State of Bombay, the Congress party came to be dominated by the scribal group (Brahmin caste as social science scholars term this social group) and the bourgeoisie members. These members were the urban based educated elite and much of the developmental funds of the state were directed towards the growth of the city. It was only aftermath of 1960, that new elite with a peasant mooring took control of the Congress party and the state. With newer opportunities, the upwardly mobile section of this peasant group now contested and bargained with each other to share power. Compromises and accommodationism was adopted as a means to retain and reproduce power. I argue that it is through the social imaginary of the peasantry that the new ‘Maratha’ elite ensured that alternate networks and groupings were either co-opted or annihilated so that no challenge to the existing order remained. With the repeated success perpetuating power, the notion that ‘Maratha’
can alone rule became so immanent that it got inscribed in the cognitive schema of the people and was naturalised.

In this chapter I argue that the ‘Marathas’ in the post-1960 controlled the field of politics (of power) and through it all the institutions of the state, including the cooperatives, Panchayati Raj institutions, entry into lower and middle level bureaucracy and other government schemes and programmes. Those individuals and groups that had the desirable networks, cultural and symbolic capital gained access to these institutions. This in effect meant suppression of the popular mass based movements of the marginalised sections. The upwardly mobile groups organised themselves on the basis of primordial identities that functioned as cultural and symbolic capital such as caste, kinship, language, region, ethnicity and religion, thereby masking their class interests.

The Consolidation of ‘Maratha’ political power took place under the leadership of Yashwantrao Chavan (the first Chief Minister of Maharashtra). He inaugurated the agenda of agrarian development, which entailed the nature of the field of power, and the specified the species of capital required. This ideology had identified two key institutions that could become the instruments for agrarian growth. These were the cooperatives and the Panchayati Raj. The ‘Maratha’ elite promoted these institutions and the used them to expand their influence. Over time these institutions inter-locked with each other thereby giving enormous power to those who controlled them. Below I examine the growth of the cooperative movement and analyse the expansion of Panchayati Raj, that is district level democracy in Maharashtra and explore how it facilitated the consolidation of the ‘Maratha’ rule

Co-operatives, Congress party and the ‘Maratha’ elite

The co-operative movement in Western India had its origin in the late Nineteenth century through the efforts of social reformers, Nationalist leaders and British officials who endeavoured to improve the economic conditions of the peasant and particularly to decrease his dependence on the rural moneylender. The Co-operative movement in Maharashtra has a long history beginning from the co-operative societies Act, 1904 that was instituted as a safety valve for the peasantry (a result of the 1875 Deccan riots that
witnessed a peasant revolt against the money lending communities). This was followed by the Co-operative Act of 1919 and of 1925. The latter was very comprehensive and it widened the base of the co-operative movement labourers and the low-income peasant groups. It also brought in the non-agricultural labourers and emphasised on raising the standard of living by promoting small industries in the co-operative sector. Its unique feature was adherence to the famous democratic principles of 'one man one vote', which gave a fillip to the progress of the movement. In 1937-38, V.L.Mehta and M.D.Bhansali submitted their report that recommended the reorganization of the co-operative movement in Bombay Province. As per their recommendations, the basis of the co-operatives was widened and the fields of utilities were widened. (Baviskar, 1980)

In the post-independence era, the Congress party came to be progressively represented by the 'Maratha' peasantry that envisioned and charted out a programme of comprehensive rural development. This development was to take place through the expansion of the co-operative sector. As per Sarayya Committee Report (1949), the government of Bombay Province tried to bring more than 50 percent of the villages as well as 30 percent of the rural population within the ambit of the reorganized primary co-operatives. In fact, by 1949-50, Bombay Provinces became the leading province in India in respect of government expenditure incurred on co-operation and the expansion of co-operative institutions. In 1953 a committee under the leadership of D.R.Gadgil (a leading Congressman and a member of the legislative assembly of Maharashtra) was constituted to suggest measures to revaluate and expand the credit cooperatives across the State. It recommended decentralisation of power and delegation of authority to the co-operatives such that the State level interference decreased. Similarly Gorwala (1960) committee recommended financial aid from the state to co-operatives in its initial stages of establishment so that they could overtime become self sustaining institutions. Further the committee recommended the setting up of bigger as well as self-sufficient cooperative credit societies in areas of 9 to 12 square miles, with a population of four to five thousands. Secondly, the Committee insisted on the distribution of loans to the peasants against their crops instead of their agricultural land. Furthermore, it recommended that the membership of the cooperative societies should be given to all
irrespective of their caste creed, religion or language. In the 1950s and 1960s Acts like the Bombay Debtors Relief Act, the Bombay Money Lenders Act, the Bombay Tenancy and Agricultural Lands Act were also passed which stimulated the development of the co-operative movement in this province. (Baviskar, 1980)

Table IV indicates the growth in the cooperative societies with its membership and the working capital in Maharashtra. It should be noted, while analysing the table that the figures for the period from 1956 to 1960 are the figures of the co-operative societies of the bilingual Bombay State. This table clearly shows as gradual rise in the co-operatives and its membership together with their coverage of the number of villages. The coverage was 53 percent in 1949-50. By the decade of 1970 it reached cent percentage coverage i.e. all villages in the State of Maharashtra were networked through the co-operative societies. What is pertinent is that these sugar cooperatives provided the ‘Maratha’ peasantry a stake in the developmental activities of the state.

But what are co-operatives? According to Baviskar (1980), co-operative institutions are similar to the ‘traditional’ communitarian networks where a group of people would till common land; sow seeds guard it and then divide the reaped benefits. The idea underlying co-operative development was to mobilise and organise the peasantry into collectivities through which sustainable development accrues. The groups organize themselves to cater to diverse interests, from housing societies, to industrial production to co-operative credit societies, to agriculture processing units, to marketing of agricultural produce amongst others. For instance in 1960 there were as many as 4.4 million share holders in these cooperatives and by mid- 1960s the figure touched 6.8 million. By mid 1970s there were almost 10 million peasant share holders who benefitted from this activity. Baviskar (1980s) argues that most of these stake holders were land owners (marginal, medium and large) and who claimed to belong to the ‘Maratha’ imaginary on the basis of their peasant cultural moorings. (Baviskar, 1980;15)

Lele (1982) argues that the field of co-operative institutions is one of the significant interest areas in the politics of Maharashtra. As this field interfaces and interacts with
the field of politics/power and behaves a conduit for political recruitment. For instance the number of ministers and legislators who represented this interest group speaks about its significance - on an average from 1960-1975, sixty percent of the legislators represented this sector. (Table V- a, b and c) The cooperatives promoted collective participation of small proprietors by harnessing their limited surplus resources to benefit all. Through these cooperative field a new mobile section of Western Maharashtra 'Marathas' leadership (or the new rural economic elite) emerged that viewed the co-operatives as a means to promote their philosophy of agro-based industrial development. With their encouragement, the co-operative sector expanded rapidly in the 1960s. They also sought to broaden the base of the Congress Party by extending their control over the co-operatives. Subsequently, these cooperatives became a significant source of recruitment of leadership in the politics of this State. As Chousalkar reasons,

"Though the co-operative movement began in the name of farmers and the co-operative institutions did help farmer in the irrigated areas, the movement was essentially dominated by the class of rich farmers, who established a close relationship with traders and businessmen in the urban areas. This class forged close links with the Bombay-based capitalists, but the slogan of 'power to villages' is mouthed to legitimise their authority." (Chousalkar, 1995; 35)

Scholars (Baviskar, 1980, Attwood, 1992, Sirsikar, 1970) have demonstrated that the co-operative overtime became an institution through which political mobilisation and patronage and power was organised. The co-operatives in time became the institution of the 'Marathas' (who could identity themselves as such either through kin relationships or through peasant or kshtriya heritage), primarily from the Western region of the State as that was the most advanced region in terms of economic development, political consciousness and also in terms of entrepreneurship.

