"Besides, history shows, that the social need not necessarily precede the political – it was not with the help of girls who went to school and studied till class four, that Shivaji established Maratha Rajya and the Peshwas hoisted the saffron flag."

B. G. Tilak, Kesari, 2nd March 1886.
The many struggles for social reform in nineteenth century Maharashtra reflected the complex process of class formation and determined the course that history would follow in defining parameters for the nation. Each stream debated the issues of caste oppression, the position of women, education as a key to progress, and, quite self-reflexively, the purpose of reform; each issue became a battleground for the articulation of conservative and liberal positions. The question of caste, particularly, was the site of acrimonious debate within the post-colonial context and was interpreted by a large section of the ‘liberal’ upper castes as a matter of the division of labour.\(^1\) Similarly, questions of gender (such as the role of women in the family, women’s education, child marriage, and *sati*) sparked arguments from diametrically opposed political positions. The more conservative discourse sought to use religion, the family and the idea of nation to strengthen the existing social structures. Women like Pandita Ramabai, for instance, who were among the earliest to raise their voice against women’s oppression can only be understood in this context of religious sanctions for social difference.\(^2\) Her understanding of gendered social hierarchies makes it possible for her to deal with questions of sexuality and the function of relationships within the household economy.\(^3\) Many liberals believed that a degree of social as well as technological and educational ‘progress’ was necessary for successful autonomy, and subjected social institutions to scrutiny; a parallel debate was carried out with respect to political and economic institutions. The underlying assumption was that once social reform took place and certain goals were achieved, political autonomy would be a legitimate demand.

The political map of India at that time reveals a clash of political frameworks that would be played out in full as each argument attained a kind of discursive maturity at the turn of the century. These became the basis for many of the

\(^{1}\) The strongest critique of the caste system, which to this day inspires lower caste movements, came from Jyotirao Phule (1826-1890), who argued that caste was an intrinsic feature of Hinduism. Phule was a social reformer who started schools for both girls and untouchable boys, and founded the Satyashodhak Samaj, which advocated a rational approach and would not allow priests to teach children. See Chapter III.


\(^{3}\) For a very insightful analysis of how gender was constituted around class divisions in the time of Ramabai, refer to Uma Chakravarti, *Rewriting History: The Life and times of Pandita Ramabai*, Kali for Women in association with the Book Review Literary Trust, 1998, New Delhi.
constructions of history and nation that have left their imprints on Indian politics to this day.

I

Recruiting the Past for the Crises of the Present: The Case of B. G. Tilak

The arena of public debate on burning issues of the time was a rich political space for prominent figures at the turn of the century. B. G. Tilak was an important interlocutor of the colonial state, and his trajectory is a good instance of very active participation in building of public opinion on matters of social and political concern. In the scheme of this thesis, he is chosen as a representative of the effective mobilisation of Brahmanical opinion in politics in Maharashtra. Also, his scholarly as well as popular reinterpretation of Indian history speaks for his political location. As a part of our concern with constructions of history, the questions surrounding gender, law, caste and religion and Tilak’s positions on some of these issues need to be addressed, because they were the questions along which the axes of anti-colonial resistance were being fashioned, and around which history was also being reassessed in view of contemporary social divisions. As we shall see in the course of this and the next chapter, it was finally the role of ideology to harness histories for wider political applications, and it is very interesting to see the transition of historical ‘fact’ to political-ideological tool. In this discussion, a sense of Tilak’s politics in the socio-political arena needs to be reconstructed around his role in contemporary debates and movements around the issues of religion, community identity gender and the related role of the colonial state. His position on specific issues like the Age of Consent controversy, and his efforts in the initiation of the Ganapati and Shivaji festivals would be particularly illustrative examples, primarily because they call into focus relevant details about Tilak’s positions and also because they had a lasting effect in determining the constituents of a Maharashtrian identity.

The vital key to understanding Tilak’s politics is the social section he represented. The issues that shall be discussed here were some of the many occasions on which his consistent opposition to the reformers was played out. While some historians feel that the differences might not after all have been in any sense fundamental, they certainly shaped not only Tilak’s role in the public debates of the
time, but also made it a political option for a specific social group.\textsuperscript{4} The growth of the public sphere and the by now entrenched tradition of English education had changed the nature of sanction sought in debates on social and political matters. The debates on reform were becoming increasingly more realistic, after having witnessed very mild and not entirely popular kinds of revivalism on the 1840s.\textsuperscript{5} However, it might be conjectured that such strains of revivalism did recognise the appeal of a new religion preached in the vocabulary of egalitarianism, and critical of Brahmanism, particularly for those who were, so to speak, outside the fold. Consequently this kind of revivalism contains within its mode of expression, also an attempt to keep a more popular audience. And of course, as the political canvas was being painted, religious identity became just one of the components, and in fact for this reason widely effective as a way of reworking history than religious revivalism without a popular political agenda was able to command. Political discourse at the turn of the century was sharper and relied more on its internal coherence and contemporary class and caste interests than on the words of the traditional literati – \textit{shastris} – and displayed a remarkable awareness of liberal ideas. Tilak represents a particular, more lasting and greatly more sophisticated appropriation of history, and moulding of religion and tradition as political categories. While there are many instances of Tilak having shared a common position with figures like Ranade on, for instance, the issue of advocating women’s education and raising the age of marriage, he gave voice and support to the conservative opinion based largely in Poona. Poona had not seen the kind of economic transformation that Bombay had, for instance, and its caste and class hierarchies were largely undisturbed. They were, however, very aware of the threat to their superior position, and at the same wished to participate in the public space to guarantee protection for their social segment, which was fairly substantial. In this respect, the Age of Consent Bill, and the establishment of the Shivaji and Ganapati festivals “maybe best regarded as perhaps a political utilisation of an already existing reality – for personally he was hardly an obscurantist.”\textsuperscript{6} His position on


\textsuperscript{5} This is with reference to the likes of Vishnubawa Brahachari. Cf., Frank Conlon, “The Polemic Process in Nineteenth-Century Maharashtra: Vishnubawa Brahachari and Hindu Revival”, in Kenneth Jones, ed, \textit{Religious Controversy in British India}, Dialogues in South Asian Languages, State University of New York Press, 1992. Vishnubawa’s revivalist agenda did not quite gain the popularity that Dayanand saw in Punjab and Gujarat. His engagement with the question of tradition and religion was highly polemical and designed to contest the influence of the missionaries.

some issues of the time in fact yoked together the allegiance of the Brahmans who were perpetually anxious about losing the caste structure on account of their privileged position in it. I have specifically chosen these as illustrative, because the former illustrates rather well the contemporary concern over the role of colonial law, the interpretation of tradition and the location as women as objects — not active agents — of contemporary politics. The festivals are symbolic of the initiatives taken by leaders like Tilak, as part of the many heterogeneous contentions with the colonial state of the construction of a regional-religious identity, backed by a specific view of history within the new paradigms of nationalism.

Age of Consent, tradition and the missing child-wife

Many areas of women’s life were under the political magnifying lens because women were the site in which rules of social mobility, caste and class location were enshrined. The gender question was often a matter used by the colonial state in varying degrees to bring home the notion of ‘backwardness’ of Indian social practices. In the tussle with the colonial state over the autonomy of various institutions — legal, educational, economic — gender became an area to contradict this very idea of backwardness. At the same time, what was at stake was the institution of the family, and patriarchal control over women to determine position within the social hierarchy. Quite naturally, therefore, women are the objects of the debates swirling around the gender question, which had at their root immense anxiety over the threat to the role of the family within the contemporary caste and class structure, which Brahmanical patriarchy sought to defend. The language of the debate on women’s education, age of marriage, participation in the public space etc., does not address the matter even remotely in the language of rights.\(^7\)

\(^7\) This should not let us forget figures like Phule, who do not fit the above description. In his case the question of rights of women is conceptualised in terms of and equality of genders. Also, Phule is not important because we can hold up his record on the schools for girls and orphanages he taught in and opened, but because of his theorisation on Brahmanical patriarchy on which he centered his sense of gendered and caste oppression. In fact, he was among the few who publicly defended Ramabai at the peak of attacks on her in various forms, especially after her conversion and the scandal over the alleged conversion of inmates in her school.
To speak in more specific terms, widowhood, and the practices surrounding the circumscription of a widow within the family were taken up by the reformers in a significant way. In the various debates around the area, the one feature that emerged responsible for this social ill was the practice of child marriage. Behramji Malabari’s initiatives and his recommendations of various methods of discouraging this practice started the process of a demand for legislation on this issue. The colonial state, which was not particularly interested in carrying out these measures, hid behind the argument that they could not oppose with legislation what was very deeply entrenched social custom. The reformers were not amenable to the proposition either. They went ahead to propose that instead of a fresh legislation on child-marriage, there could be an amendment of an already existing law on the age of consent, passed in 1860, which fixed the minimum age of consent for sexual intercourse with a girl as 10 years. They proposed that instead of 10, it be raised to 12 years. This proposal clearly shifted the focus from the issue of child-marriage to when a man could legally have intercourse with his child-wife. It also created the possibility that rape within marriage would have to be recognised, which English law did not, on the grounds that marriages were considered consensual. It also followed in the wake of the death of Phulmonee Debi, a 10-year-old girl, due to forcible intercourse by her 35-year-old husband, Harmaiti in 1890. The judge who gave the verdict in the case, proceeded on the grounds that since she was over 10 years of age — the age of consent for legitimate sexual intercourse — there was no possibility of rape, and built his case on the hypothesis that the couple had slept together earlier. He proceeded to ignore the testimonies of Phulmoni’s mother and aunt and other women relatives to the contrary, and took the husband’s word for it, finally exempting the husband as well as the brutal practice of child marriage from criticism and legal censure. This event caused a great deal of uproar not merely upon the judgement but also upon the entire practice and the role of men within the institution. The government therefore passed the bill raising the age of consent to 12 years. The debate surrounding this bill was fierce, and engulfed larger issues of tradition and the role of the colonial judiciary etc. As Uma Chakravarti has observed, it became an issue in which arguments in favour of these

