Introduction

There is an extensive discussion on the discourses of caste in India. Caste has been theorized to mean many things and has come to represent in both popular and disciplinary discourses, many separate but interconnected societal features, such as, attributes, ideologies, subjectivities, discourses institutions, political movements and social scientific perspectives, with some of these perceptions and positions contradicting each other. These discourses have at various times argued that caste as a system can be used interchangeably to understand Indian society. Though some scholars (Dirks, 1989, 2001, Quigley, 1995) argue that in its contemporary avatar it is a colonial artifact, others (Dumont, 1966, Klass, 1980) have insisted on examining its ancient character and have argued through its indigenous orientation. Both these aspects can be seen in its usage as a status group (Beteille, 1965, 1969), as ethnicity and ethnic movements (Fuller, 1997 and Reddy, 2005) and as a group in an evolutionary sequence in continuum with the tribe. (Madan and Majumdar, 1967, Mathur and Agarwal, 1974, Dev, 1997) In the sixties, caste was interpreted to mean a system representing hierarchy, rooted in the binary logic of purity-pollution. This perception assumes caste is primarily unique to Hinduism. (Dumont, 1966) More generally, the term caste is used to depict and identify an inclusive and tightly knit group of kin networks that operates through the principle of endogamy and exogamy. (Karve, 1953)

In recent decades, in both popular and disciplinary literature, caste discourses and movements has been perceived in negative ways-sometimes as racism, a system of discriminatory practices anchored in the colonial discourse that classified indigenous actors (natives in colonial language) in terms of Aryan-Dravidian binaries, on the basis of physical appearance and through the use of anthropometric methodologies. (Ghurye, 1963, Robb, 1997) At other times it has been perceived as legitimizing patriarchy (Rao, 2003, Chakravarti, 2003). Earlier, Marxists had suggested that caste was moored in the relations of production and hence functioned as classes. (Omvedt, 1981, 1982, Patil, 1979)
As mentioned earlier, in India almost every phenomenon has been made to have a 'casteist' expression and almost all commentators are enjoined to make a 'caste' analysis. Given these multitude of meanings and its many popular and professional interpretations, it has become difficult to use the concept of 'caste' and understand its myriad interconnections, as separate contemporary processes, without one's analysis becoming diffused and fuzzy and taking on competing interpretations and meanings, present in these discourses.

In recent literature on caste within anthropology, there is recognition that it has been employed unproblematically. It is argued that colonial practices of domination through knowledge/power axis, structured an understanding of caste to suggest that it was timeless, static, rigid, uniform, all-encompassing and ideologically consistent. (Cohn, 1987, Bayly, 1988 and Dirks 2001)

For instance Quigley (1995;1) argues that 'caste' in popular representations and social science discourse is understood to be based on three axioms – that the Hindu world is made up of castes, castes are closed social groups (endogamy, in this way the system is perpetuated ad infinitum) and that castes are hierarchically arranged on a purity-pollution scale (caste system). He finds these definitions inadequate for empirical research and thus he states:

"Intensive historical and ethnographic investigations of caste-organized communities in India have repeatedly demonstrated that this three-line theory is at best inadequate, at worst wholly misleading. And yet it has remained remarkably resistant to attempts to modify it.” (Quigley 1995; 1-2)

However, this kind of interrogation is not available within the specializations of political sociology, as an area that investigates the relationship between the interface between caste and politics. Given, that the focus of this thesis is on one 'caste' (as assumed in social science discourse) called the 'Marathas' and its relationship with power, more particularly in its dominant form-as rule, it is important for me to ask: how has the concept of caste been used by social scientists to assess and evaluate its interconnections with the political processes.
The specific questions that I am asking are: How do modern forms and processes of power and politics interface with groups (in existing terminology connotated as caste) to organize them into political formations? And how do these formations influence the way power is structured and distributed in society?

Most often than not, the contributions in this domain are made by political scientists who have focused more towards understanding politics rather than theorizing this dialectical relationship. For instance, Kothari et al. (1970) the first to theorize on the relationship between caste and politics) assumed that all jatis were placed in the hierarchical order on the Varna system following Srinivas’s (1955) conceptualization of caste as jati. Kothari et al. (1970) contend that disparate jatis (which I argue are social groups) organize to form political alliances to realize their interests and once the objectives are achieved newer permutations and combinations emerge. In doing so, this scholarship recognizes that power is organized through political formations of social units (which they deem to be jati), but not how power/knowledge and historical contingencies shape the formation of these groups in the first place and also how power creates conditions and contexts that enable and organize these groups to mobilize into larger political formations. Thus their analysis tends be located in apriori absolutism which then takes for granted that such groups are castes (jatis) and hence their research tends to slip into solipsism. It is therefore not surprising that this scholarship presumes unproblematically that these groups are jatis and that jatis are neatly demarcated endogamous social units that ensure individual loyalty through a set of rules. Following this logic then political formations are deemed to be coalitions of many jatis and communities which exhibit differences that are quantifiable and identifiable interests.