Thus, soon after the formation of the Maharashtra State in 1960, under the aegis of the first Chief Minister of Maharashtra, Y.B. Chavan the ideology of agro-industrial development was inaugurated in the State. He encouraged the idea of development through the establishment of co-operatives with the hope of promoting agriculture, cottage industries, and education. By promoting such decentralised bodies, two
corollary objectives were attained - the first was the fashioning of a political channel that connected rural elites to the Congress party elite and the State elites and secondly, through these co-operatives (especially, sugar co-operatives) ensured a sustained funding for the Congress party. (Sirsikar, 1970, Lele, 1982)

Thus, throughout the 1960s Yashwantrao Chavan persuaded Congress leaders to join the co-operative movement - he liberally distributed positions of power to the leaders in the co-operative field who joined the Congress after 1960. The cooperative and peasant leadership prior to 1960 was with the PWP. By amalgamating various sections of the peasant leadership within the Congress fold, the dominance of the ‘Maratha’ peasantry was maintained in the ruling Congress party. It is very interesting to note that Y.B.Chavan and his ‘Maratha’ associates ensured that the ‘Maratha’ peasant interests operating through the co-operatives and Panchayati Raj institutions also provided a stable basis of political power in the State. (Chousalkar, 1995; 34-35)

With the co-operative field being dominated by the ‘Marathas’ since the 1950s, new groups organised to form alternate networks mobilizing actors through the use of ideology of caste. Social capital through alternate strategies were organised such as the ‘Bunkar Sahakari Samiti’ (co-operative society of weavers), ‘Sahakari Macchimar Samiti’ (co-operative society of fishermen), ‘Mali Sahakari Sakhar Karkhana’ (cooperative sugar factory of the gardeners) and the Lingayat Sahakari Karkhana (Lingayat cooperative factory) among others. However these efforts did not dent the ‘Maratha’ dominance in the field of power.

The co-operatives since the late 1960s proliferated the sphere of education, public health and village development. Some of the co-operative sugar factories in Western Maharashtra had established high schools, colleges, hostels, hospitals and other charitable institutions in their respective district and taluka areas encouraging the formation of civic associations. The ‘Maratha’ peasantry was now entering these fields in large numbers and getting new opportunities to be part of the ‘Maratha’ rulership.
In order to examine in depth how the ‘Maratha’ dominance in the co-operative sector was realised, we need to first examine what is the co-operative structure. There are three main types of types of agricultural co-operative societies in Maharashtra namely 1) Agricultural Marketing Co-operative Society 2) Credit co-operative society and 3) Agricultural processing co-operative society.

Of these the last two had a profound effect on the rural economy and the politics in the State. Within the processing co-operatives it was the sugar co-operatives that provided maximum political and economic leverage to the ‘Maratha’ elite and facilitated in their entrenchment in the political structure. Below I analyse the way each of these cooperatives sector expanded in the State of Maharashtra.

The main objective of the co-operative marketing bodies was that the peasantry should get fair value for the produce, the produce should be measured in a correct manner and that the farmer should get their payments on time. The Maharashtra State Agricultural Produce (Marketing Regulation) Act 1963 was enacted to regulate the Agricultural Marketing. The Agriculture Produce Market Committees (APMC’s) were established under this Act and it also provided for setting up of the Maharashtra Agriculture Marketing Board. These societies ensured that the produce was weighed correctly and the farmer got a fair price for his goods. These societies also ensured that deductions of loans extended to the small and medium farmer under various schemes were made and the farmers received the balance amount speedily. Similar co-operative sale-purchase unions at the Taluka (block level) level and the District level were created. The District level co-operative unions were placed under a unitary agency called the Maharashtra State Co-operative Marketing Federation, which regulated all co-operative marketing agencies in the State. (Baviskar, 1980)

Thus an elaborate marketing mechanism for marketing of agricultural produce of the peasantry provided the necessary political leverage for the ‘Maratha’ peasantry. The hierarchy within this institution opened up avenues of patronage through which political power was negotiated. With the backing of the State leadership this institution soon became a political arena- a network channel through which support bases were built up.
by the ‘Maratha’ elite, wherein favours and resources were disbursed in return for party and caste loyalty. The field of power/politics ensured that these avenues were regulated and to enter it one of the necessary elements was to exhibit a ‘Maratha’ identity. Those possessing the necessary cultural, social and symbolic capital necessary to be recognised as ‘Maratha’ had the potential to accrue state patronage.

Cooperative as an institutional framework was not new. In the colonial and even a few decades after independence, the ‘Maratha’ peasantry was dependent on the local trader/money lender for his credit requirements. Understanding this lacuna and learning its lesson during the Deccan riots, the colonial government had initiated measures for the installation of credit institutions in the region as far back as 1901. Then too it was the ‘Maratha’ peasant group that demanded this. Now in the early 1960s with the reigns of power in the hands of the ‘Maratha’ elite, they ensured that there would be no such repeat and that the development of their constituency (Maratha peasantry) would further ensure their legitimacy. Thus once in power, the ‘Maratha’ elite sponsored by way of financial assistance to these societies partially through State funds and partially by facilitating collection by expansion of membership through membership fees.

Unlike the marketing cooperatives, the credit co-operatives were organically stratified. At the lowest level (Taluka (block level) and village) were the Primary Agricultural Credit Societies (PACS), followed by the District Central Co-operative Banks (DCCBs) at the district level and finally all these were affiliated to the State level credit co-operative bank. With this hierarchy, the Maratha elite was able to achieve the following; a) members predominantly belonged to the peasantry (not only the ‘Maratha’ constituency but also other peasant and allied group members like the Dhangars, Malis, Vanjaris and Mahars among others. Thus they ensured that patronage flowed not only to their close kin and group members but also outside their close knit group, i.e., patriarchal and patrimonial patronage- b) allowed the ‘Maratha’ elite to streamline leadership from within the ‘Maratha’ imaginary and thus were able to create channels which was intrinsically linked from the grass root level to the State level leadership; ultimately facilitated pluralist politics. It was easy to mobilize organized peasant
shareholders who had common economic interests, thus these became large permanent support bases. (Lele, 1982)

In 1961 there were 18,998 PACS in the State and the total membership stood at 18,27,000. By 1971 the there was an increase both in the number (an increase of five percent) and membership (an increase of almost seventy one percent). However by 1981 smaller PACS were consolidated into larger units and therefore its number fell by nine percent but total membership increased by sixty-seven percent- of these eighty percent were controlled either directly or indirectly by influential members of the ‘Maratha’ community (Maharashtra State Government Statistics, 2001)

It is no wonder that scholars such as Chousalkar (1995) argue that the district central co-operative banks or D.C.C.Bs over a period of time became the epicentres of developmental activities in the district, because credit to peasants, processing units and to different development activities was disbursed through these institutions. It was through these institutions that the state came in direct contact with the rural populace which was the constituency of the state leadership. In 1960s the total number of such banks (located in each district) was twenty six. Members of the management committee are elected who then choose the chairman of the bank. The chairmanship of the bank usually was wrested by a ‘Maratha’ who had close allegiance to the Congressmen at the State level. Chousalkar has provided a fine illustration

“In the Sangli District Central Co-operative Bank, the main leader of the district, Mr. Vasant Dada Patil, decided that the D.C.C banks should be managed by Mr. Gulabrao Patil. Therefore, there was no factional struggle in the bank till 1980. During this period, Mr. Gulabrao Patil developed a network of supporters at the local level and established links with the State and the National leadership. He became the Chairman of the Maharashtra State Co-operative Federation in 1973 and Chairman of the Maharashtra State Co-operative Bank in 1980. In 1978-79, his political career gained an upward swing when he joined the Congress (I) against the wishes of Y.B. Chavan and Vasant Dada Patil. He forged an alliance with A.R. Antulay and became the President of the Maharashtra Pradesh Congress Committee (MPPC). He very narrowly missed the post of Chief Minister in 1982. Mr. Gulabrao Patil symbolised the power of district central co-operative banks
and was one of the most important leaders to come from that sector. He was allowed to enjoy monopoly power due to the then prevailing balance of strength of the different factions in the district” Chousalkar (1995; 36)

From 1960s onwards, many leading political leaders of the State, such as Vasant Dada Patil, Gulabrao Patil, Bhausaheb Thorat, Kisan Veer, Ratnappa Kumbhar and U. Gaikwad, occupied important positions in these banks. (Chousalkar, 1995; 35)

The total number of recruitments to the State-legislature from the DCCB leadership (chairman and directors) during the period of 1967 to 1972 was of the order of 32 seats (Table V- a, b, c and d). The credit societies were most developed in the Western Maharashtra belt as it was from this region that the co-operative movement had first begun and also because the peasantry of this region was involved in commercial agriculture that required investments.