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8 Cf., Tanika Sarkar, “Rhetoric against the Age of Consent, Resisting Colonial Reason and Death of a Child-wife, Economic and Political Weekly, September 4, 1993, for a specific case study of the Phulmonee case, and for an analysis of the debate of the age of consent, with specific reference to Bengal.

9 Ibid, p. 1874.
traditional social practices had to be upheld by conservative opinion, and "... since Phulmoni, unlike Rakhmabai, could not be attacked, nor could Harmaiti be publicly defended, the issues raised were those of religion and 'nation', and the autonomy of an alien state to legislate on the nature of Hindu marriage."\textsuperscript{10} The virulent opposition to the bill was articulated around the idea that it went against the prescriptions of the \textit{shastras} and that the colonial state could not make legislations which violated the basic life-principles and social practices of the Hindus. The conservative lobby, which was led by Tilak in Maharashtra, went back to classical religious sources to say that it was mandatory for the marriage to be consummated as soon as the girl achieved puberty. In Bengal, this position was represented by R.C Mitter, in which a text by one Raghunandan was held up to demonstrate that there were actually injunctions to the householder in classical traditions that a marriage had to be consummated immediately after the onset of menstruation for the first time "to complete the \textit{garbhodhanam}, thereby ensuring the purity of the womb and of the future offspring".\textsuperscript{11} Reformers like Telang successfully defended the bill on the grounds that it was the duty of the state and the legislature to defend the rights of its individual subjects to ensure their safety, which was endangered as shown by the case of Phulmoni and many such other cases. Telang was also against the idea that there were spaces sacred beyond the state's intervention.\textsuperscript{12}

The Age of Consent Bill is a historical landmark because it brought as its focus the enduring association between the woman's body, her sexuality and the larger good of the nation.\textsuperscript{13} The debate entered the territory of women's health as well as the uncertain ground in which the sanctity of the institution of marriage had to be maintained. The reform logic employed medical evidence - both ancient and modern - and the anti-Bill lobby used arguments based on rights and duties of the Hindu householder. The whole spectrum of positions struggled to deal with the issue of rape within marriage, the role of adherence to tradition whether recommendatory or

\textsuperscript{11} Ibid, p. 178.
\textsuperscript{12} "No proclamation could override that duty especially if the \textit{shastras} and customs meant torture and death to individual women - of rather minor girls. Equally decisively Telang was rejecting the implicit argument that governmental authority could not go into certain sacred spaces - the marital bed - which the opponents of the Bill were representing as central to the 'religious' observance of the Hindus". Ibid, p. 179.
\textsuperscript{13} See Uma Chakravarti, \textit{Rewriting History}, in which she has highlighted this connection as it unfolded in Maharashtra and Bengal, p 175-186.
mandatory, and whether the law – especially of a foreign government – had the right to intervene. Tilak’s own position on the matter is very sharply articulated on similar lines – the question here is of tradition, and that the colonial state cannot be allowed to penalise its male subjects into violating sacred laws. In a reply to the arguments put forth by Bhandarkar and Telang, he wrote a letter to the Mahratta on 29th January 1891 (published on 1st February 1891). He argues in this letter, that the shastras have fixed the date of the consummation of marriage at the onset of puberty, and that when there is any question regarding the Hindu law in a court of law, then the shastras are adhered to, not because they are taken to be fabrications of priests’ imaginations, but because the recommendations of the shastras also have the sanctity of daily practice. He says,

"thus both the written and the unwritten law enjoin consummation of marriage on the first attainment of puberty and the Bill if passed into law, will interfere with the religious custom, at least in 6 cases out of 126, according to the statistics given by the Honourable mover of the Bill himself".14

Typically, he says that the Queen’s proclamation of 1858 precludes the possibility that the law will actually do anything about it.15 And,

"[B]ut it may be clearly shown that the Bill, which proposes to protect a girl till 12, is less humane in its operation, than the Hindu Shastras and custom which prohibit intercourse before the occurrence of a certain well-known physical condition, which takes place in 95 cases out of 100 later than the age of 12. Indeed, there is much that can be said in favour of the Shastric period for the consummation in preference to the numerical limit of 12 years, which admittedly violates the injunction of the Shastras unless accompanied by an exception for cases of puberty before 12."16

In his opinion, the difference between what the shastras suggest as obligatory and recommendatory precepts, is not very great, and that even if they are merely recommendatory, they are equally binding. He stresses particularly that the law cannot be allowed to intervene in the sphere of religious practice, and in reply to those reformers who had previously argued that legislation on this issue would not amount to interference with tradition, he says,

15 In fact, he hails the proclamation, and says that it is the correct position on such matters, for according to the shastras the king should leave people’s customs as they are, otherwise he shall cause discontent. He also employs Manu to affirm this view. Ibid, p. 972.
16 Ibid, p. 972.
"...suppose for argument's sake that a certain precept is recommendatory only, in the sense in which Telang understands the expression. Does it follow that if the legislature seeks to alter it, it will be no interference? ...A[n] instance would be that of idolatry, which the Hindu shastras do not make obligatory. In this case would it not be a clear interference with our religious law and custom if Government were to abolish idolatry and restrict it in favour of certain idols alone?"\footnote{Ibid, p. 975.} 

The following is not to be missed:

"In the present instance, the proper period of consummation of marriage is clearly laid down in the Shastras and when this is followed in daily practice, the bill cannot but interfere with it. It is no use to plead that we 'sometimes' delay such consummation in practice. Mr Telang would have done valuable service by proving that the custom does not prevail generally. But so long as this cannot be shown, the bill would, to say the least, take away the liberty allowed to the people by the Shastras and the custom."\footnote{Ibid, p. 975.}

What is particularly disturbing about this response is that there is absolutely no heed to the statistics quoted by the reformers about the number of deaths and permanent damage to the health of these young girls. Moreover, there is not a single reference to the girl wife, her rights and her emotional and physical health, just as there is no reference to the duties of the husband. It is a completely brutal, typically brahmanical-patriarchal concern with the logic of tradition and the urgency of upholding it at all costs. All this is particularly interesting also in the light of the fact that the same lot of people represented by Tilak, who opposed the Bill, were also responsible for setting up cow-protection societies, and were vehemently demanding legislation to safeguard cows!\footnote{This bill was being opposed because law ought not to be allowed to interfere in daily practices since it would meddle with what had been lain down by scriptural tradition. Of course, the irony of the same lot of people asking colonial law to intervene in another sphere to actually protect so-called tradition cannot be missed. Sumit Sarkar, Modern India, p 71.} In an editorial in the Kesari, he argues that if the reformers had, instead of agreeing to the 12 year limit, set the limit at the attainment of maturity, they would have had a resounding response in favour of the Bill. Before ending the editorial by calling the sabha held to gather support in favour of the Bill a farce, he says that

"...they (the reformers) probably assumed that this would somehow mean tacitly supporting outdated religious beliefs, and so these men full of very western ideas of reform ignored it completely"\footnote{B.G. Tilak, Kesari, 24th February, 1891, p 2, my translation.}
This was a particular brand of conservatism, which saw to it that while its politics at one level claimed to oppose the colonial state and its legal and political legitimacy, it insisted on abiding by its own internal logic of gender relations and patriarchy. Tilak’s position even in the Rakhmabai case – in which Rakhmabai, who had been married to one Dadaji Dhakji as a minor, then later refused to live with him and applied for divorce – illustrates this particular use of tradition against the colonial state. In an editorial in the Kesari of 22nd March 1887, he argued that while it was important that the position of women had to be improved, it was not an end that could be achieved through the espousal of causes of women like Rakhmabai. He said in the same editorial that while there were thousands of men living happily with their minor wives, was it not surprising that Rakhmabai should file for divorce? In his opinion, he states clearly, that not liking the man you are married to cannot be sufficient grounds for divorce, even if it was without your consent, adding that consent in any case was a tricky thing, because while there is nothing wrong with marrying with the consent of both the parties concerned, it was open for everyone to see that even such marriages were prone to being full of disturbances. In this manner he puts out the question of consent as a mere matter of debate, at the same time also successfully highlighting for the reading public that the real contest was between the state and the upholders of Hindu tradition – as though what was at stake was not the emotional and physical well-being of child wives and their rights, but the authority and sanction of Hindu religion. Uma Chakravarti has pointed out that in the pre-colonial period, the state monitored female sexuality through the community and did not have direct access to such regulation. “Through this legislation, the colonial state had for the first time assumed authority, defined as protection, over the child-wife, superseding the authority and the rights of the husband. The fundamental point to the Tilakian

21 Mohini Varde has written a biography of Rakhmabai in Marathi, and for anyone able to read Marathi and working in this area, it is a must read. Of course, all our scholarly work gives Rakhmabai only enough space to recount this single event of her life as part of a discussion on gender in the nineteenth century. Her case is useful and famous and illustrative. No one ever discusses what she went on to do. She went on to study medicine and worked for the rest of her life, providing very valuable healthcare to women. Mohini Varde, Rakhmabai: Ek Arta, Popular Prakashan, Bombay, 1982.