In the late eighties, Frankel and Rao et al. (1989) in their quest to identify, quantify and map the interface between social groups and politics at the politico-administrative level of States used the received understanding and terminology while classifying these groups i.e. caste. To give credit to these scholars, they at least recognized the myriad meanings of caste and so they set out to contextualize
the term caste and its disparate meanings in different contexts, as Rao (1989) observes,

“It is necessary in any empirical investigation to define the spatio-temporal context in which a caste group or category is located and the specific meaning or sense in which it is used. Unfortunately a single term caste is employed to connote different structural orders such as the smallest endogamous sub- sub- caste...a higher order consisting of several sub castes...and still higher level of varna order...we shall use the term with qualifications in a given empirical context...to designate respective territorial levels, structural orders and units of operation.” (Rao, 1989; 22)

But such an exercise of objectively cataloguing groups (deemed to be caste) in terms of exogamy and endogamy (as jati) and purity and pollution (Varna) posed new set of problems as Shah (1989) observes,

“One faces similar difficulties in using the term caste...not all castes are endogamous. Sometimes the levels of hypergamy are so many that one finds it difficult to decide where one caste ends and the other begins...” (Shah, 1989; 59)

It is no wonder that by assuming social groups to be castes by scholars such as Kothari et al (1970) and Frankel and Rao et al (1989) led to another set of problem- their undue reliance on the ‘structuralist’ explanation regarding caste behaviour in the context of electoral politics. For instance in their voting behaviour model, they presume that caste based voting is predictable as caste is collapsible into a community and therefore following this logic members of a community are bound together by a set of rules. They premise their argument on the axiom that caste rules and regulations facilitate the organization of caste solidarity- caste as an identity enables politicization of caste which in turn enables political mobilizations, which finally manifests in caste based voting behaviour. Following this trajectory of explaining political behaviour this scholarship has further engaged in research that anchors itself in apriori axioms of rules to predict how rule is organized in context of larger political formations such as the Kshtriya, Harijan, Adivasi and the Muslims (KHAM) or the Ahir, Jat, Gujjar and the Rajput (AJGAR). However there is another lens through which the question of how and why individuals organize into groups (caste loyalty) can be addressed- as
strategies of actors who actively engage in the struggle for resources. Can we instead examine such political formations through the lens of strategies and practices of actors without losing out on the rigor of how structure impinges on the actions of these actors? Can one instead of employing the term caste (in its objectivist stereotyped understanding) envisage such groups as a manifestation of subjective interactions that are nevertheless shaped by existing structural constraints?

It is in this context I trace the genealogy of the discourse on caste in the social science imagination. Caste as a concept has undergone much definitional metamorphosis from what it meant in the pre-colonial, in the colonial period and how has it been imagined in the post colonial period. For instance as Thapar (1984, 2010) argues that in the pre-colonial period usurpations of political power was a common phenomenon which had repercussions in the social arena in terms of potential for social mobility. This meant that some social group or individual who through military prowess could capture political power the opportunity as a leverage to move up the Varna hierarchy and also challenge and reorganize this hierarchy (for instance when the Maurya Kings in ancient Indian history who were socially seen as shudra rose up to claim a kshatriya status and their kin groups related by blood or marital alliance claimed a ritual status higher than that of the Brahmins in the four fold Varna hierarchy as they became patrons of Hinduism). These kinds of political upheavals necessitated that the social hierarchy (Varna and jati) and its understanding remain flexible and transmutable. However with the advent of colonialism, when all the territories were merged into one political and administrative unit called the British India, the political recourse through military success as a means of social mobility disappeared. The British administrators in their quest to comprehend societal organization in India through the European lens of class chose one model that of caste. Caste was understood as a function of purity/pollution, endogamy/exogamy which was the received understanding that emerged from the works of early Christian missionaries, indologists and which was legitimated by a section of the scribal group
(understood as Brahmin caste) whom the colonial state chose as interpreters. But this is not to suggest that casteism did not exist or was not operational. Neither to suggest that the ideology of caste for political ends was not employed and rather both these processes can be experienced even to date.

It is no wonder then that the through the census and data collected through other ethnographic enumerations, the colonial state legitimated this model (of caste) as the way of understanding Indian society. In this schema caste came to mean a timeless, frozen and identifiable social category (used synonymously as community), which it really was not as some historians suggest. (Bayly, 1996, Dirks, 2001) It was essentialised as the most important social organization through which societal processes could be understood meaningfully (a simplistic, quantifiable category that appealed to the colonial administrators). In the post-colonial period the discourses on caste continued to be informed by the colonial episteme without considering its historical contextualization. This discourse suggests that the caste as an objective category is fixed, bound, permanent and timeless and therefore predictable in its outcomes. But this did not mean that the indigenous actors followed this model in their everyday practices. Instead they followed the well tested and successful strategies that were practiced in earlier times and also innovated newer ways of social organization that did not neatly fit into the structure of the colonial caste model.