However, the most important cooperative sector in terms of political mobilisation was that of the agricultural processing societies. These provided conduits to employ rural capital and labour, thereby securing reasonable returns to the primary producers. These societies are given financial assistance for setting up of processing units of Agricultural Produce like Ginning and Pressing in case of the cotton growers, oil mills, rice mills, fruit and vegetable units among a few. In the processing co-operatives it is essential to mention that the sugar co-ops and the cotton ginning and processing co-ops have been highly successful in the State more so the former.

The first sugar cooperative was formed in 1951 in Ahmednagar. It was called the Pravaranagar Sugar Co-operative. The inauguration of this sugar co-operative itself was a revolution of sorts not only in the Indian co-operative sector but also the Asian region. This co-operative was organized by Vitthalrao Vikhe-Patil and received guidance from Dr.Dhananjayrao Gadgil, an eminent economist and the cooperative expert Vaikunthbhai Mehta. This co-operative sugar factory set an example in the echelons of rural Maharashtra and inspired the formation of scores of other sugar-co-operatives in Maharashtra. Thus it set a starting point for not only the farmers to organize themselves but also brought fore the concept of rural leadership. Very soon the Warna-Nagar sugar cooperative was established in 1956 in Kolhapur district. Under the patronage of the
‘Maratha’ elite the sugar co-operatives grew consistently. By late 1960 fourteen and by 1970, thirty of them cropped up. By 1980, there were almost sixty of them and by the end of 1990 their number rose to over a hundred.

The sugarcane cultivators and small farmers are the members of sugar co-operatives. They become members by virtue of their shareholding in the factory. During the factory elections for the post of chairmanship they play a crucial role. As discussed earlier members of the ‘Marathas’ predominate, as they constitute the biggest chunk of an imagined group within the peasantry in the State. Also because this imagined group is predominant in the Western Maharashtra region (due to colonial context as discussed in chapter three) and also because this region is coterminous with the sugar co-operative belt. It is no wonder that scholars such as Baviskar (1980) and Attwood (1985) argue that an economically and politically dominant leader, a ‘Maratha’, usually holds the chairmanship unless some other group (caste) members control the co-operative. Even where the co-operative is collectively owned by members of other groups (castes), the ‘Maratha’ elite through the policy of accommodationism ensure that they have a say in certain matters.

As Attwood argues,

“The rise of the cooperative sugar factories involved a complex set of changes in the regional political system, including struggles over the balance of power between various castes and classes. The Marathas, as the most numerous landholding caste, under the leadership of the rising ‘sugar barons’, eventually prevailed in most of these struggles, but they often did so by forming coalitions with leaders from other castes. Moreover, the technical and economic constraints of sugar production compelled the Maratha leaders to attend to the interests of the small and medium scale cane growers who made up the vast bulk of the membership of the cooperative factories.”

(Attwood 1985; 74)

Political lobbying at the party level and the State level and endorsement from the higher ups for the post of chairmanship and board of directors is an innate characteristic of cooperative politics as these positions offer access to immense material resources that ultimately is used for expansion of patronage power.
As Chousalkar (1995: 35) explains

“The first few rounds of state politics are in fact played at the level of co-operatives, because in the rural areas, State politics, co-operative politics and Panchayati Raj politics are closely intertwined and are essentially mediated through the Congress Party. The factional struggle in the Congress Party politics reflected in the politics of co-operatives.”

Normally, a caucus controls every sugar co-operative and it is extremely difficult to dislodge that caucus from power. Overtime the chairmanship of some sugar co-operatives has become hereditary and these individuals occupying these positions have also been termed as sugar barons. Some of the prominent sugar co-operatives like the Shetkari at Sangli district, Panchganga at Ichalkaranji (Kolhapur district), Krishna at Karad district and Pravara at Pravara Nagar (Ahmednagar district) were controlled by four distinguished leaders of Maharashtra politics, Vasant Dada Patil, Ratnappa Kumbhar, Y.J. Mohite and Balasaheb Vikhe Patil respectively. Sugar co-operatives are really the sinews of political power. These sugar co-operatives are breeding grounds for assertion of leadership that eventually are resonated in the Congress party and State politics. (Chousalkar, 1995; 36)

Overtime these sugar barons move up the political ladder by virtue of their sheer control of the co-operative societies that themselves constitute large support bases. There were around ten sugar barons in the fifties and by early 1960s the figure had crossed twenty. The sugar co-operatives grew by over 245% in a period of a decade (1961-71) and by almost 110% in the period 1971-81, seventy percent of the Sugar cooperatives were established in the Western Maharashtra region. This in turn increased the political clout of the ‘Maratha’ elite of the Western Maharashtra region within the Congress party and the State legislature.

As Chousalkar (1995; 37) points out

“Normally, these sugar barons contest State Assembly or Lok Sabha elections and win their seats comfortably; for example, Vikhe Patil has been winning the Lok Sabha elections since 1971. Sometimes, these leaders are defeated in the elections; for example, Mr. Shankarrao Mohite lost in the assembly
elections of 1978. Mr. Kumbhar was defeated in the 1980 elections and Mr. Vishnu Pant Patil lost the Sangli by-election in 1986. But these are exceptions. Otherwise, even opposition leaders win the elections if they are supported by the sugar co-operatives. Govindrao Kalikate, Nagnath Naikwadi and P.K. Patil won elections to the State Assembly on the strength of their factories. Therefore, there is clamour for the establishment of sugar co-operatives among the political leaders, and in South Maharashtra, almost every Taluka (block level) has a sugar co-operative."

One of the most prominent sugar co-operative leaders was Vasant Dada Patil from Sangli district. He was made the MPCC chief in 1968-69 and by 1977 became the Chief-Minister- the first leader from this field. It was deemed to be a triumph for sugar co-operatives. Thus by 1972 there were fifty-four sugar co-operatives in Maharashtra. From the above discussion the relationship between State politics and the sugar co-operatives becomes clear. In the period from 1952-72, in all sixty-five sugar co-operative leaders were elected as either Members of Legislative Assembly (MLAs) or ascended to the positions of State Ministers. (Table V- c, d and e )