22 B.G. Tilak, Kesari, 22nd March, 1887, in Samagra Lokamanya Tilak, Vol 5, p 204. His phraseology is interesting: “Aamchya striyanchi unnati hone aavashyak aaehe he aamhi kabool karto. Pan yaa vrutha sudhararakans aameche itkech saangne aaehe ki, ti sudharana ardhyaakhalkundaa divilya honoraya rakhmhabaisarkhyaa ajaanatya strichyaa haatoon kadhiihi bhavayaarchi nahi. Aaj hajaaro purush aaplya ajaanatya baaykaanbarbarbarkhaane naanadat aaheet. Ase astaanaa dhyaanavadurvidagdha streene aaplaa bhrataar aapnaans yogya naahi mhanoon aapnaans kaadi modoon dyaa ashi kortaat firyaad karavi hi aashcharyaachchi goshta navhe kaay?” All translations from the Marathi unless otherwise stated, are mine.
resistance to the Bill was as much a statement that female sexuality must remain a subject of caste and community control (but not of course of the women concerned) which the state, especially the alien state, must keep away from and not erode.\textsuperscript{23}

In winding the threads of gender and tradition irretrievably, Tilak was successful in shaping the public debate away from an agenda of rights of women within the family, and away from the disturbing questions regarding the institution of marriage itself. In this, he was able to bring together the voices of conservative anti-colonialism, which were interested in the maintenance of the social status quo and the safeguarding of their class interests. A further role of defining the parameters of the nation was played by the Shivaji and the Ganapati festivals that he actively participated in founding, and which have proved to be lasting markers of identity in a highly communalised politics in western India.

\textit{Ganapati and Shivaji: Gods and history on the street corner}

It is the same recruitment of tradition and history that we witness in the founding of these festivals in Tilak's time. Ganapati as a deity was largely part of the private space, though he did enjoy special attention from the Peshwas in their time. The Ganapati festival was celebrated publicly, but did not have the form that it was to take after Tilak's intervention. In the footsteps of the Hindu-Muslim riots in the Deccan, the festival was given shape by Tilak as a public festival with participation not merely of families, but of residential areas as communities. The scale and form of celebration changed, and have lasted in some fundamental sense till today. With Tilak's intervention, the change was visible in the massive \textit{mandaps} and large commissioned idols, and the coordination with which all these public idols were immersed on the tenth day of the festival unlike the domestic god which went to the river or well in the backyard in the second, fifth, or seventh day of the festival. "A more important change was the introduction of the \textit{mela} movement of singing-parties which were attached to the public Ganapatis. In many streets, \textit{wadas} (compounds), or \textit{peths}, a \textit{mela}, composed of from twenty to several hundred singers, mostly boys and students, rehearsed verses in honour of the god and marched for weeks before the

\textsuperscript{23} Chakravarti, p. 185.
annual procession. Dressed in lavish costume, sometimes in the garb of Shivaji’s soldiers, armed with bamboo sticks decorated with coloured paper and emblems of Hinduism practised in dancing drilling and fencing, the mela was a colourful and ceremonious unit."\(^{24}\) There were impromptu songs, which were sharp with political comment.\(^{25}\) These songs urged the people to remember the significance of celebrating this festival, and remember also that it was important to uphold one’s religion, for it was under threat. These songs reveal an early shade of Hindu militancy, and in the wake of the Hindu-Muslim riots in the Deccan, exhort people to boycott the Muharram festival, which till then Hindus and Muslims had always celebrated together.\(^{26}\) The organisation of this festival had the specific agenda of cultivating a sense of a shared national culture defined by religious symbols. It did come under a lot of criticism for its expenses, and in reply, an editorial in the Kesari says,

"[T]his work will not be as strenuous and expensive as the work of the Congress. The educated people can achieve results through these national festivals, which it would be impossible for the Congress to achieve. Why shouldn’t we convert the large religious festivals into mass political rallies? Will it not be possible for political activities to enter the humblest cottages of the villages through such means? Will it not be possible to make available to our illiterate countrymen in the villages the moral and religious education which you [the educated people] have obtained after strenuous efforts."\(^{27}\)

Cashman has pointed out that this festival primarily succeeded in rallying the Brahmins behind Tilak, who perceived themselves as a threatened group.\(^{28}\) Those alienated by the reformers’ agenda saw the space in the program of Tilak for political expression otherwise not compatible with their class and social position. The logic behind such celebrations did not quite integrate other social groups in the manner

\(^{24}\) Richard Cashman, *The Myth of the Lokamanya*, University of California Press, 1975, p 77-8. This is one of the few works available that analyses the role of Tilak as a leader able to mobilise the Brahmins at the time, and his role as a public figure.

\(^{25}\) To this day, there are Ganapatis housed for 10 days by housing colonies, some of them also largely Brahmin in composition, which take the idol in a procession to the mandap as well as to the sea, and often these processions largely consist of men and children, mostly boys. Some organizers put up themes on topical issues, and most often from Hindu mythology or from currently popular films. Anand Patwardhan’s film Father, Son and Holy War has immortalized this particular scene which actually shows a bathing Mandakini – minimally clad and every now and then lifting a mug of water and pouring it down over herself – which the organizers of the festival explained as being a representation of the freedom of women before ‘Muslims invaded India’! Another helpful source among those present adds that it is actually an artist’s rendering of an aunt of Shivaji who had been bathing thus by the riverside when she was abducted by the marauding Muslims!

\(^{26}\) Richard Cashman, p 78.

\(^{27}\) Quoted in Cashman, p 79.

\(^{28}\) Ibid, p 80.
envisioned by Tilak. In the same year, 1894, Hindu participation in Muharram was marginal. The revivalist tone of the songs sung at these *melas* appealed to the sections, which had been affected by the changing political climate after the Deccan riots. In invoking a shared past with icons like Shivaji and the Peshwas, and criticising Hindu participation in festivals like the Muharram, the festival sought to bring together such sections. The *melas* tended to be divided along caste lines and when the processions finally got together, there was no way that the exercise could be used for any wider politicisation of the participants like Tilak had envisioned. Towards the beginning of the 20th century, the tone of the festival did become more overtly political, commenting on contemporary methods of anti-colonial resistance. But the festival on the whole did take on a life and shape of its own within its revivalist parameter.

Shivaji turned out to be a different kind of icon from Ganapati, by virtue of being a historical figure and holding ample potential for creative evocations of history. In Tilak’s formulation of nationalism, historical icons like Shivaji were crucial, and they were effectively combined with the religious nationalism of the time. In pointing out the need to rise as Hindus, he says, the need to put aside various disputes regarding difference between various sects had to be recognised. In a speech delivered at the gathering of the Bharat Dharma Mahamandal in Benares on 3rd January 1906 he said,

“so long as you are divided amongst yourselves, so long as one section does not recognise the affinity with another, you cannot hope to rise as Hindus. Religion is an element in nationality.”

(My italics).

The religious nationalist logic of the need to revive religion to revive national feeling is strong in this speech.

“During Vedic times, India was a self contained country. It was united as a great nation. That unity has disappeared bringing on us great degradation and it become the duty of the leaders to revive that union ...... The study of the Gita, Ramayana and Mahabharata produces the same ideas throughout the country.

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29 Cashman, p 80.
30 Interestingly, on the 25th August, 2001, a procession was held to commemorate 100 years of Tilak’s first visit to the area from Portuguese Church to Keshavji Naik Chawl in Kandewadi with women residents of the area, dressed in finery typical of the nineteenth century, the nine yard saree and the *nath*, and another resident dressed as Tilak. The procession was joined by a large number of Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh activists.
Arc not these – common allegiances to the Gita and the Ramayana – our common heritage? If we lay stress on it forgetting all the minor differences that exist between the various sects, then by the grace of Providence we shall ere long be able to consolidate all the different sects into a mighty Hindu nation. This ought to be the ambition of every Hindu.”