This colonial exercise (through census and affiliated practices) of superimposing real groups into imaginary model that was legitimated by some sacrosanct religious principles continued and soon got embedded in the language and imagination of the disciplines of anthropology and sociology. But is caste such a neatly demarcated social entity extrapolating from what Thapar (1984, 2010) and Dirks (1989) illustrate through the Maurya and Kallar kingship (similar to the Maurya case wherein the Kallars who were deemed to be the untouchable castes during the medieval period through conquest rose above the Brahmins in ritual status in as patrons of Hinduism) models?
I argue that scholars such as Kothari et. al (1970) and Frankel and Rao et. al (1989) do not recognize this unproblematic genealogy. Instead they limit their enquiry into the contextualization of caste. Having recognized the difficulty in employing caste as an overarching concept at the methodological level these scholars at best found alternate ways of using context specific meanings of caste. I argue that their methodologies, theoretical lens and language did not permit them to examine caste as a subjective, experiential phenomenon that could account for the strategies and practices of actors who partake in the social imaginary (called caste).

How does Marxist scholarship (Omvedt, 1981, Patil, 1979, Harriss, 2003) address the issues related to caste and its interface with politics and power? They argue that caste can be examined through the lens of relations of production or class analysis.

For instance, Omvedt (1981) and Patil (1979) argue that the agrarian structure was predominantly feudal in character at the time of independence, though as they observe, important elements of capitalism had arisen. They argue that in the post colonial period, there occurred a near-absolute correlation between caste and class. However this collapsing of caste into class led to a rather rigid frame of argument that privileged a class based analysis and foreclosed the option of assessing the role of other cultural and social categories and practices operating in Indian politics.

The focus of the Marxist interrogation was to understand processes through which exploitation within the purity-pollution hierarchy occurred- in which occupation was an ascribed function. They have also examined how political mobilizations of the lower caste groups in the ‘modern’ democratic system and how it has enabled political contestations and also how it ensured certain degree of social mobility amongst these groups. (Omvedt, 1976) These scholars have not assessed the role of middle and high caste mobilizations in organizing power and when they did the role of caste was subsumed under the category of class. Harriss (2003) has
employed the paradigm of caste-class analysis to examine how certain groups (which he calls middle caste) organized rule. However in this analysis caste is deemed to be an objective category and hence qualified to interchangeably mean jati, Varna and sometimes also unproblematically collapsed as caste cluster/caste coalition. Recent interventions (Barbara Harriss, 2003 and Fernandes, 2007) have been more inventive and sophisticated that suggests that a class analysis need not always be located within the framework of the relations and mode of production but may be understood as a function of consumption and or of culture i.e. ideas, symbols, signs, identities and reinvented memories. Similarly, Bourdieu (1990) argues that class as construed through the Marxist lens is really “class on paper” and is a taxonomical entity that has no independent ontological existence. It is a theoretical construct that allows one to explain and predict the actions of those it classifies (including their potential to form into real groups (for instance labour unions). For him, classes on paper are made up of actors who happen to occupy similar positions in multidimensional “capital space” (i.e., they possess similar amounts and types of capital). As a result, these actors will have experienced similar material and cultural conditions and will have submitted to similar types of conditionings. This means that members of these classes will have every chance of having similar dispositions and interests, and thus of producing similar practices and adopting similar stances. (Bourdieu 1990; 231)

The major difficulty of the scholarship (liberal and Marxist) on caste and its interface with politics relates to its theoretical lens. It needs a vocabulary to grasp the dynamics and relational character of caste; instead it falls into the trap of examining caste as an objective, given category- and an end result (post facto) rather than the actual process. I would like to suggest that this scholarship has assumed caste to be a web of objective relations that organizes practices and the representations of practice. The problem with this logic is that it attempts to delineate structures existing prior to actors, structures that make possible the knowledge and primary experience of those persons. This logic incorporates approaches such as Marxism (such as its concepts, mode of production which
encompasses forces and relations of production, that in the final analysis determines a certain social formation), structuralism (uncovers the underlying oppositions that render a text, myth, or a social system intelligible), and hermeneutics (comprehends a ritual or literary work by constructing an interpretation). Bourdieu (1977; 32) argues that all these approaches share the same characterization of what they deal with as an object (in this case caste), a datum, an *opus operatum* rather than a *modus operandi*.

This problem arises as Bourdieu (1990) points out, when the researcher attempts to elicit a representation of practices, whether from an informant or a set of aggregate statistics that results in misrecognition, as regards the object being structured by an immanent underlying code. In conventional analysis all social relations are assumed to be ‘objectified’ communicative relations that have a predetermined path and hence predictable. The result is that the researcher misrecognises the ‘real’ and instead proceeds to construct some kind of repertoire of rules to account for the system- the ‘regularities’ are misunderstood as rules. (Bourdieu, 1977; 25) What is presented as the elements of an analysis is then a predetermined set of discourses and actions appropriate to a particular stage or frame. Thus producing objective representations such as maps, grammars, role sets, lists of ordered rules among others whose specific forms may differ, but all of which attribute a stable underlying order to social phenomena. Is the social order so neat and predictable? While focusing on rules (structure) does social research discount the role of strategies and practices of actors that are so fundamental in examining agency? How does one then ensure that both structure and agency get equal treatment in analysis?