A regional analysis of location of sugar co-operatives points to the fact that 72 percent of them were concentrated in the Western Maharashtra region. This distribution continued to be skewed until the 1980s and even then Western Maharashtra accounted for three fourths of all the sugar co-operatives of the State. Marathwada accounted for another twenty three percent (23%) of total by this time and Vidharbha and Konkan together had less than 5% of the total. In early 1960s Ahmednagar had most number of factories (6) followed by Kolhapur (4) and then Sholapur, Nashik, Satara, Sangli and Pune (2 each). By mid 1970s Ahmednagar continued to top the table with 12 factories followed by Kolhapur (10), Sholapur with (7), Nashik with (5) and Sangli with (3). In all there were seventy sugar co-operatives by mid 1970s, an increase by over fifty co-operative since the late 1960s. According to Baviskar (1980; 226), the Marathas were able to entrench themselves in the co-operatives not only because they were significant in terms of numbers, but also because their close caste kinship and affinal linkages which was their collective cultural capital that when operatinalized got translated into social capital (through networking) at various levels of the administrative and political system.
Scholars (Baviskar, 1980, Lele, 1982, Sirsikar, 1994 and Khekale, 1999) have demonstrated that from the period, 1967 to 1972, almost sixty percent of the legislators (of the State Legislative Assembly) belonged to the co-operative sector also many Cabinet Ministers, Members of Parliament (Centre) and Zillah Parishad (district level) presidents hailed from this section. They have also demonstrated that this co-operative leadership overlapped with the ‘Maratha’ elite group and with the State Congress party. However I wish to go a step further and argue that it was the ‘Marathas’ from the Western Maharashtra region, which in particular, became the dominant group within the ruling political regime. As demonstrated in this section, the co-operative institutions were predominantly concentrated in the western region of the State as it had a head start in this field. Also, the sugar co-operatives, which as discussed earlier, emerged as the most influential of all processing co-operatives in terms of its patronage and which due to historical reasons were largely found in the western region of the State. Therefore it is little wonder that the ‘Marathas’ from this region emerged as the dominant political section within the elite and soon took over the leadership of the State Congress party and exerted their influence to State politics. This is borne out by the fact that the most influential leaders of the Maharashtra Pradesh Congress Committee (MPCC) were serving chairmen and office bearers of the cooperative sugar factories as well as the district and State-level cooperative institutions. [Table V(d) and V(e)]

Baviskar (1980), Attwood (1985) and Lele (19990) have argued that the political contestations that are played out at the level of the processing co-operatives such as the sugar co-operatives and of the credit co-operatives i.e. banks have a profound effect on the politics at the level of political party and also State politics. In turn the politics within the State is indirectly regulated through the party politics and especially so when the party is rather centralised and hierarchical in nature such as the Congress party of India. As all the co-operatives are governed by rules and regulations passed by the legislature, the State executive exerts sizeable influence on the functioning of the co-operatives. These scholars also argue that the parliament also exerts certain authority
over the functioning through various mechanisms though in an indirect manner. It is in this respect i.e. of the existing power relationship between the co-operative sector and the State and the Union government, that the co-operative leadership usually organises a strong pressure group within and outside the government so as to protect its interest.

As Chousalkar argues,

“For that purpose, a large number of co-operative elites came together and formed the sugar lobby under the leadership of Mr. Vasant Dada Patil in 1968-69, because they wanted to consolidate their gains and prevent the then Minister for Co-operation, Mr. Vinayak Rao Patil from making changes in the by-laws of the banks and factories. From then on Mr. Vasant Dada Patil and his politics symbolised the politics of the co-operative sector.” (Chousalkar, 1995;38)

Once in power, this section of the ‘Marathas’ from Western Maharashtra facilitated and promoted the entry of ‘Maratha’ leadership from Marathwada, Vidarbha and Konkan into the Congress party by offering them positions of influence manifest in the co-operative structures. Thus before long, as I have argued in this section, the cooperatives came to play the role of linkage structures between the legislative leaders, caste and the rural political elite, both, predominantly belonging to the ‘Maratha’ peasantry. Also, by binding the rural peasantry (akin to the ‘Maratha’ social imaginary) to the functioning of the cooperatives the ‘Maratha’ elite managed to create long-term support bases. The ‘Marathas’ of the western region, realised the potential of the co-operative sector and hence in due course, developed, expanded and promoted the Co-operative sector all over the State, with a motive of incorporating ‘Maratha’ leadership from the other regions into the Congress fold (Baviskar, 1980).

As seen in this section, over time the ‘Maratha’ elite encouraged and promoted the agrarian ideology thereby ensuring the interlocking of various sites of power and leadership of the processing co-operatives (especially, sugar industry) with leadership in financial institutions like district co-operative financial institutions and political institutions like Panchayati Raj (Local Self Government), so as to monopolize power. This political manoeuvre resulted in consolidation of a ‘Maratha’ group spanning
different regions of the State, though it was the the ‘Marathas’ of the western region that still remained the dominant group within the Congress party and thus ruled the State of Maharashtra.

Table V (a, b, c, d) illustrates the predominance of the ‘Maratha’ presence in the cooperative sector. In the period 1967 to 1972 almost eighty one percent (81%) of the cooperative leadership belonged to this caste cluster. As argued earlier, the control of these cooperatives gave the ‘Maratha’ elite access to the profits made by them, which were then distributed in exchange of patronage among ‘Marathas’ and other allied peasant groups. The coinciding nature of leadership of the Congress party, Cooperatives and the Panchayati Raj institutions resulted in complete dominance of the ‘Marathas’ in State politics.

It is no wonder that the State became sensitive to issues regarding rural development, which was related in its policies and programmes to strengthen the co-operative structure and also promote democratic decentralization by revamping the PRI structure. Thus, it becomes clear that the Congress party agenda and State policies to a great extent now reflected the interests of the co-operative leadership, which was inclined towards agricultural development. It is however pertinent to remember that the cooperative leadership overlapped with the leadership of the locally decentralize Panchayati Raj Institutions which espoused similar goals.

Organising Stakeholders and Peasant Networks: The Case study of the Poona Urban Cooperative Bank Limited

In this section I examine how the Poona Urban Cooperative Bank Limited (PUCBL, since 1991 it is called the “Pune Urban Cooperative Bank Limited) was organised in the year 1924 with the objective to cater to needs of the ‘Marathas’ and allied peasantry. The bank was inaugurated as ‘The Poona Cantonment Cooperative Credit society Limited’ by the teachers of Camp Education Society in Pune. One of the reasons I chose this as a case study was to examine how networking takes place and how various capitals, stakeholders and interests are safeguarded. What is more interesting is that the genealogy of this cooperative can be traced to the colonial period and even though it is
smaller in comparison to sugar cooperatives or to ‘modern’ state funded central district credit cooperative networks, it does give us an idea of how this cooperative functioned in urban locale to create stakeholders called the ‘Marathas’.

It is pertinent to provide a synoptic territorial division of the city of Poona during this period without which understanding this case study may become difficult. The city of Poona was basically divided into two broad categories- one was the British military Cantonment area (also called camp) and the other was the old ‘city’ area that was the main marketing and commercial centre of the city (the Central Business District or CBD). The ‘old’ city or the CBD was further divided into peths (smaller territorial areas named after the weekdays in Marathi, such as Somwar peth, Mangalwar peth among others).

The British inaugurated two large markets to cater to the needs of its military (and ancilliary staff who resided in the camp area such as tailors, barbers, washerman among others) and also in line with its governance policy for the benefit for other city dwellers. One market specialised in vegetables and was then called the Lord Reay market (which was in the post colonial period renamed as the Mahathma Phule Mandai). This market was popularly called as mandai by the indigenous actors (natives). The other market was inaugurated close to the Cantonment area called the Market yard (now renamed as Shri Chhatrapati Market Yard) also during the 1880s and specialised in the marketing of food grains and fruits.