The story of the Shivaji festival started in fact with Ranade raising the issue of a memorial to Shivaji at Raigad, a key fort in Shivaji’s map, from where he conducted his affairs and where he was also crowned. Tilak took over from Ranade, and took the opportunity to carve out the space for a public festival as a method of bringing the masses closer to the politics of the Congress in which Tilak was active. The composition of those present at the meeting where the outlines and needs of a festival were drawn out was very heterogeneous, and an attempt was made to see that the eclectic shades of the assemblage were maintained. The agenda and purpose of remembering historical figures like Shivaji – and in his connection even Ramdas – was outlined in the editorials of the Kesari. In a piece on the memorial to Shivaji at Raigad, Tilak says

“it is natural that all Maharashtrians should feel proud of the achievements of Shivaji who immortalised the name of Marathas in contemporary history, and the name of Maharashtra - in fact of all of Hindustan – in world history. Those who are even minimally familiar with the importance of history, and those who understand what kind of bravery, staying power, enthusiasm and thoughtfulness is required to re-establish swarajya and swadharma that has been lost for thousands of years”

would understand the significance of commemorating the achievements of figures like Shivaji. In his opinion, the Shivaji festival is different from the Ramnavami, for example, because Ram was a divine incarnation and Shivaji was one like us, who had received divine inspiration. Shivaji can never become a myth like Ram as long as his achievements are being taught to children in schools as history, and as long as the fruits of his achievements are in front of our eyes. He stresses upon the role of such commemorative festivals in the consolidation of national feeling, and points out that those nations, which have successfully maintained cohesiveness among its people, have always put their great men to such use. Most importantly, in his eyes, the merits of such public celebration are to be seen in the coming together of various castes and

33 Cashman, p. 101.
34 Samagra Lokamanya Tilak, Vol 4, p 30, editorial published on 2nd July 1895.
social groups within the scope of this feeling of *rashtreeyatva*, and that Shivaji is one figure which can command the attachment and love of all sections of society.\(^{36}\) It is interesting to note, that with Shivaji, his alleged mentor Ramdas also gained prominence in this evocative reinterpretation of history. Ramdas, who Shivaji met only as late as in 1672 – Shivaji died eight years later – is said to have shown the path not of devotion, but of the effective admixture of religion and political duty, whereas the earlier saints in Maharashtra – a possible reference to the *bhakti* movement, which was mostly non-Brahmin in composition and ethos – had only shown a purely *dharmic* path to salvation, which in Tilak’s opinion was impractical.\(^{37}\) In the same write up, Ramdas and Shivaji are compared to Krishna and Arjun in the Mahabharata

“Shri Samartha Ramdas prepared the minds of the nation, and Shivaji built his army and the subjects. It is not something that can be achieved only through education. Shri Samartha Ramdas had not opened schools. A 100 to 125 of his disciples would wander in each district showing people that path of independence, freedom and salvation (*swarajya, swatantrya, and mokshaprapati*). (…) They did not teach people to read and write. They taught people how the resurgence of the nation and its prosperity could be achieved.”\(^{38}\)

In using Shivaji as a popular historical symbol, Tilak was attempting to define once again the link between political mobilisation, social divisions and revivalist nationalism, complete in the case of Shivaji with the martial aspect of Shivaji’s activities. In the case of this particular icon of the history of western India, and now very particularly of Maharashtra, it has since become a matter of highly conflicting appropriations based on how the class/caste nature of his ascendancy is interpreted.

The use of popular icons, the initiation of popular festivals and the writing of a history, which refers to contemporary debates on ancient Indian history, can help us position Tilak’s politics with sufficient accuracy. It would also help us understand the particular genus history and its link to a specific social class and its relation to the emerging contests for nationhood.

\(^{36}\) Ibid, p. 36.

\(^{37}\) Tilak points out, “*dharma aani vyavahar yaanchi jodi kashi ghaalaavi he Samartha Ramdasani shikavile*”, Samagra Lokamanya, Vol 6, p. 957.

\(^{38}\) Ibid, p. 960.
The Arctic Home: A Race Toward the Past

In this section on Tilak, apart from his use of history in the social sphere, we could also examine his actual writing on history – it is more direct and head-on, and tackles the question of the ancient history of an Aryan civilisation in the light of the recent arguments forwarded by formal historical and ethnological scholarship. The bone of contention here is the age of the Vedic civilisation – after all it matters in the colonial setting to be able to argue that it is after all much older than European scholars have been able to show, since such an assumption makes use of civilisational maturity as grounds for political autonomy. The Arctic Home in the Vedas is a text that tries to firmly put down these ideas of a civilisation more ancient than hitherto imagined, and complements the defence of the Vedic tradition that we have seen in Tilak’s politics outside the actual writing of history.

The central agenda of this book is basically to put back the beginning of the post-glacial epoch to 8000 B.C, and to thus also to date primitive Aryan life to 4500 B.C. Tilak employs information from various disciplines – he addresses the tools of comparative philology and directly refers to the method used by Mueller, he takes recourse to ‘latest geological researches’, archaeology, as well as his own computational approach, which relies heavily on astronomy. It also weaves in conjectures made on the basis of anatomy, and race science, which were contemporaneously used in Europe.

“There are many passages in the Rig-Veda, which, though hitherto looked upon as obscure and unintelligible, do, when interpreted in the light of recent scientific researches, plainly disclose the polar attribute of the Vedic deities, or the traces of an ancient arctic calendar.”

that since the people in this text seem to describe seeing the sun only about once a year, and that their surroundings were probably destroyed by sun and ice, Tilak’s text pegs the first migrations southward on calamitous climactic changes. Therefore also the conclusion “that the primitive Aryan home was both Arctic and inter-Glacial.”

40 Ibid, p. ix.
He partly accepts Mueller’s contention that comparative Philology would be the only sensible tool to study the origins of societies for which there were only mythological—not archaeological—sources. He also argues however, that this method was not exactly adequate, if we wanted to reconstruct anything more about the ancient peoples. For a fuller conception was required help from other scientific disciplines. This text is a particularly complex rendering of what Tilak conjectures to be the real beginning of the Aryan civilisation. It looks at verses of the *Rigved* and other Vedic texts for an examination of its ritual prescriptions. They are considered important because they specify a certain method and timetable for the fruition of the recommended rituals. Tilak’s analysis is based on these specific instances which contain references to the time of day, the seasonal calendar, the range and frequency of seasons, and also detailed descriptions of the length of the day and night as it varies throughout the seasonal calendar. It begins with the description of the grounds for believing that there might have been at least two glacial periods, according to geological evidence, with the observation that the interglacial period must have been mild in the arctic region—where civilisation might have been possible. Comparisons of the references to time in various scriptures (the Vedic calendar and the *Taittiriya Samhita* for instance) are supposed to show an arctic duration of day and night. The references to “long days and long nights” are interpreted to suggest a memory of the arctic climate. Not just the Indian tradition, but also the Zoroastrian, Greek, Norse and other traditions have parallels in such an account.

“If these traditions and statements are correct, they show that the idea of half yearly night and day of the Gods is not only Indo-Iranian, but Indo-Germanic, and that it must therefore, have originated in the original home of the Aryans. Comparative mythology, [...], fully supports the view of an

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41 Tilak agrees that it is possible to gain an insight into the activities of an ancient people by an examination of what language holds as clues—“primitive Aryans were familiar with the art of spinning and weaving, knew and worked in metals, constructed boats and chariots, founded and lived in cities, carried on buying and selling and had made considerable progress in agriculture. We also know that important social and political institutions or organisations, as for instance marriage of the laws of property, prevailed among the forefathers of our races in those early days.” Ibid, p. 361.

42 He also accepts the idea of a kinship between Sanskrit and the languages of Europe and of the Zend Avesta. It was possible to reconstruct the ancient world with “the discovery of the ancient language and sacred books of India: a discovery which the Professor (Mueller) compares with the discovery of the new world, and through the discovery of the intimate relationship between Sanskrit and Zend on the one hand and the languages of the principal races of Europe on the other, a complete revolution took place in the views commonly entertained of the ancient history of the ancient world.” Ibid, p. 2.

43 “A calendar of 12 months and six seasons is peculiar only to the temperate or the tropical zone, and if we were to judge only from the facts stated above, it follows that the people who used such a calendar, must have lived in places where the sun was above the horizon during all the days of the year.” Ibid, p 52. But clearly, taking other evidence into account, a different picture emerges.
original Arctic home of the Aryan races, and there is nothing surprising if the traditions about a day and a night of six months are found not only in the Vedic and the Iranian, but also in the Greek and the Norse literature. It seems to have been an idea traditionally inherited by all branches of the Aryan race, and, as it is distinctly Polar in character, it is alone enough to establish an Arctic home.\textsuperscript{44}

What follows are long, involved and rather knotty descriptions of ‘the Vedic dawns’; ‘long day and long night’, ‘Vedic myths – the captive waters’, ‘the matutinal deities’ etc.\textsuperscript{45} This text also attempts a comparative analysis of the mythology in the Vedic and the Avestic evidence with that found in the “Myths and traditions of the European branches of the Aryan race.”\textsuperscript{46} Building upon previous observations, he says that the similarities are obvious, and that the original home of the Indo-Iranians would be the same as that of the other Aryans.\textsuperscript{47} Also, that the Arctic might have been home to other races as well, since there are many other cultures that make a reference to this detail.