Also, with the recognition of this limitation of ‘timeless’ conceptualization (in the case of caste), what is the language one should employ to examine these processes of political formation that overcomes this logic of the pre-determined rules? Should we use the term caste to explain these political formations? After all, it is now recognized that caste is not only an objective, quantifiable category but also a subjective, interpretative every day experience of belonging that is manifested
through practice of common value systems, symbols, signs, invention of memories and ideologies. These value systems, signs and ideologies are always contested and change overtime under the influence of power. This imagined group displays elasticity at some points of time allowing larger membership and subjectivity to emerge and at other times it becomes rigid and an objective category and is conventionally comprehended as an institution.

This argument then leads us to a pertinent question- how does one examine the processes of group formation and political mobilizations in a democracy? In order to tackle this complexity, which perspective can help us best to comprehend these processes of group formation without losing out the uneven, unpredictable and complex permutations and combinations at play? Which theoretical framework can enable us to examine every day practices that conjure up a social imaginary of a group/community at particular given historical moments? Would not Bourdieu’s (1977, 1985, 1990) concepts of social capital, habitus and fields give us an adequate tool to interrogate the dynamic processes in the organization of power? After all Bourdieu’s (1992) theory offers us a dynamic and relational lens through which emerging continuous flexible networks can be examined. But how does Bourdieu’s (1977, 1990) theorization help us?

Bourdieu (1990) argues that the earlier approaches in social sciences misrecognise the way social life is organized and thus end up either positing social reality through a structuralist or a phenomenological perspective i.e. either the structure or agency becomes immanent. He posits an alternate perspective that situates analysis in the practical universe of everyday practices and not in a given and bounded objective space but in relational matrix. For Bourdieu (1977, 1990) social behaviour is not to be examined in terms of a code given as a static representation, but as continual and dynamic operationalisation of actions by social actors who strategise in accordance with their practical mastery of social situations and in the given historical contexts. How does he do this? Bourdieu (1977, 1990) proposes a “theory of practice”.
"... To restore to practice its practical truth, we must therefore reintroduce time into the theoretical representation of a practice which, being temporally structured, is intrinsically defined by its tempo... to substitute strategy for rule is to reintroduce time, with its rhythm, its orientation, its irreversibility. Science has a time which is not that of practice. For the analyst, time no longer counts: not only because... arriving post festum, he cannot be in any uncertainty as to what may happen, but also because he has the time to totalize, i.e. to overcome the effects of time. Scientific practice is so 'detemporalized' that it tends to exclude even the idea of that it excludes: because science is possible only in a relation to time which is opposed to that of practice, it tends to ignore time and, in doing so, to reify practices... practices defined by the fact that their temporal structure, direction and rhythm are constitutive of their meaning." (Bourdieu, 1977; 8-9)

In this schema, actors are both a product of social structures and also producers of these structures (the "generative principle" of practice) and thereby situating the analysis within the very movement of accomplishment of any social phenomenon. Such an account makes possible a science of the dialectical relations between objective structures (to which the objectivist mode of knowledge gives access) and the structured dispositions within which those structures are actualized and which in their actualization reproduce them, which he terms as the habitus.

In this context Bourdieu's (1990) conception of strategies, dispositions, generative principles and schemes i.e. habitus, field, practice and species of capital become pertinent to comprehend how social groups are organized and how rule is organized. His analysis also seeks to explain how various strategies are drawn up and practices organized by individuals to become part of the ruling group. Bourdieu's (1977, 1990) theory of power is rooted in the logic of cultural reproduction which operationalises through the logic of practice i.e. through the dialectic interaction between the habitus and the fields. The habitus is the mental structure through which people deal with the social world. It can be thought of as a set of internalized schemes through which the world is perceived, understood, appreciated, and evaluated.

Bourdieu stressed that mechanisms of social domination and reproduction were primarily focused on bodily know-how and competent practices in the social
world. Bourdieu fiercely opposed Rational Action Theory as grounded in a misunderstanding of how social agents operate. Social agents do not, according to Bourdieu, continuously calculate according to explicit rational and economic criteria. Rather, social agents operate according to bodily know-how and practical dispositions. Social agents operate according to their “feel for the game” (the “feel” being, roughly, habitus, and the “game” being the field) with agents enculturated to certain dispositions, with certain schemes of thinking and acting that are regarded as the only right way to do things, not in the sense of having been chosen as better than other ways, but as the only way, the “natural” (doxic) way to act. Taken as an entire system of schemes of perception, appreciation, and action, these dispositions constitute what Bourdieu terms the habitus. It is the habitus that lends order to customary social behaviour by functioning as the generative basis of structured, objectively unified practices. (Bourdieu 1977: vii)

“...in short, the habitus, the product of history, produces individual and collective practices, and hence history, in accordance with the schemes engendered by history. The system of dispositions - a past which survives in the present and tends to perpetuate itself into the future by making itself present in practices structured according to its principles, an internal law relaying the continuous exercise of the law of external necessities (irreducible to immediate conjunctural constraints) -is the principle of the continuity and regularity which objectivism discerns in the social world without being able to give them a rational basis.” (Bourdieu, 1977; 82)