The Poona Cantonment Cooperative Credit society Limited was organised in camp with the specific objective of enabling members of the Bahujan samaj to partake in the entrepreneurial activities and businesses. As the other communities already had cooperative banks that served the interests of its members such as the Cosmos cooperative bank (1906) that served the interests of the Brahmin community, Gokak Urban cooperative bank (1906) that specifically helped members of the Gokak Brahmins, The Saraswat Co-operative Banking Society (1918) that networked amongst the Saraswat Brahmins among some others.
The Poona Cantonment Cooperative Credit society Limited catered especially to the needs of artisan communities that were serving the colonial military. It disbursed loans to tailors, barbers, cobblers, washerman among others so that they could expand and modernise their enterprises. But its mainstay was the teachers of the Camp Education society who were its shareholders. As this cooperative credit society was within the urban limits it had certain restrictions, such that it could not lend money for agricultural purposes. It therefore had a limited clientele and reach. (Documents from the PUCBL and interviews with resource persons)

In 1943 the Poona Cantonment Cooperative Credit society limited was relocated to Market Yard was renamed as “The Poona Urban Cooperative Credit Society Limited” which was again in the year 1945 changed to ‘The Poona Urban Cooperative Bank Limited’ (PUCBL) when it was given permission to function in the capacity of a cooperative bank. (Documents from the PUCBL and interviews with resource persons)

It was with the relocation that the composition of the membership of the credit cooperative (later PUCBL) changed drastically. Now more and more of the casual labourers such as coolies (hamals who worked at market yard as daily wage labourers), peasants who would come to sell their goods (both at market yard and mandai), small peasant entrepreneurs among others came to be part of this cooperative. In the year 1945 the PUCBL had 686 share holders and had a total share capital of rupees 21,841. What is interesting is that of the 686 members almost 500 of these claimed to belong to ‘Marathas’ (information collected from the records of the bank). Of course they were enumerated as Maratha caste. In the post colonial period the break of caste is absent and therefore it is difficult to extrapolate from the data. Having the symbolic and cultural capital required to be a ‘Maratha’ could have surely helped one to become part of this network. In the 1940s, most migrant workers who were basically peasants found it easier to find an opportunity if one was associated with the ‘Maratha’ imaginary.

With the relocation of the cooperative to market yard there occurred a substantial makeover of the managing body. Now the element of the camp education society who had inaugurated this cooperative began to diminish. Instead one finds that the managing
body now began to be constituted of members belonging to the ‘Marathas’. I also found that ‘Marathas’ who were associated with the ‘Maratha’ education forum (AIMEC) were also associated with the bank. Thus some of the prominent names such as Keshavrao Jedhe, Baburao Sanas, Keshavrao Dhere, Ganapatrao Shedge, and Baburao Jagtap figured in the functioning of the bank. (Records of the bank and interviews)

This becomes quite clear from newspaper reports. For instance the close association of the bank with the AIMEC and its objectives of peasant consolidation become clear from the following newspaper report,

“...we urge the peasantry to become part of this bank. We are having a meeting at the shri Shivaji Maratha school premises on the 23rd of July...please attend in large numbers...” (Jagruti, 15th June 1946)

Similarly in another report the peasant cause becomes the ‘Maratha’ cause,

“...the shetjis are here to exploit you of your labour...so do not sell your produce at any price that they ask for...the Poona urban cooperative bank is willing to lend money for marketing your goods...” (Jagruti, 19th January, 1946)

I interviewed Shivajirao Dhamdhere (he was also the former deputy mayor of Pune municipal corporation and is an active member of the Nationalist Congress Party and close associate of Sharad Pawar) who has been associated with the bank for the last five decades and is presently the director of PUCBL and his son Nilesh Dhamdhere is the chairman, regarding the journey of the institution thus far. I also interviewed other members of the managing committee such as Prakash Khedekar (vice chairman of the bank), Prakash Dhere (former MLA), Ankush Kakde (real estate baron), and Chetan Tupe (Corporator) among others. Shivjirao Dhamdhere’s family members were large grain traders in the market yard. So were the Dhere family members in Pune. On asking Prakash Dhere whose family is bound through kinship with the Dhamdhere family, regarding the ‘Marathas’ and grain trade in those periods, he replied,

“Most of the godowns and granaries were owned by the Gujarati Banias and Marwaris. It was rare to find any Marathi speaking individual in this business. Although it was the Marathi peasant that produced the most of the
grains he was always exploited by these ‘shetjis’. My father Keshavrao Dhere got into this business sometime in the 1940s. Since then he along with other ‘Maratha’ leaders urged the peasants to beware of the ‘shetjis’. One of the reasons that the PUCBL became popular was because Amrutrao Dhamdhere (father of Shivajirao Dhamdhere) helped peasants sell their grain at better prices and also provided help for them to store grain till the market fetched good prices.”

As the cooperative laws did not allow for urban banks to enter rural market, one may wonder how this bank created networks amongst the peasant groups. Shivajirao Dhamdhere opines,

“In the period just prior to and just post independence was one of high speculation. The trader communities had dominated the market yard and the mandai. These were large scale wholesale traders and had the requisite capital to ensure their survival. However, the peasantry that came to sell its goods did not have any such leverage. Therefore the bank provided them with help in terms of giving them a fair price for their produce and also in some ways ensuring help in terms of logistics, storing and marketing their goods.”

From interviews I also learnt that the bank had mobilised a large number of labour force from the unorganised sector who were working in the market yard and mandai. These labourers were basically peasants who had very small landholdings or landless labourers and worked as hamals (potters or coolies) who would upload and download goods from the trucks. A large proportion of them had small patches of agricultural land in the vicinity of the Poona city. As the city itself was expanding, these areas such as Hadapsar, Bibewadi, Vanaz, Katraj, Khadakwasala, Panshet, Kamshet, Yerawada, Mulshi and Khed among others were now being merged into the main city area as rural-urban fringes. These small peasants would transport their goods in a bullock cart and sell their produce at the market. They would continue to stay within the market yard premises so that they may get part time employment also. Some of the labourers who were landless were migrants to the city. These migrants would usually find jobs as hamals and if lucky as jobbers in industrial setups, though there were not many openings then. But how did the ‘Marathas’ create an awareness amongst this class? Shivajirao Dhamdhere argues,
“Most of these labourers were in some ways connected to the talims (gymnasiums). They would spend their early morning hours or evening leisure time at these talims. These talims also functioned as mandals (civic organisations). It was easier to target these labour groups at the talims because most of these casual workers would be dispersed during the day. Only those labourers working at the market yard and mandai could be reached during the day. Mandai of course had a historical legacy to it. It is here that Mahatma Phule had initially begun his activities of his Satyashodhak Samaj.”

By the 1950s a large section of this unorganised labour force participated in the Samyukta Maharashtra Movement (SMM). This was so because of the efforts of the Peasants and Workers Party (PWP) which had begun to mobilise this section. The Communist Party of India (CPI) had also tried to mobilise this section, but their focus was on organised labourers, especially those who worked in mills and industries. Bhole (2010) has argued that it was the PWP that was instrumental in organising the unorganised labour force. He further contends that it was the PWP that took over the reins of the SMM from the erstwhile Brahmin dominated socialist intellectuals by 1956-57. It is no wonder then that during the SMM that the PUCBL became a site for mobilisations of peasants and workers. (Phadke, 1979)

In the post-1960 period, the membership of the bank increased to almost 1500 members. However with the Maharashtra State inaugurating newer cooperative structures such as that of marketing agricultural produce, credit societies, the importance of PUCBL declined from the late 1960s onwards. However it remained as a popular image in the minds of the people, a symbol of the non-Brahmin and anti-sowcar movement. It is no wonder that Shivajirao Dhamdhere and the Dhamdhere family on the basis of this symbolic capital have enormous political weight in the local arena. Shivajirao Dhamdhere has been elected as a corporator four times and has also served as the deputy Mayor of the Pune Municipal Corporation. This family is also very closely associated with the Congress Party and also the Nationalist Congress Party. With the state taking over major functions of credit supply and marketing to itself, the Dhamdhere family members have successfully entered these state institutions as elected
members of DCC banks. Moreover the PUCBL in the 1970s also received state patronage as in terms of funds and grants. (Registers of the bank)

Panchayati Raj Institutions, the Congress party and the ‘Marathas’