The idea is therefore, that the Aryan civilisation, which is as old as the inter-Glacial period, was caught in extremely trying climatic conditions. So the primitive Aryans migrated, and came southward and spread over Europe and Asia. In stressing the inadequacy of the methods of Comparative Philology, he points out that from the evidence assessed, it seems that the civilisation of the primitive Aryans was actually quite higher than what is known to us.\textsuperscript{48} Clearly, the study of primitive language and the vocabulary available to these inter-Glacial Aryans has revealed as much, but the sciences of geology, for instance, have helped to give this conjecture much weight.

\textsuperscript{44} Ibid, p. 64-65.
\textsuperscript{45} It has to be admitted, that this text is a curious instance of a merger of disciplines and for the same reason extremely difficult to unravel critically. After one reading from cover to cover, I could only be certain of having ‘followed’ broadly what was said. Which is why my analysis has not been able to (a) take it apart textually, and (b) has not been able to either agree or disagree with its arguments on the basis of knowledge of the disciplines presupposed in it. Clearly, it would require some familiarity with the sources, and with a much deeper understanding of the debates of prehistory. What I have attempted is a highlighting of the implications of this genus of ‘history writing’, a term which in this case is a mere shorthand.
\textsuperscript{46} Tilak, Arctic Home in the Vedas, Samagra Lokmanya Tilak, Vol 7, p. 321. For all the following footnotes, I have used the edition of the text, which is part of the collection of Tilak’s writings.
\textsuperscript{47} For this, he compares the names given to various mythological figures and their specific functions within each narrative.
\textsuperscript{48} For instance, according to the sources used by him, “primitive Aryans were familiar with the art of spinning and weaving, knew and worked in metals, constructed boats and chariots, founded and lived in cities, carried on buying and selling and had made considerable progress in agriculture. We also know that important social or political institutions or organisations, as for instance marriage or the laws of property, prevailed amongst the forefathers of our races I those early days.” Arctic Home in the Vedas, p. 361.
Comparative Philology did not go beyond the assumptions established in the nineteenth century, and concentrated on the northern European Aryans in a way that did not necessitate probing into the degree of civilisation attained by the primitive Aryans. For the linguistic study of the history of the Aryan civilisation, the Neolithic period was practically the beginning. It is the cumulative effort of various disciplines that has even raised the need to reconsider the Neolithic period, and see what its predecessors bequeathed.

For Tilak, the legacy of the primitive Aryans was a high civilisation, far superior to that of what he calls the Neolithic “savages”, a mark of their survival on migration to northern Europe and further southward. 49

“The very fact that after compulsory dispersion from their mother-land, the surviving Aryans, despite the fragmentary civilisation they carried with them, were able to establish their supremacy over the races they came across in their migrations form the original home at the beginning of the post-Glacial period, and that they succeeded by conquest of assimilation, or by Aryanising the latter in language, thought and religion under circumstances which could not be expected to be favourable to them, is enough to prove that the original Aryan must have been of a type far higher than that of the non-Aryan races, or than the one found among the Aryan races that migrated southward after the destruction of their home by the Ice Age.” 50

The civilisation of the Neolithic Aryans, which is the stock of the work of comparative philologists, is in fact a remnant of what they might have brought along in the arduous process of a search for a new home. What was lost on the way can only be conjectured about, but recognising this fact in fact takes us further into the assessment about what in fact might have passed before the migration. Further of course this entails being alert to the signs of what texts which have been preserved, or which mirror a mythology and a sense of history, have to say about such an original home, and that they pretty much require a rereading after the theory of an arctic home has become acceptable. The Asiatic Aryans seem to have preserved this original culture better by incorporating the basic tenets of a primitive religion and culture I the form of ritual and poetry in the Rigved, which, for this reason is a storehouse of historical possibility. 51

51 Ibid, p. 364.
With this summing of the text, it would help to point out once again why it was taken as part of the scheme of this chapter and as part of the general assessment of notions of history at all. As we have seen in the first part of our description of Tilak's understanding of the link between the process of building a regional-national identity, religion and history, the unearthing of the distant past has to be part of the resistance to the colonial state – not a straightforward categorical resistance, but one in which the foreign state and its laws could not be allowed to interfere with lasting effect in the indigenous hierarchies of caste and class. That is by now axiomatic. But what really needs to be put in the spotlight is the use of the Aryan concept. First, the race concept which has as its upshot an idea of social division and segregation – especially in Tilak's' case, a clear sense of a more triumphant civilisation, which had settled in by conquest and force. We must also note the fairly easy application of the category of race in the discussion of viable methods to resurrect history. What is striking is the arrival of race as a category in the narrative of Indian history, a necessary fallout, as Romila Thapar has pointed out, of its combination with language. It is also very interesting that Tilak made these observations a good two decades after Phule had grounded caste oppression in a reworking of the idea of an Aryan invasion. In order to make further pointers for analysis, I should have to couch them as questions: First, what are the implications – and the meaning – of situating the Vedic past as far back as Tilak does? Second, how should we analyse the use of a concept, which has its roots in the Orientalist tradition of Europe, when transplanted into the caste/class barriers of western India? In fact, these questions are practically the refrain of the following analysis.
The Politics of Reform: Universal History and Social Hierarchies

The politics of reform in western India has always had a very sensitive relationship with the pervasiveness of the caste structure and its patriarchal manifestations. The membership of the social section of the reformer class was determined largely by the growth of the literate elite specifically shaped by English education and a consequent exposure to liberal ideas. It was the very class on which the colonial administration depended for effective administration and as a result, the politics of reform was caught between the orthodox resistance to all the issues raised as part of the reform agenda, and the colonial state which accommodated only what fitted in suitably within the framework of colonial authority and did not threaten the security of the colonial state. In Maharashtra, the social section that did raise the liberal ideas opposing caste, were looking for a model which would abide by broad principles of social equality without challenging the authority of religion and related divisions of class. In this scenario of limited possibilities, organisations like the Sarvajanik Sabha – while it was still steered by Ranade – for instance, were active in raising awareness of the literate audience of the reform movement regarding the economic situation of the subjects of the colonial state, the legal structure within its purview, and the need for greater participation of the literate elite which was predominantly Brahmin in composition. Such organisations also saw the need for greater economic independence from colonial control, and conducted studies on the conditions of agricultural production in the agrarian areas, and campaigned for swadeshi. While these efforts were on, an equally important feature of the reform agenda was that in its conflicts and negotiations with the colonial state, it often came up against the interests of the landed gentry – largely Maratha and kunbi – who had control over land and agriculture and in certain matters were beneficiaries of the colonial state just as the literate Brahmin elite. Therefore, it was the literate elite that formed the core of both the pro and anti reform sections. In the debate upon issues mentioned earlier and the issue of legislation surrounding it, the orthodox position was very clear. They were completely opposed to the interference of the alien law,

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52 I am using the term 'liberal' in a rather loose sense for lack of a better term, and do not intend to suggest that the reformers were talking about the question of individual liberty.
and were advocates of the caste hierarchies and held up the issue of an unassailable tradition wherever possible. On various gender-related matters for instance, they stood by the idea that women too were an inalienable part of the baggage they upheld as ‘tradition’, and so were outside the purview of a law that did not operate in tandem with religious authority. Social practices like early marriage and enforced widowhood had become the emblem of upper caste status and a rung for upward social mobility. In such a situation, the role of the reformers was more complex. Leading lights of the reformers’ lobby like Bhandarkar and Ranade had to deal with opposition from the orthodox anti-reform section, but at the same time did not have a radical political alternative. In fact, they followed the classic ‘liberal’ position, which seeks out the results of liberal attitudes – without entirely stepping out of fundamental social hierarchies – and seek ‘reform’ within essentially oppressive social practices. This is not merely an inadequacy of the reform agenda, but rather an essential feature.

Ranade’s text is a significant appropriation of the Shivaji icon, which uses Maratha history for characterising the nature of politics since Shivaji, the social base of Maratha power and its singular unity in opposing Mughal rule. It is a reinterpretation of history, to draw lessons in reference to British ascendance. Before scrutinising it for its politics, one might delve somewhat into Ranade’s role as a leading reformer of his day, and situate his politics in the instances of his avowal of the liberal cause – along with its limitations.