Instead of analyzing societies in terms of classes (in my case caste), Bourdieu (1977) uses the concept of field: A social arena in which people maneuver and struggle in pursuit of desirable resources. According to Bourdieu (1990) a field is a network of social relations among the objective positions within it. It is not a set of interactions or intersubjective ties among individuals. Social agents act strategically depending on their habitus in order to enhance their capital. It is a type of competitive marketplace in which economic, cultural, social, and symbolic powers are used. The pre-eminent field is the field of politics, from which a hierarchy of power relationships serves to structure all other fields. The field of power (politics) is peculiar in that it exists “horizontally” through all of the fields and the struggles within it control the “exchange rate” of the forms of
cultural, symbolic, or physical capital between the fields themselves. A field is constituted by the relational differences in position of social agents, and the boundaries of a field are demarcated by where its effects end. According to Bourdieu (1986) to analyze a field, one must first understand its relationship to the political field and also has to map the objective positions within a field. Finally, the nature of the habitus of the agents who occupy particular positions within the field with varying amounts of species (cultural, social, symbolic and economic) capital can be mapped. It thus follows that fields are historical constellations that arise, grow, change shape, and sometimes wane or perish, over time. (Wacquant, 1998, Bourdieu and Wacquant, 2002)

These agents act strategically depending on their habitus in order to enhance their capital. Bourdieu (1984) examines the social construction of objective structures with an emphasis on how people perceive and construct their own social world, but without neglecting how perception and construction is constrained by structures. An important dynamic in this relationship is the ability of individual actors to invent and improvise within the structure of their routines.

According to Bourdieu (1990) the system of dispositions people acquire depends on the (successive) position(s) they occupy in society, that is, on their particular endowment in capital. Thus for Bourdieu (1986), a capital is any resource effective in a given social arena that enables a social actor to appropriate the specific profits arising out of participation and contest in it. Capital comes in three principal forms: economic (material and financial assets), cultural (scarce symbolic goods, skills, and titles), and social (resources accrued by virtue of membership in a group). A fourth species, symbolic capital, designates the effects of any form of capital when actors do not perceive them as such (as when we attribute moral qualities). The position of any individual, group, or institution, in social space may thus be mapped on two planes, the overall volume and the composition of the capital (different forms of capital) they control and the third coordinate, which determines the variation over time of this volume and composition- it records the trajectory of the social actors/institutions through
social space and provides clues as to their habitus by revealing the manner and path through which they reached the position they presently occupy. But in modern societies, social agents usually do not face an undifferentiated social space. The various spheres of life, art, science, religion, the economy, law and politics, tend to form distinct microcosms endowed with their own rules, regularities, and forms of authority -what Bourdieu (1990) terms as fields. (Wacquant, 1998, Bourdieu and Wacquant, 2002)

Having briefly outlined the comprehensive and dynamic element of Bourdieu’s (1977, 1986, and 1990) theorizations and conceptions, I argue that his insights are useful in comprehending and capturing the vibrant nature of social and political group formations. In this thesis I invoke the Bourdieun perspective to argue how the caste can be construed as social capital and how this social capital enables organisation of rule. In doing so I seek to overcome the problems that caste as a concept is beset with and instead I endeavour to examine how individuals and social groups organize through social networking (using cultural, social and symbolic capital) for political ends.

It is in this context that I ask how do individuals and social groups reorganize themselves to take the challenge posed by power, and create new models to organize themselves through new imaginings that reflect the categories framed by power? What are the strategies that these social imaginary enable? Through which institutions and practices do these strategies operate? How are requisite species of capital and value systems internalized by actors through everyday practice? By taking the example of ‘Marathas’, which is deemed to be a caste (or even a caste cluster) I ask if the ‘Maratha’ is a continually refashioned social network? ‘Maratha’ has been defined variously by those in power and by individuals who profess to be ‘Marathas’. I am arguing that ‘Marathas’ is a political formation.

In order to substantiate my argument that caste is really a form of social networking (social capital), in this thesis I choose one social group/political formation termed as ‘Maratha’. I reasoned that by examining the ‘Marathas’ as a
case, I may be able to overcome the limitations faced by scholars such as Sirsikar (1970, 1994), Lele (1982, 1990), Palshikar (1994, 2002), Vora (1996) R. Deshpande (1998) and R. Deshpande and Palshikar (2008) i.e. that the ‘Maratha’ (Maratha-Kunbi) is a tightly knit caste cluster. Lele (1982, 1990) has argued that this caste cluster is unique as it constitutes 31% of the total population of the State and thus does not require the support of any other caste group to rule. Further he has argued that the organisation of the Maratha caste cluster could take place despite its internal stratification (in terms of classes and jatis) through hegemony. But in his analysis he does not examine the processes and everyday practices through which ideology operates to actualize hegemony. Moreover, if one accepts this logic it becomes difficult to imagine how hegemony alone can bind this 30 million (2001 census) individuals together over long periods of time. This reasoning also assumes that this caste cluster as relatively immutable and permanent reproducing itself generation after generation. It cannot explain the journey of how the ‘Marathas’ got organized in the period from the colonial to the post-colonial. Another problem with such kind of analysis that uses a received meaning of post facto categories such as caste is that it tends to view strategies such as kinship, the operationalisation of the ideology of martial race, signs, symbols through the structuralist prism as rules rather than as strategies. It is no wonder that their argument slips into the positivist framework i.e. of examining the opus operatum (post fact) rather than the modus operandi. The term ‘Maratha’ has meant different social formations at various historical junctures (colonial and post colonial contexts) - from akin to a region to meaning a particular social and political formation to meaning a peasant group. (P. Deshpande, 2004, 2006)