In the following section I attempt to demonstrate the role played by the ‘Marathas’ in the Congress party politics and the State politics. The decade of the 1960 was a politically peaceful period in Maharashtra. It is in this decade the State promoted expansion of cooperatives and the Panchayati Raj Institutions together with the establishment of institutions of education. Lele argues that these institutions were ‘opportunity structures’. These allowed the ‘Maratha’ political and economic elite (as they are coterminous) access and control over the most valued public resources and through them were able to consolidate the ‘Marathas’ by disbursing benefits from these public resources through patriarchal patronage, thereby creating support bastions. The two institutions of Co-operatives and the Panchayati Raj Institutions were part and parcel of the Congress ideology. (Lele, 1982:54)

Panchayat Raj Institutions (Panchayati Raj Institutions) or the local self-government bodies owe their existence to the Balwantrai Mehta Committee of 1957. The Panchayati Raj Institutions endeavoured to devolve power district centres and thereby shift the decision making closer to the masses. Prior to 1960 the State government had created district development boards and charged it with supervision of developmental schemes. After the formation of the State the leader; passed the PRI Act (1961), in which the three-tier system (the village level- Gram Panchayat, the block level-Panchayat Samiti and the district level- Zillah Parishad) was introduced in which, power was concentrated at the district level.

Understandably, State Congress leaders saw institutions of Panchayati Raj Institutions providing them with opportunity to reach out into the Maharashtra country-side. One consequence of this was that it strengthened linkages from village to district, and structured the ambitional route of the Congress party leaders. It was observed that
soon after their inception, these Panchayati Raj Institutions became the centres of power in rural Maharashtra. The rural voters were connected with the legislative leaders through the Panchayati Raj leaders and thus the Panchayati Raj institutions became the recruitment bases of the State legislators (Rosenthal, 1982). Panchayati Raj Institutions provided an opportunity to the Congress to strike the roots more effectively into the country-side. One consequence was that it strengthened linkages between the village and district levels. The rural voters were connected with the legislative leaders through the Panchayati Raj leaders and thus the Panchayati Raj institutions became the recruitment bases of the State legislators. (Table VI)

The Maharashtra State model is novel as it has the provision of inclusion of the local M.Ps, MLAs, and MLCs in the Zillah Parishads and Panchayat Samitis. With the creation of the Zillah Parishads (district level administrative structure) the Maratha leadership had taken a major step in the direction of introducing greater political homogeneity across regions and of ensuring the effective functioning of the Congress system. Over time the Zillah Parishads’, became a political arena for securing privileged access to the newly consolidated resources of the development administration of the State; once introduced the EGS too became another instrument that performed the same function. As Lele (1990) argues,

"In the structure of polity that was at work during this period much depended on the establishment of systematic linkages between the local and State government elites, which was carried out through the Congress Party". (Lele, 1990:183)

Given the socio-economic differences that had existed prior to the creation of the State this was not an easy task. Chousalkar (1995) argues that the Congress party leadership is built up from bottom upward through the Panchayati Raj institutions. The presidents of the Zillah Parishads are found to be powerful and influential leaders in their respective districts. These leaders could control the politics of the district as the Zillah Parishads emerged as the financial pivot of development so much so that even the members of the State legislature and parliament had to depend on these leaders for the success of the developmental schemes in their respective constituencies sponsored by
the State or the centre. According to Lele (1990) studies of local elites conducted during the 1960s demonstrates that often the dominant district leaders preferred to become officials in the Zillah Parishads to ordinary members of the legislature.

Additionally it is important to remember that the PRI leadership found representation in all credit and processing co-operatives, as they were the local representatives. Besides they also represented the district councils and were members of any developmental scheme sponsored either by the State or the central government. According to Sirsikar (1970) many a times State leaders had to maintain cordial relations with the local level leaders and instances are not wanting when due to factional politics an entrenched State level leader has had to loose the elections.

The legislative leadership inducted from the Panchayati Raj Institutions belonged to the upper peasant class of the ‘Marathas’. Chousalkar (1995) notes how Panchayati Raj Institutions facilitated the consolidation of the ‘Marathas’ as a group within the state. According to him the ‘Maratha’ were able to create a patronage linkage system that bound together leaders of this imagined group right from the grass root Panchayat level to the district level leadership. Further as the ‘Maratha’ members largely came to represent the Congress Party which was the ruling party in the State of Maharashtra since its inception in 1960s; the Panchayati Raj Institutions became a conduit of reaching higher echelons within the Congress party and through it reach higher political positions. In the period from 1962 to 1972 a total of 17 State cabinet ministers and 8 central ministers belonged to this group. A total of 60% of the PRI leadership was successful in winning State legislative seats. Some of the prominent leaders who emerged from this section were S.N Mohite, H.G Wartak, S.B Chavan and Y.V Hire. All of them were influential Congressmen. It is however pertinent to remember that the PRI leadership overlapped and interlocked with that of the co-operative leadership and the Congress party leadership. (Table VI)

‘Marathas’ whom they deem to be the elite. What I am arguing is that the concept of ‘Maratha’ rule encompasses not only the elite section but also provides a potential to any individual or group that can align itself with this social imaginary. How one uses one’s capitals ultimately decides whether one is successful or not. But at least it provides an opportunity that is denied to other individuals/groups. In this context one must not forget that it was not only the institutions of cooperatives and the PRIs that provided opportunities for the ‘Marathas’ but also the lower bureaucracy. For instance in the mid 1950s the then Mayor of Pune city Baburao Sanas who was a close associate of Jedhe announced much to the displeasure of the Commissioner (Barve, who was a Brahmin) that for entry into lower level bureaucracy of the Municipal corporation, educational qualifications and examinations were not to be conducted. He observes,

“...this policy of educational qualification and examinations ensures that only the Brahmins get into these services. What about the Bahujan Samaj and Maratha youth? Just because they do not get enough opportunities for pursuing academics does not mean that they are less qualified for employment. In the capacity as a Mayor and with the support of other elected members of the municipal corporation have decided that henceforth neither examination, nor educational qualifications will be required for the enrolment for the post of bus drivers, bus conductors and class four employees. As long as they can read and write anyone can apply for these posts.” (Kesari, 1956, 12 August; 3)

This policy was continued until the early 1980s and thus paved way for many youths belonging to the ‘Maratha’ peasantry to join the lower level services. In the decade of 1960s, in the case of police constable recruitment the state also did away with the need to conduct examinations or the need to have a sound educational background. Instead only physical tests were conducted. Similarly state services in the collectorate office of peons and lower level staff did away with the need to have educational qualifications. This move allowed many of the ‘Maratha’ peasants to join state services. Now any candidate with a peasant background was encouraged to join the state services. The peasant leadership who controlled the state also encouraged departmental promotions and also encouraged education as a means of upward mobility within the state services such that the peasants who had joined the state services could pursue education while
working. (Interviews) Below I examine a case study of how ‘Maratha’ peasantry was organised and how the PRI and the cooperative structure provided opportunities for ‘Maratha’ actors to move up the political ladder.

Networking: From the Local to the State and to National level Field of Politics

In this case study I examine how Vitthal Baburao Tupe a landed and well to do ‘Maratha’ who was associated with the cooperative movement in Western Maharashtra, entered the political field first at the local level and thence at the National level as a member of Parliament (MP). Vittal Tupe was born in 1940 in a landed ‘Maratha’ family in a place called Hadapsar (which today is part of the Pune city). His father attended high school and discontinued studies thereafter. He was closely associated with the Jedhe family. In fact the Tupe family members were related to the Jedhe family through marital ties. The Tupe family also were related to the Dhamdhere (the promoters of the Poona Urban cooperative Bank) and also to political families such as Baburao Sanas (first Mayor of Pune city), Annasaheb Magar of Hadapsar (Corporator and later Member of Parliament) among others.