Ranade was a typical instance of that class which had had the benefit of a western education, and had begun to grapple with the possibilities of assimilating certain broadly liberal values, within the structure of brahminical patriarchy. In a simple interpretation of reformers’ politics, it might actually seem as though they were caught uncomfortably between the orthodox view and the colonial state and the people to whom they were responsible and tried to mobilise. It is however important to recognise, on the basis of various events that unfolded, that they were only trying to fit in liberal values and agendas in a structure which was actually deeply inimical to such change. Ranade studied at some of the most prominent institutions in Bombay, and participated in activities of the time with some of the leading lights of the reform
movement in the early stages. In fact, Ranade participated in the early phase of radicalism that the reform movement saw. Leaders of the Brahma Samaj were also involved in generating a response to their programs in western India, and witnessed the setting up of societies like the Prarthana Samaj, which devised direct social action on matters of widow remarriage and against idolatry and enforced widowhood. In the early phases of the reform fervour, Ranade too was part of the wave. As its various dimensions evolved, he was on the forefront of the widow remarriage campaign. His espousal of the cause of widow remarriage was articulated by examining such practices against the precepts of western rational philosophies. Gopal Hari Deshmukh, Vishnu Shastri Pandit and Ranade were among those who took the initiative in arranging alliances for widows, and there are instances of their signing the invitation to one such wedding. However, in arguing the case for this agenda in the public arena, the reformers attempted to find sanction in the authority of the shastras, thus following the same pattern and using the same tools that the orthodox lobby was using. During this phase, Ranade published tracts, which sought to demonstrate, that the shastras actually held widow-remarriage as lawful. These texts follow the idea that the Puranas were really corruptions of a caste society, while the purer tradition of the Vedas which modern society should follow did endorse this view on widow remarriage. Even while endorsing the practice through such religious sanction Ranade was unable to uphold this belief through practice in the personal realm. When his wife Sakhubai died of tuberculosis in 1873, after having been married to him for 19 years, he gave in to threats and coercion from his father and other members of the household and married Ramabai Ranade, then merely 11 years old, within two months of the death of Sakhubai. It was an event that made much news, and proved to be a setback for the reformers. It also meant that Ranade’s later actions were also judged based upon his failure to adhere to his beliefs in the personal sphere. Clearly, it is not merely the question of a personal failure. We need to analyse such an event as being

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53 At the age of 20, he was responsible for editing the English section of the Indu Prakash, founded in 1862 by G. H Deshmukh, and was very close to the then champion of widow-remarriage, Vishnu Shastri Pandit. Cf, Richard Tucker, Ranade and the Roots of Indian Nationalism, Popular Prakashan, Bombay, 1977, p 56. This is one of the few well researched biographical histories concentrating on Ranade’s life and work, and his position in the contemporary shaping of nationalistic ideas.

54 Tucker has quoted one of Ranade’s early college essays in which he actually compares the principle of Brahmanical practices like enforced widowhood against the precepts laid down by Bacon: "...they are diametrically opposed to Bacon’s method – and are full of the restless agitation and the dogmatic tendency that Bacon censured." Tucker, p. 65.

55 Two of them were entitled, “The Texts of the Hindu Law on the Lawfulness of the Remarriage of Widows”, and “Vedic Authorities for Widow Marriage".
a result of the inability of the liberal framework to go beyond certain deeply entrenched social codes and to provide any radical alternatives, which would challenge the basic premises of the orthodox advocates of brahminical patriarchy. It was not only Ranade, but other contemporaries and men on the forefront of the reform movement – like Gopal Hari Deshmukh, for instance – faced similar situations in which they had to do adequate penance recommended by Brahmans of the time, with the attendant threat of excommunication. With the ultimate power to coerce resting in the hands of the Brahmin orthodoxy, the nature of political action changed drastically towards the latter part of the nineteenth century. The focus shifted away from issues of gender and social reform as it had been perceived earlier, and reformers sought to bridge the gap by participating in not-so-scandalous political activities. As mentioned earlier, organisations like the Sarvajanik Sabha concentrated on the economic profile of agrarian production in the countryside, assessed the nature of the indigenous money lending systems, the financial role of the colonial state etc, issues which caused on the whole minimum stress on the reformers in the social realm. Ranade and Bhandarkar were also involved the activities of the Vedashastrottejaka Sabha, established in 1873, and which drew many hues of shastris together to promote the study of Sanskrit. This was a gradual transformation to a more moderate position, in which they were not challenging the mainstream in any direct manner. “And finally, when the reformist Brahmanas moved to set up the Poona Sarvajanik Sabha, an alliance of professional and landholding elites dominated by Brahmanas, the founding statement provided that they body would deal only with ‘political’ issues (where one could unite as a class) and avoid divisive social and religious issues which would fragment them.” At the same time, organisations like the Sarvajanik Sabha, which claimed to represent a wide social section, did come into conflict with the non-Brahmin initiatives. With the establishment of Phule’s Satyashodhak Samaj, it was clear that there were many social sections, which did not feel represented by such Brahmin dominated organisations. In fact, there were instances where the Brahmans closed ranks against lower caste assertions – at the time when there was a demand from the non-Brahmin lobby for increased representation in

56 In Deshmukh’s case, he refused to go to London to testify before the finance commission, fearing social pressure and ostracism if he crossed the seven seas. There are instances of people raising funds to send a scholar abroad to study, but for fear of ostracism, could not dare to even share a meal with him on his return. Uma Chakravarti, p. 93.
57 Chakravarti, p. 94.
58 Ibid, p. 94.
public services and educational institutions—and hailed occasions in which the conservative section among the non-Brahmins became critical of Phule's radical alternatives. Even the Sarvajanik Sabha which was active in raising awareness about economic conditions, opposed legislations which would damage the fabric of indigenous economic hierarchies. This was of course done with separate tools, the conservative among the Brahmins opposing it on the ground that the caste structure had its benefits and that the colonial state could not be given the right to tamper through legislation with the standing of the indigenous elites. The reformer lobby opposed it on the basis that the complete monopoly of the colonial state was not healthy in the face of a need for a free market. While this was becoming more or less a general trend, Tilak was consolidating his end of the political spectrum. When issues of gender did arise—like in the debate on the Age of Consent Bill, Ranade felt compelled to resist that any resolution be tabled in the Calcutta session of the National Social Conference. He did this on the grounds that the matter of the Age of Consent was intended more as a way of inculcating within the social fabric a sense of amicable change, and not cause major rifts and divisions, which the Age of Consent Bill was effectively doing. Other instances demonstrate amply, that Ranade's position of keeping the peace actually coincided in principle with the Brahmin orthodoxy. In the question of the law on widow remarriage and forfeiture, in which an earlier case had won the verdict that wherever caste rules permitted, the widow would be allowed to keep the property inherited from her deceased husband, and in which case the law of forfeiture would not apply. A bench in the Bombay High Court, in which Ranade was also a member, later overturned this verdict. He had a very literal interpretation of the concerned law, based on the idea of its universal applicability, wherein he insisted that "some of the assumptions of the act, particularly that the ban on the remarriage of widows was almost universal with only some exceptions, was mistaken. (...) Ranade's position amounted to the Shastric position that a man's property was to be enjoyed only by the 'chaste' widow who lived up to the sacramental notion of 'Hindu marriage'." In the broad argument upon the issue, Ranade also held that even those

60 Tucker, p. 231.
61 Chakravarti, p. 130.
castes, which did not recommend forfeiture that would have been the 'original' practice.62

Uma Chakravarti has pointed out that the shared ground between them on cultural and religious matters was that they were fundamentally opposed to the non-Brahmin interpretation of history and the meaning of Brahmanism within the ills of the caste hierarchy. They were united in their critique of Phule, whose use of the Aryan category was grounded in the idea that they were alien oppressors of the indigenous population and the progenitors of the caste system. Shivaji was also a bone of contention – for Phule the Shudra hero, and for Ranade a figure who symbolised the potential of rising above social divisions. The following text stands out as yet another attempt to employ Shivaji as an instance of the possibility of a broad unity of all social sections.

_Rise of the Maratha Power: Projecting a suitable history._

Ranade writes this book at a time when the reinterpretation of history has proven politically crucial and when interpreting history has become an essential vehicle of political mobilisation. By the end of the nineteenth century, Maratha history, and especially Shivaji as a political icon, were already firmly situated in the historical and political psyche of Maharashtra, and this text symbolises the use of the history of western India not merely to establish the causes of the presence of the British in India, but also of the relation of Marathas to political equations of the time, on the basis of which to set the parameters of contemporary politics. Ranade sets out the aims and objectives of writing yet another book on the history of the Marathas when especially newer and ever more authoritative ones were being written on the basis of freshly unearthed sources etc. Describe the structure of the book, He says,

"My aim is rather to present a clear view of the salient features of the history from the Indian standpoint, to remove many misapprehensions which detract much from the moral interests and the political lessons of the story, and above

all, to enlist the sympathy of the representatives of the conquering British power in the fortunes of its worsted rival.63

In this history, we might find the roots of a method of political unification, which stood the western Indian polity in good stead.