Thus for political scientists (Sirsikar, 1970, 1994, Lele, 1982, 1990, Palshikar, 1994, 2002, Vora, 1996 and Deshpande 1998, Deshpande and Palshikar, 2008) the question is how Maratha-Kunbi caste cluster became a political bloc. By doing this these scholars collapse many phenomenon and processes (mobilisation based on class, ethnicity, race among others) into one category i.e. caste. I am instead suggesting that the ‘Maratha’ is a layered term and instead examine it as a
political formation. It constantly evolved and in time came to be recognized as a political formation (social capital) which was effected through various models and strategies (cultural, symbolic capital). These capitals could be operationalised due to the organizations of certain social imaginaries which were context contingent. This I argue is a way out of absolutism and offers us a perspective through which to assess the dynamism of the societal phenomenon which ingrains within it a sense of time and space.

I argue that there were many ways of interpreting the social category connoted as ‘Maratha’ – it meant a territory, it was also understood as a social group that was interconnected through kinship networks, through the ‘kshtriya’ ideology in the sense that any individual performing the kshtriya role as in through military service was also imagined as ‘Maratha’. It was also imagined through the notion of being a peasant group (as Kunbis). To be accepted as kshtriya either one had to have right kind of decent or kinship or one could acquire it through an embodied form of cultural capital—through particular forms of masculinities i.e. by disciplining one’s body and habitus through socially recognized masculine sports as is demonstrated through the ‘talims’ (gymnasiums or social sports clubs). One could also become part of the ‘Marathas’ by way of possessing wealth or on the basis of possessing power/influence (symbolic capital).

I am arguing that individual actors and social groups coalesced together through social imaginaries for particular political and economic interests to form larger political formations. These political groupings were really a manifestation of strategies for organizing networks and capital for survival and reproduction by the indigenous actors. These groupings sometimes did reflect certain attributes of caste (such as endogamy, occupational preference, and ritual purity) but were not exclusively determined by these principles. For instance in the colonial period any native who owned or cultivated land could be termed as Kunbi and in the early 20th century all Kunbis claimed to be ‘Marathas’—suggesting that this system was not completely and exclusively based on endogamy or ritual purity but rather on the skill of individuals, the capital they possessed and the strategies that they
employed in various contexts and fields that allowed them to be a part of and to use this political platform. These strategies of constructing a social imaginary is actually the ‘modus operandi’ and consisted of operationalisation of social phenomenon ranging from class, ethnicity, race, gender among others rather than restricted to just caste. However, these strategies and social imaginings were misrecognised by the colonial state as caste and legitimated through the census and other related bureaucratic registers. This colonial episteme soon got embedded in the social science paraphernalia first through the discipline of anthropology and sociology and then to others such as political science and economics.

The question that comes to mind is how do individuals and social groups become part of a social imaginary? For which one needs to first ask what is social imaginary? According to Lacan (1989) social imaginary may be understood in a broad sense, in which aspects such as images, fantasies, and illusions are seen as relevant to the constitution of subjectivity. It is through this social imaginary a common identifiable cultural illusion is instituted- based on certain common values, norms, symbols, signs, language, laws and ideology. As Parker (1997) surmises

“...an imaginary sense of position from which to experience the real. This imaginary mediation is compounded by the entry into language, into the symbolic order in which there is mediation not only of self-identity but also of the identity of others...” (Parker, 1997:218-219)

In this sense, the subject’s identification is related to the ‘other’, and is not an individual developing outside the social. Therefore, it is not possible to approach the imaginary realm without taking into consideration the symbolic networks that structure it. Social imaginary as elaborated here connects with many aspects of discourse- as discourses include images, texts, and ideas and so on. But more importantly discourses make explicit a political position when it highlights power relationships and thus social imaginings which stem from such discourses may be deemed to be a strategies for political mobilizations- by inventing illusions of ‘we-ness’. In my thesis I examine ways of forging “we-ness” i.e ‘being a
community’ of the ‘Marathas’ -the ideology, processes and practices through which individuals and groups internalized these value systems that suggest a unified social experience i.e. of social imaginary called ‘Maratha’ which connoted different meaning at disparate points of time.

In India there were two phases of construction of these fields i.e. the colonial and the post independence period. In the colonial period some mobile individuals and social groups/communities were able to access such fields which were coterminous with interests of the colonial authorities. In the post independence period the fields got reconstructed in the context of electoral democracy. Power was now routed in and through the state. The principle of one person one vote now created spaces for the organisation of new forms of political blocs and coalitions. In some States these political formations took the form of newer networks that cut across primordial identities to from political blocs (political scientists deem them to be caste coalition and clusters). Modern institutions of education and sports together with decentralized and local state institutions such as the Panchayati Raj Institutions and cooperatives enabled ‘reimagining’ and identification with newer political groupings.