In the colonial period Hadapsar area was on the fringes of the city limits and served more as a hinterland to the main city area. This region supported the everyday vegetable and fruit supply to the city during the colonial period. It also specialised in growing sugarcane and millets (Jowar and Bajara) other than vegetables and fruits. His father was an agriculturalist who also marketed his produce at Market yard and Mandai of Pune. As his family was settled on the fringes of Pune city he was able to take advantages of both locations- in terms of agrarian moorings and also in terms of urban based ‘modern’ education and civic practices. Some lineages who claim to be ‘Marathas’ and own most of the land in Hadapsar area are the Magars, Tupe, Dhamdhere, Dhere, Jedhe Babar, Kakade and Shirole among a few others. These lineages are have kinship connexions and are politically active.

As mentioned Vittal Tupes family was closely associated with the Jedhe family and was a strong proponent of the Bahujan Samaj movement in Pune. As their family supplied agricultural goods to the city (at Mandai and Market yard) it nurtured its ties with
After college education, Vittal Tupe got involved much more with the activities of the RSD through which he was able to associate with the masses in and around Pune city. As his background belonged to a peasant culture he chose to make agriculture his profession. He urged peasants to innovate and also highlighted the importance of science and scientific attitude in order to extract more yield. Through his connection with the Phule movement and later the Andha Shraddha Nirmulan Samiti (Committee for the removal of superstition) he kept close links with the peasants (majority of who claimed to belong to the social imaginary ‘Marathas’).

He was also associated with the foundation of the Sane Guruji Shikshan Sanstha that was organised on the lines of the founder of the Rashtriya Seva Dal. He was also associated with the educational enterprise called the Rayat Shikshan Sanstha- he was a founder member of the Sadhana Educational trust at Pune. In the mid 1960s he along with ‘Maratha’ leaders such as Annasaheb Magar (Mayor the Pune city) organised the sugar cooperative called the Yashwant Co-operative Sugar Factory at Theour in Pune. This cooperative played a pivotal role in ensuring the rapid growth of sugarcane in this hinterland. It was due to these social activities that he became well known in Pune. He joined the Congress party in the 1960s when Yashwantrao Chavan urged ‘Maratha’ peasants to partake in the affairs of the state. He was soon elected as a member of the Municipal Corporation for two consecutive terms in 1974 and 1978. He became a member of the legislative assembly (MLA) for three consecutive terms in 1978, 1980 and 1985. For a short period he was left the Congress party and joined the Janata Dal. He returned to the Congress party in late 1980s and was elected as a Member of Parliament (MP) in 1989 and 1998. Soon after he switched his allegiance to the
Nationalist Congress Party and became a close associate of Sharad Pawar. He passed away soon after in 2001.

As an MLA and later as an M.P he was instrumental in developing the Hadapsar area in Pune. He along with Sharad Pawar was responsible in de-zoning the agricultural zone in this area and converting a huge acreage into non-agricultural/residential area. This enabled the high class residential township of the now famous ‘Magarpatta city’ to come up in the first decade of the 21st century. Similarly he urged the peasants of this area to merge their lands and take up the business of construction and real estate so that they would not need middlemen in developing their own lands. A new project that was recently concluded (2010) called the ‘Amanora city’ similar to the ‘Magarpatta city’ involving around 500 acres of land belonging to the peasants and organised by the peasants was the brainchild of Vittalrao Tupe. The ‘Magarpatta city’ and ‘Amanora city’ are cooperative enterprises wherein the peasants who own land ensure that the real estate business protects their interests. The farmers now own flats and row houses within these residential complexes and also have shares and stocks in this project which are marketable.

I was able to interview several people who knew him well. I enquired about his journey from that of a social worker to that of his entry at the local and State level politics. What emerged from the discussions was that Vittalrao Tupe was able to organise the peasantry to form cooperatives-credit, educational, land and processing cooperatives. As he was also trained in agriculture (diploma in agriculture) and also the fact that he had been able to visit Israel and bring back technology regarding irrigation management he was held in high esteem in his constituency. He urged the peasants to learn and put into practice new land management and irrigation techniques, enabled the organisation of marketing cooperative at Hadapsar (which is a major supplier of wholesale agricultural goods to Pune city) and also ensured that the children of the peasants were enrolled in schools. When the state and the land mafia wanted to take over the lands of the peasants for developmental purposes he rallied behind the peasants in this region and urged them to unite and came up with a plan to safeguard their interests. As
Keshavrao Tupe (a kin relative of Vittalrao), the former sarpanch (village head) of a village in Hadapsar area (known as Sataranali) reminisces,

"Vittalrao was essentially a social worker with a socialist ideology. He was associated with the Rashtriya Seva Dal in his early political career. As he was well versed with agriculture and also the market he was able to organise educational, processing, credit and marketing institutions that earned the respect and loyalty of the peasantry in Hadapsar area. He was a visionary and urged the peasants not to sell our land. He understood the importance of retaining land. He was instrumental in saving our land from the construction (builder) lobby. He also used the local area development funds (as MLA and MP) wisely. He ensured that the overall interests of the peasants were safeguarded. It is no wonder that he was able to defeat Suresh Kalmadi in the 1999 elections to the Lok Sabha. He had the requisite knowledge and political skill that enabled him to rise from the position of a corporator to that of MLA and later MP."

From the discussions and interviews with resource persons, what emerged was that Vittalrao Tupe possessed the necessary cultural and social capital to enter the field of politics. For instance his agrarian moorings together with education, besides his family connections enabled him to convert these advantages into political success. It was almost ‘natural’ for him to join the Congress party which was after 1960 dominated by ‘Maratha’ peasantry. With the Panchyat Raj institutions being put in place, it facilitated his entry into local level politics. Kin relations together with the symbolic value that the Tupe family inherently possessed enabled him to rise to the State level political arena. With a sound educational background and political support from within the Congress party in Maharashtra, it was not very difficult for him to contest successfully at a National level. Besides the support networks that he organised through the sugar cooperative, educational institutions together with his socialist leanings propelled him onto the National scene. Through the organisation of cooperatives (credit, marketing and processing), educational institutions and political patronage, the peasantry in Hadapsar area prospered and it is no wonder that many of those who claimed to be ‘Marathas’ benefitted from these enterprises. So much so that as an MLA and later MP he with the help of other likeminded political actors ensured that an industrial belt came up around Hadapsar that ensured employment to the landless and marginal peasants. It
is no wonder that in the last decade of the 20th century and the first decade of 21st century two mega construction/housing projects (that are supposedly the largest in Asia) called the Magarpatta city and Amanora city have come up in this area. Chetan Tupe (the son of Vittalrao) and his mother Leelavati (wife of Vittalrao) are both politically active and had earlier contested local and legislative elections under the banner of the Shiv Sena. However both of them are now in the Nationalist Congress party of Sharad Pawar. Chetan Tupe is currently a corporator in the Pune Municipal Corporation. I interviewed him regarding how ‘Marathas’ are politically dominant

“I think it is because the Maratha caste members are naturally inclined to enter politics from a very young age. Besides they are the sons of the soil who have also shed their blood for this land. They are the real cultivators of the land and have been doing so since many generations. Factories and industries are a modern phenomenon. It (the dominance of ‘Marathas’) also may be due to the politicisation of this caste. Politics is a profession and I think it requires skill. Moreover since many of the Marathas own land they have diversified their activities into cooperative activities, construction activities, agricultural processing and marketing. Also the fact that the Marathas are the largest caste makes this (dominance) possible.”