"The lessons it (this book) seeks to illustrate are (1) that the rise of the Maratha power was not a mere accident due to any chance combination, but was a genuine effort on the part of a Hindu nationality, not merely to assert its independence, but to achieve what had not been attempted before - the formation of a Confederacy of States animated by a common patriotism, and (2) that the success it achieved was due to a general upheaval social, religious and political of all classes of the population. The attempt failed; but even the failure was itself an education in the highest virtues, and possibly intended to be a preparatory discipline to cement the union of the Indian races under British guidance.64

The central point of reference is the Mughal empire and the factors that contributed to its decline, and it is in this perspective that he tries to analyse the importance of the Maratha ‘Confederacy’ as he calls it, among all the other factors and agents like Hyder and Tipu, the Nizam, Shuja-ud-Daulah, Alivardi Khan, Ranjit Singh, Suraj Mal, which were contemporaneous to Mughal rule. He argues that an understanding of the specific nature of the Maratha Confederacy is to useful in determining the causes of British ascendancy in India, an understanding which is possible after a comparison with the above mentioned rulers in other parts of the subcontinent. British success in India was, in his opinion not merely on account of the commitment of individual servants of the colonial state, but because such commitment was backed by a certain unity of purpose, and by “resources of the great British nation”.65 The argument is that the same singular feature – the subtle sense of ‘nation’ – was what differentiated the Marathas from other rulers and political formations:

“Freebooters and adventurers never succeed in building up empires, which last for generations and permanently alter the political map of a great Continent. Unlike the great subhedars of Provinces, who became independent after the death of Aurangzeb, the founder of the Maratha power and his successors for two generations bore the brunt of the attack of the Moghul Empire at the zenith of its splendour.66

64 Ibid, p. iv.
65 Ibid, p. 3.
66 Ibid, p. 3.
Those mentioned previously did not survive beyond a few generations unlike the leaders and founders of the Maratha Confederacy, who survived for a good 10 generations — clearly the former perished because they were not backed by any “national power”. With this, Ranade tried to contend with some of the accusations regarding the Marathas that they were a bunch of freebooters and tactically they spread like a conflagration etc. In analysing the specific features in which the sustainability of the Maratha Confederacy was based, he points out first that it must first be recognised that the immediate predecessors of the British were not the Mughals, but the Marathas, who had effectively “thrown off the Mahomedan yoke.”

The powers in Delhi were also dependent upon the dynamics of Maratha intervention, and,

“For all practical purposes, therefore, it might be safely stated that except in Bengal and on the Madras coast, the chief power in the land was in the hands of the Native Hindu Rulers controlled by the Confederacy. The Mahomedan influence had spent itself and the Hindus had asserted their position and become independent rulers of the country, with whom the British power had to contend for supremacy.” (My italics).

It is this interpretation that is sustained throughout the account, of tussle between Hindu and Muslim rulers for control over the subcontinent. The propelling force behind the formation of a Maratha Confederacy — an assertion of Hindu rulers — is a sense of patriotism.

“Unlike the Subhedarships of the Bengal, Karnatak, Oudh and Hyderabad, the rise of the Maratha Power was due to the first beginning of what one may well call the process of nation-making. It was not the outcome of the successful enterprise of any individual adventurer. It was the upheaval of the whole population, strongly bound together by the common affinities of language, religion, race and literature, and seeking further solidarity by a common independent political existence. This was the first experiment of the kind attempted in India after the disastrous period of foreign Musolman invasions.”

It was a movement in which all classes participated. This participation was ensured by people’s relationship to the land — the Maratha Confederacy had as its backbone those soldiers who were part of the army and came back for half the year to till their fields, and “even commanders of great armies prided themselves more upon their being Patils and Deshmukhs in their old villages in Maharashtra than on their

extensive *Jahagirs* in distant lands.” It is precisely this sentiment that marked the beginning of a nation. In his opinion, personal histories end, and real history begins with Shivaji, what follows can thus be characterised as Maratha history: “it is the history of the formation of a true Indian Nationality, raising its head high above the troubled waters of *Mahomedan confusion.*” (My italics). The ambition here was “the establishment of a central Hindu *Padshahi* or Empire at Delhi, uniting and controlling all other Native Powers.”

Ranade builds his argument about nationalism as represented by the Maratha Confederacy with the idea that a comprehensive explanation cannot be had in the argument that the matter was of an upheaval in reaction to religious persecution – and he admits that many Muslim rulers were in fact not fanatics in religious matters – and that one should look towards preceding religious traditions as well. He points to the *bhakti* tradition in western India, notably in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries. Its non-Brahmin composition had a very wide reach “in its spirit of protest against forms and ceremonies and class distinctions based on birth, and ethical in its preference of a pure heart, and of the law of love, to all other acquired merits and good works.” He describes it as a movement, which, because of its lower caste origins, finally brought political leaders into conjunction with religious leaders and instilled in the polity increasingly more liberal ideas.

“What Protestantism did for Western Europe in the matter of civil liberty was accomplished on a smaller scale in western India. The impulse was felt in art, in religion, in the growth of vernacular literature, in communal freedom of life, in increase of self-reliance and toleration.”

Ranade further names a relatively weak central power as both a strength as well as a weakness.

“There were so many centers of power and vitality and as long as they were animated by a common purpose and a central idea – and they continued to be so animated for nearly a century – their power was irresistible and even the disciplined British army had to dismember the Confederacy before success could be achieved. For a hundred years there was not an expedition to the south or to the north, to the east or to the west, (...) in which the confederate

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70 Ibid, p 8.
72 Ibid, p. 10.
73 Ibid, p. 11.
The ascendency of the Peshwas was like the ascendance of the Prussian Monarchy in the German Empire. The Central Authority represented more the idea than the force of the Confederacy."  

He further discusses the reasons that contributed to the very fact that the "first successful attempt to throw off the Mahomedan yoke was made in western India". He names the tolerance between various castes as a hallmark of the culture of Maharashtra.

"The Brahmans and the non-Brahman shudras are brought into contact on more equal terms than elsewhere. (...) The shudras, and even the pariahs - mahars - have produced saint poets", whom everybody reveres. He presents this as a backbone of contemporary society, and assesses Shivaji's administration in that light. At the same time he argues that political power of the Muslim kings, especially the Deccan Muslims was brought under Hindu influence primarily because they were far from their "base" on the North west frontier, and unlike the Mughal rulers, could not be

"recruited by fresh invaders, as was the case at Delhi, where Afghans, Gilkhs, Turks Usbegs and Moghals succeeded one another, keeping up the Mahomedan tradition intact with every fresh invasion."  

With this, in one sweep, he puts highly conflicting political powers in one part of the political measuring scale only on the basis of their shared religion. He also ignores the fact that there were occasions when the Deccan Muslim rulers cooperated with Shivaji in campaigns against Aurangzeb and other rulers based in Delhi. He uses the specific instance of the first Bahamani ruler to say that in his reign the record keeping was done not in "foreign" languages like the Persian, but in the vernacular. In fact the idiom in the Deccan has always been what is called dakhni, and the rulers themselves used it, not because everything was under so called Hindu influence, but because these rulers were well entrenched in the region, and part of the social and cultural practices of the region. There were other social causes that maintained the Hindu

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75 Ranade, p. 24.
76 He also comments on the contemporary system of land tenure, the rayatwari, as an element that has made for a significant degree of class stability. Ibid, p. 22.
77 Ibid, p. 28.
78 Here to illustrate his point about Hindu influence in spite of "foreign" rule, he uses a story about the Bahamani rulers, which tells of how the first Bahamani ruler was the slave of a North Indian Brahmin, who predicted his future. When the Bahamani ruler first established rule in the Deccan, in gratitude, he
influence – that the Muslim rulers took Hindu wives, and that some of the rulers were actually children of Hindu converts to Islam etc. These are the reasons why the Muslim rulers in the Deccan were unable to continue their bigotry, and “gradually, civil and military power came into Hindu hands.” The real sense of insecurity and danger apparently came from the attempts made by rulers in Delhi from Akbar to Aurangzeb, to expand Muslim rule. “If successful, it would have thrown back the country for another period of three hundred years, which had been the time that the Hindus had taken to re-assert their independence after the first conquest”, a danger more threatening than the “first” conquest which had been surmounted and accommodated.

“The new danger required new tactics, but above all tactics, what was wanted was a new spirit, a common feeling of interest, a common patriotism born of a liberal religious fervour (my italics). The scattered power of the Maratha chiefs had to be united in a confederacy, animated by a common purpose, and sanctified by a common devotion to the country. Shivaji’s merit was that he realized this danger, kept the separatist tendency under control, brought the common forces together in the name of a common religion, and he thus represented in himself, not only the power of the age, but the soul stirring idea, the highest need and the highest purpose, that could animate the Marathas in a common cause. He did not create the Maratha power; that power had been already created, though scattered in small centres all over the country. He sought to unite it for a higher purpose by directing it against the common danger.”

In describing the rule of Shivaji, Ranade adheres to the idea that where his choice of people in his administration and in the military was eclectic, it was an eclecticism to demonstrate that there could be no differences within or with the Hindu fold. Ranade’s view of history achieves two things. First, it attempts to establish through Shivaji the tolerance of Hinduism in the face of Muslim bigotry and political invasion, employing religion as a basic criterion for national belonging. At the same time however, while reiterating the worth of assimilative and tolerant traditions, which rise above caste – in his view, Shivaji is an instance of the same – he powerfully contests other interpretations of Shivaji’s relevance. In popularising the view that Shivaji was a universal symbol – rather than the property of any caste or

called himself Hassan Gangu Bahamani, and invited the Brahmin to handle the finance department – whence the record keeping in the vernacular. Ibid, p. 29.
79 Ibid, p. 32.
80 Ibid, p. 36.
social group - he was effectively countering Phule’s interpretation of Shivaji’s rule as lower caste assertion.