In this thesis I argue that these strategies were inaugurated through the production of various discourses by disparate sections amongst the indigenous actors of the Deccan. The interfaces between these various native discourses and its interface with the ever shifting social imaginings of the ‘ethnographic’ colonial state led to certain discourses of ‘Maratha’ becoming the dominant imagination at particular points of time. ‘Maratha’ as imagined as territorial to ‘Maratha’ as a parochial inclusive kshriya kin group, to ‘Maratha’ as an inclusive political formation of the peasantry.

My thesis examines how the ‘Marathas’ organized through various strategies and due to certain colonial contexts and practices and also assess how from the 1940s onwards the ‘Marathas’ expand their power in the various fields and create new ones enabling them to reach the zenith of their rule until the 1970s. I argue that
from the early 20th century a section of the ‘Marathas’ as an imagined group take up the mantle as the leaders of the non-Brahmin communities in the Bombay Provinces (later in other regions of Deccan which today constitute Maharashtra). They claimed to promote the interests of the peasant and associated artisan communities and thus came to represent them. This becomes quite evident from the colonial recordings of 1919 when under dyarchy (Montague-Chelmsford reforms) the peasantry is provided electoral reservations under the nomenclature ‘Maratha’ and allied castes. This meant that to be part of the ‘Maratha’ nomenclature was thus profitable and hence indigenous actors devised and operationalised various strategies such as inventing ‘kshtriya’ lineage (which I argue is the strategy of kingship), through marriage and kin practices and also by developing one’s habitus and body in a peculiar form of masculinity through practice of certain socially acceptable masculine sports such as wrestling (in talims i.e. gymnasioums) and also by partaking in educational efforts of ‘Marathas’. In the colonial and post colonial period ‘Maratha’ as a category was imagined variously depending on the political context and interests of leadership of this imaginary - it was a layered imagining which shifted in meaning and was impinged upon by historically contingencies. In the post colonial period ‘Marathas’ were deemed to include all non-Brahmin communities- it was employed as a social imaginary to oust Shetjis and Bhattjis (non-Marathi speaking businessmen and Brahmins). After the formation of the State of Maharashtra in 1960 the category became more specific and came to represent only those individuals who could justify their membership either through kinship or ‘kshtriya’ past. Most importantly by organizing a social imaginary called ‘Marathas’ its stakeholders inaugurated new fields in the post 1960 period that required new strategies for entry- capitals. This exclusive group captured power and all members who constituted this group became part of this rule which created a potential for accessing the spoils of the state (though the volume and share of the prize was unequally received, depending on how much capital an individual possessed). Additionally the ‘Marathas’ ensured electoral success by controlling access to cooperatives, panchayati raj institutions, State level
Congress party, lower level bureaucracy among others through the field of politics/power.

This thesis is divided into eight chapter including the introduction and conclusion. In chapter two I undertake a review of literature on caste, class and its relationship in the organisation of power in the Indian democracy. This chapter engages the received meaning of caste present in existing discourse on caste and politics- it questions the unproblematic manner through which societal phenomenon is placed in the convenient methodological concept called caste thereby essentialising it. I trace the lineage of the concept of caste and argue that it is embedded in the colonial episteme and how it proves to be unsatisfactory in explaining social and political formations. I explore how Bourdieu’s (1990) theorization of social capital may enable us to overcome the limitations posed by existing methodologies that seek to explain societal mobilizations through the colonial classificatory system of caste. To be precise I ask can ‘caste’ (as employed unproblematically in social sciences- a category that follows certain rules) be comprehended as agency i.e. as social capital. I also ask how Bourdieu’s theorization of reproduction of power helps escape the many loopholes that the discourse on caste and politics has been unable to satisfactorily answer. While outlining Bourdieu’s (1977, 1986, 1990) theory of practice I examine the importance of human agency (while of course taking into consideration structures that limit and shape this agency) i.e. how actors through their habitus employ various strategies to ensure survival and reproduction. I introduce the concept of social capital and also explore its relationship to fields, habitus, stakeholders and species of capital and how these in turn organize power. The second chapter outlines the methodology I employ for this research. My research reconstructs social imaginings, memories, interpretations and reinterpretations of the past (since late 19th century till 1970s) and argues that the ‘Maratha’ is a social imaginary and has had several connotations depending on the historical contingencies particular points in time. There is a misrecognition in social science wherein scholars attempt to collapse such a relational, subjective and contested
identity movement into a routinised and immanent category i.e. caste. Therefore the methodology I employ is based on historical reconstruction and interpretative sociology. Primary sources include documents within the archives and the public domain (newspapers, pamphlets, diaries, official papers and communications) together with case studies, interviews, narratives and life histories. Secondary sources are review of literature in social sciences, articles published in journals and books.