From this argument, it becomes quite clear that most of the respondents misrecognise ‘Maratha’ as a caste that always since time immemorial displayed features of peasant moorings and martial traditions. They have naturalised the idea that ‘Marathas’ are politically dominant because this group (caste) has always been politically active and have been rulers. Another premise of this argument is that ‘Marathas’ are a unified and monolithic group (caste) and thus constitute the majority. They behave in unison especially during electoral processes and therefore remain politically dominant. When he states that ‘Marathas are naturally inclined to enter politics’, I argue he is referring to the cultural, symbolic and social capital that individuals professing to be ‘Marathas’ operationalises in given fields. It is by virtue of operationalisation of these capitals that ‘Marathas’ have been politically successful and this success is naturalised by all as ‘Maratha’ rule.
In this case I examine how the identity of being a ‘Maratha’ peasant enabled entry of not so qualified actors into the lower bureaucracy. In the 1960s after the emergence of the separate State of Maharashtra, the political elite who now consisted predominantly of the peasantry a large section of which claimed to be ‘Marathas’ ushered in policies of agrarian development. This ideology enabled many of the peasant groups to access state resources especially in rural areas of the State. In urban areas too, the ‘Maratha’ leadership reorganised the lower bureaucracy such that members of the ‘Bahujan samaj’ could enter this field. As mentioned earlier in Pune the enrolment of Bus drivers and conductors no longer required a matriculation degree or even for entry into the police constabulary the Maharashtra State did away with educational qualifications and instead stressed only on physical requirements. In this case study I examine how a family exhibiting peasant moorings and claiming to be ‘Maratha’ accessed these opportunity structures. The Thopte family originally owned small patches of land at the fringe villages of Pune city called Thopte Wadi at Khadakwasala (famous for the National Defence Academy). With the land being divided over generations the land got smaller and uncultivable as this region is a hilly area. The main crop of this region is rice and millets. Having no other option but to migrate to Pune city many families took up employment as casual labourers. I have interviewed and discussed with many such migrant families other than those from Thopte Wadi but I narrate only one in this case. Ganpat Thopte (66 years) is a retired employee of the Octroi collection division of the Pune municipal corporation. He has two brothers - Shankar Thopte (63 years) a retired Bus ticket inspector and Suresh Thopte (60 years) a retired police writer (post above a senior constable in the police service). Their father Shyamrao Thopte was a small peasant and usually worked on other fields besides his small patch of land. He sent his sons to his wife’s brother’s residence in Kamatipura (in Pune cantonment) in the 1950s as he could not sustain them. All three brothers worked as casual labourers such as coolies, truck cleaners, assistants in shops among others since the age of ten. None of the brothers could study beyond 4th standard and had to struggle to make a living. Their
maternal uncle (Mama) was a tailor by profession and had earlier worked for the British Indian military establishment in Cantonment area. After independence he continued with this job for some time but his services were no longer required as the military had its own new recruitment mechanisms of civil personnel. With the formation of Maharashtra and policies being put in place that enabled many peasant youths, the Thopte brothers were fortunate to find employment despite other drawbacks. I was able to interview Ganpat Thopte and other brothers regarding their journey thus far.

Researcher: How did you manage to get employed in the Corporation? Did you read an advertisement and applied...or did you know of the opening through friends and relatives...who helped you get the job?

Ganpat Thopte: I was around eighteen years of age when I joined this job. I learnt of this job opening through a friends' father who was already working in the Pune Corporation. I remember clearly that in 1962 the Panshet dam was damaged and there was a great flood in Pune. Half of the city was washed away. It was in these circumstances that the Pune Municipal Corporation (PMC) started a new recruitment campaign to clean up the city. I joined as a labourer and my duty was to clean up areas in the Kasba Peth area.

Researcher: so how did you end up in the Octroi department of the PMC?

Ganpat: When I joined the PMC as a labourer it was not a permanent employment. The PMC tried to induct many people like me into permanent service but many also went jobless. In 1963 there was an interview held in which I was successfully chosen. Henceforth I was made a permanent employee but worked more or less in the capacity of a labourer (I would have to dig ditches, help in garbage pickup, help in constructing roads among other such odd jobs). It was only in late 1960s that I was shifted to the Octroi department. I also worked as a peon for sometime in the PMC main office.

Researcher: Was educational qualification important...what were other criteria you think that enabled you to get the job?
Ganpat: Educational qualification was not important though the officials asked me if I could read and write which I could. I was also asked about my family background. In that flood many people had lost lives and those who survived had lost all their belongings. Most of these families were relocated in different parts of the city like Gokhale Nagar, Mukund Nagar etc. Some surviving members were also given jobs in the PMC and other State departments. As my family did not face the brunt of the floods, I did not have that excuse to get the job. However I think that the government was trying to include as many unemployed youth into lower level services. I think because I belonged to a peasant family and because my friends' father put in a word I was able to get the job.

Researcher: Was your friend also a ‘Maratha’?

Ganpat: No. He was a ‘Komati’ by caste. But since both our families were poor we helped each other.

Researcher: Did the fact that you were a ‘Maratha’ help you in any way to get the job...or a transfer within the department?

Ganpat: Well...as many of the political actors at that point of time did belong to the Maratha caste, it did help in certain ways, especially when I wanted to shift to another department. I had approached our local corporator and he spoke to some higher officials who then transferred me into the Octroi department.

Researcher: What about your brothers- Shankar and Suresh?

Ganpat: By the time they joined service I already had made many friends in the PMC. The municipal corporation is a place where many local leaders and bureaucrats come. Some of the political leaders were related to my family. I was able to use this connection to get noticed. This was especially true when I worked a peon in the PMC. It was here that I learnt many things. It was during this period that there was a drive for recruiting bus conductors. I was able to get Shankar this job. Suresh had his own contacts. He used to go to the talim at Bhavani Peth in cantonment regularly. It was
here that he made many friends some of whose fathers or brothers were in the police. He also had a good athletic body and that helped him to enrol as a policeman.

Researcher: Do you still have land at your native place in Thopte Wadi?

Ganpat: No. We sold that small piece of land many years ago- now all three of us live in Pune city.

There are many similar stories regarding economic mobility of families. However I only narrated one in the thesis. What emerged from my discussions with the brothers was that it was not only the contexts that enabled their success, but also their social networking. Ganpat operationalised his kinship networks to get a posting and also used these connections to get Shankar employed as a bus conductor, whereas Suresh through networking at the talim found a way into the police services. All three brothers operated through the identity of ‘Maratha’ (though they have not specifically said so in the interviews it came out through informal conversations). Police naukari was relatively seen as ‘Maratha’ employment as it was construed in terms of individuals exhibiting martial dispositions.

Conclusion

To conclude, the ‘Maratha’ peasantry gained control over these the institutions of the co-operatives, the Panchayati Raj and the Congress Party through which they controlled the state. They soon opened up opportunities in the state services such as lower bureaucracy such that any individual/group possessing the requisite cultural and social capital could easily be accommodated within the state. The ‘Maratha’ leadership through the co-operatives and the Panchayati Raj Institutions was able to extend patronage to members of the imagined community and at simultaneously, through the policy of accommodationism with other peasant groups ensured political dominance-which one can argue is rule. For instance the ‘Maratha’ leadership made arrangements with the Republican Party of India (A party representing the interests of the Scheduled
castes) to share seats at the Zillah Parishad level and also initiated steps to provide representation in its ministry to different peasant groups, as early as 1960s.

Also, by legislating on behalf of the rural masses, and providing employment opportunities during this period, gave legitimacy to the Congress Party. The ‘Marathas’ in due time also, managed to unite the disparate regions of the State by providing representation, which was deemed as a political victory. Thus we see how the ‘Marathas’ strengthened the Congress party and through it consolidated and legitimised their authority. (Sirsikar, 1970, Lele, 1982, 1990)

Thus by the late 1960s the Western ‘Marathas’ had become the dominant leadership within the State Congress party. However through the strategy of accommodationism and pluralist politics, they provided avenues for representation of ‘Maratha’ leadership from Marathwada and Vidharbha.