In chapter three, I outline the political economy of the Deccan (and especially of the Bombay Provinces) from the early 19th to the 1970s when the ‘Maratha’ rule was at its peak. I examine how changes in the political economy (inauguration of capitalism and ‘modern’ governance structures) lead to organisation of various fields. These fields such as the military, bureaucracy, judiciary, legislature, education among others demanded specific kinds of capital. In pursuance of this objective I explore how the indigenous actors devised various strategies of accumulating these species of capital i.e. cultural, symbolic and social. I ask how this entails reorganization of individuals and groups sometimes manifest as political and social formations that circumvent Varna ideology and practice. However as mentioned earlier, this process of forming interest groups was deemed to be caste by the colonial state and this position was legitimated through the colonial registers. It is in this context that I locate the term ‘Marathas’ and ask if it can be construed narrowly only as a caste or can be deemed to be a political formation. I examine how the term ‘Maratha’ is loaded with manifold meanings and is multi layered and has connoted various imaginings at disparate junctures of time and contexts. I map the journey of this imagining from the early 19th century into the post colonial period. I also explore how the fields in the post independence and post 1960 (when Maharashtra was inaugurated as a State) got enlarged and newer fields (cooperatives, panchayati institutions, local bureaucracy among others) emerged. I assess the role of various strategies such as kingship (Kshtriyaness), kinship, education, sports albeit in a transformed manner
continued to play an important role in the post independence period to access power.

In chapter four I take case studies to explore how the indigenous actors employed strategies of kinship and kinship to accumulate cultural, symbolic and social capital in order to access the fields set out in the colonial and post colonial period. With the introduction by the colonial state of the notion of martial races and the necessity of having a martial background to enter the military- ‘Marathas’ were now recognized as a martial race in the Deccan. This development set in motion a process whereby the indigenous actors organized strategies to become part of this imagining i.e. of becoming part of ‘Marathas’. For which the indigenous actors invoked past military heritage through the organisation of symbols, signs, value systems, sports among others. Kinship was also employed to demonstrate one’s martial lineage.

In chapter five I explore how strategies such as education and sports enabled the construction of this imagining called ‘Maratha’ and how these became conduits to qualify for becoming part of this imagined community. I trace the early efforts of forging educational civic societies by a section of the ‘Marathas’ since the early part of the 20th century. Similarly I explore how certain sporting institutions such as talims (gymnasiums) became sites of discipline the body through certain ‘masculine’ sports (such as wrestling) to organize embodied form of cultural capital to claim a ‘martial’ connection. I also assess how these sites became important recruitment grounds for enrolling in the military and police services in the colonial and post colonial contexts.

In chapter six I elaborate on the strategy that the native groups employed in order to construct a social imaginary of a large peasant group. This peasant group was mobilized under the category ‘Marathas’. I trace how certain colonial governance practices such as the introduction of dyarchy in 1919 facilitated the organisation of this imagining. I explore how various sections of peasantry with differential cultural backgrounds could coalesce as one imagined community. I also assess the
impact of this mobilisation in accruing resources by way of maneuvering in the delimited colonial fields. I ask how this peasant imaginary enables the 'Marathas' to acquire the moral leadership of the Samyukta Maharashtra Movement (SMM, a movement to demand the State of Maharashtra) and in the post 1960 become the legitimate heirs to claim political power.

In the seventh chapter I examine how from the 1960s onwards 'Marathas' capture political power in the State of Maharashtra. I argue that the 'Marathas' inaugurate policies and programmes in Maharashtra that address interests of the peasantry and in doing so it helps in sustaining the imaginary of 'Maratha' rule. I assess how the field of power structures entry into the cooperatives, the panchyati raj system, the State level Congress party, lowers levels of bureaucracy and also the State legislature. What are the species of capital required to accesses state resources? What are the strategies that the individuals draw up to become part of the 'Maratha' social imaginary? How do 'Marathas' benefit from the various capitals that they possess? I explore means and practices through which the 'Maratha' rule is sustained and reproduced. By rule I mean a the misrecognition that the 'Marathas' are a unified largest political bloc and it is through sheer numbers and resources that only this group can capture political power in the State. This happens through naturalization of the idea that 'Marathas' had a legacy of kingship (as kshtriyas they were always meant to rule) - a doxic condition in the minds of the masses.

In the conclusion I contend that to understand societal phenomenon in totality with all its complexity, one must account for temporality and spatiality. I argue that social scientists have misrecognised these multiple processes and placed them under a standardized concept called caste. For instance can one comprehend a political coalition such as KHAM or AJGAR through the narrow lens of caste? Can this perspective allow us to understand how and why do such culturally disparate groups coalesce in particular contexts and disperse overtime? Are these groups homogenous in constitution or are they fluid entities with flexible boundaries? In assessing societal phenomenon, this perspective relies much on
structuralism or on rules rather than on agency and on practice. This approach is anchored in examining the opus operatum rather than the modus operandi. One could also examine this phenomenon differently- why do individuals form a group? What are the strategies employed? How and under what circumstances do groups coalesce into political blocs? What are the social imaginaries that facilitate such a formation? What are the interests served? I contend that by essentialising caste and positing it as the focal axis through which such political and societal formations occur, it detemporalises the phenomenon and straight jackets complexities into monolith positivistic categories. It is in this context that I argue that 'caste' (in its misrecognised form) can be examined as a set of strategies that allow social and political formations i.e. social capital.