His view of the bhakti tradition in western India similarly stresses the idea that Maharashtra has had syncretic traditions, which were never really to be claimed by any one social section. In the text of the *Rise of the Maratha Power*, there is an entire chapter on the bhakti tradition, which interestingly starts with the old myth about how Ramdas once called upon Sambhaji to unite all those who are Marathas and to uphold the dharma of Maharashtra. Ranade’s interpretation is that what Ramdas was referring to with the former was the political movement which took its final shape under Shivaji and the latter, the religious movement which was a reflection of the former and at the same time a facet of what constituted the Maharashtrian identity. In pointing out that Ramdas does not ask Sambhaji to propagate the Vedic, Puranic, or generally the Hindu religion, his stress is on the ‘religion of Maharashtra’. That particular chapter takes off from here in questioning what it is that might have been recommended by Ramdas as a panacea for the ills of Sambhaji’s famously chaotic government. In answer,

“The close connection between the religious and political upheaval in Maharashtra is a fact of such importance, that for those who, without the help of this clue, have tried to follow the winding course of the growth of Maratha power, the purely political struggle becomes either a puzzle of dwindles down into a story of adventures, without any abiding moral interest. Both European and native writers have done but scant justice to this double character of this movement, and this dissociation of the history of the spiritual emancipation of the national mind accounts for much of the prejudice which still surrounds the study of the Maratha struggle for national independence.”

This section on the bhakti movement is structured around the similarities – and a couple of differences – it shares with the European Reformation. Its protest against the Brahman orthodoxy is compared with its equivalent in the Reformation:

“Ancient authority and tradition had been petrified here, not in an ambitious and his clergy, but in the monopoly of the Brahman caste and it was against the exclusive spirit of this caste domination that the saints and prophets struggled most manfully to protest.”

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83 Ibid, p. 64.
84 Ibid, p. 67.
The ‘saints and prophets’, in the face of much Brahmanical adversity, never ceased to speak of human dignity irrespective of birth and social rank. Ranade recounts many stories, which are part of old, Maharashtrian lore, in which the faith of these saints is put to test, and in which their faith emerges victorious as against the fanaticism of the Brahmans who subject them to humiliation and ostracism. He uses the same accounts also to illustrate the liminal aspect of this tradition. There are instances of conversion to Islam, and then back into the Hindu fold. Such figures like one Baliram Bhat defied the strict codes of either religious practice and were living examples of a golden balance between the two. Consequently, both communities claimed them as part of their religious traditions. In Ranade’s view, this needs to be recognised as an instance of the popular resistance to caste domination. He says, “[T]hese examples show how the lives of these men have tended to elevate the national conception of man’s spiritual nature, and shake the hold of caste intolerance.” 85 This leads him to believe, rather unrealistically, that as a result of the influence of the bhakti tradition in northern India, caste hierarchies disappeared from the religious sphere, and that they were to be found only in the social sphere. In his comparison with southern India, he finds that wherever the influence of these saint-poets had taken hold, there was a relative indifference to caste:

“This feeling of indifference is most accentuated at the times of the annual pilgrim gatherings, and the mixed greetings with which the lord’s feast is celebrated on the last day. Just as in Europe, men ceased to believe that the priest was a necessary medium between God and man for purposes of salvation, in this part of India, the domination of the Brahman caste as the Gods of creation, whom the other castes should serve and worship, lost much of its potency, and men and women, high and low, came to feel that they were free to attain salvation by faith and love in spite of their own origin.” 86

A realistic attitude to the world of here-and-now as a measure of resistance to the empty ritualism of the Brahman orthodoxy is another feature that he recounts as a point of comparison between the European Reformation and the bhakti tradition in western India. The issues raised were very similar – the protest against the celibacy of the clergy, the diktats for renunciation of nuns – and “our saints and prophets raised their voice against self-mortification and fasts, and meaningless penances and endless pilgrimages. The same spirit prompted them to condemn austerities practised by those who followed the Yoga system with the view to acquiring the power of

85 Ibid, p. 69.
86 Ibid, p. 69.
working wonders which, it was supposed, the Yogis enjoyed in consequence.87 Many of these had families, a fact that demonstrates that these figures put a high premium on the sanctity of family life in contrast to the dominant tradition which recommended renunciation of the world — *vairagya* — as an escape route from responsibilities of a householder.88 The lives of the women saints are interesting in this aspect — their devotion often brings god to their rescue with prompt help with household chores. He points to the risk of trivialisation of divine intervention, but says at the same time that it is not so much the appearance of god to alleviate the daily difficulties of the saints that is important, but the very conception of divinity that these stories reveal. First, they point to a resistance to past traditions of asceticism, and also to a sense of a god who is always there for them, without the sombre voice of a mediator. This is comparable with the quest of the Reformation to find a way out of "the thralldom of scholastic learning", whereby an opposition to the monopoly of the ecclesiastical elite over interpretation of the bible, available then only in Latin, grew in favour of vernacular interpretations.

"These early Marathi writers knew that modern India, after the Buddhistic revolution, was less influenced by the Vedas and Shastras than by the *Ramayana* and the *Mahabharata*, the *Bhagawata Purana* and the *Gita*, and these latter works were translated and made accessible to all."89

So these saint poets addressed their audiences in the vernacular, not in Sanskrit, which was till then the language of religious practice. These women and men were in fact the pioneers of the development of the vernacular, and Ranade says that the matter of Sanskrit versus the vernacular was decided in favour of the latter long ago, simply because Sanskrit was considered to be useless in addressing popular audience. In remembering that the Reformation challenged the hold of the clergy over salvation, as mediators between god and men and women, Ranade draws a parallel with the conception of god within the *bhakti* tradition. It was linked with challenging the extravagances of image-worship prevalent in Hindu practices. The god of the *sant-kavis* was a kind, cheerful and bright presence, accessible to anyone

87 Ibid, p. 69-70.
88 Here Ranade adds what is also part of the lore about these *sant-kavis*, that most of them were not blessed with co-operative better halves, and that they often had to put up with anger and criticism from uninitiated wives. Of course none of this lore ever asks why it might have been — if at all — that these women were forever acting like shrews with a husband who made miracles work for the whole village and sang songs about God, when there was little to eat at home.
89 Ibid, p. 71.
who might seek him. However, this is an essential feature of Aryan divinity – a point of difference with the conception of god in Semitic religions. Semitic religions, according to him present god as formless, inaccessible, dark and brooding, a god who punishes and chastises more than he rewards, and even when he does, "kept the worshipper in awe and trembling."\(^90\) Christianity is one religion, which managed to bridge the gap by "securing the intervention of God incarnate in the flesh, as Jesus Christ, who suffered for mankind and atoned for their sins."\(^91\) The god of Brahmanical orthodoxy was however not the daily unmediated presence as envisioned by the bhakti tradition.

Ranade paints the picture of a fruitful interface between the bhakti tradition, and what he calls the more "militant Mahomedanism". Both religious traditions were willing to acknowledge a fundamental unity of god, with numerous instances of people converting from one faith to the other and poets like Tukaram and Eknath composing verses in Urdu, in a way that was not unacceptable even to some of the stricter believers in Islam. There was a give and take between the two religious traditions and communities on this issue, though, as Ranade qualifies, there were sporadic outbursts of Muslim fanaticism.

The way Ranade looks at the bhakti movement, it gave Maharashtra a vernacular literature, a steady growth in spiritual values, gave the region a common thread by which to hold together on the grounds of humanity. It took away caste hierarchies, and "raised the Shudra classes to a position of spiritual power and social importance, almost equal to that of Brahmans" and improved the status of women.\(^92\) It made peace with Islam. Most importantly, it created the conditions for cohesion among the people in the face of 'foreign domination'. This, for Ranade is the essence of the religion of Maharashtra.\(^93\)

Contrasted with Tilak's more obviously political recruitment of Shivaji, Ranade's historical account seems to suggest a concern with reconstructing a social history of western India on the grounds that rather than being a quest for regional

\(^{90}\) Ibid, p. 73.  
\(^{91}\) Ibid, p. 74.  
\(^{92}\) Ibid, p. 75.  
\(^{93}\) The term here is Maharashtra dharma, and the translation 'religion of Maharashtra' does not have the same connotation. Maharashtra Dharma has shades of a way of life, a moral and social, rather than a religious meaning.
power, the period under Shivaji's rule was actually a movement which stood for a challenge to Mughal invasion. It seeks to convey a sense of a regional identity based on a feeling of unity of all classes and castes, a condition achieved by the uniting facets of the bhakti tradition. It might be argued, that while Ranade's interpretation of Shivaji is different from that of Tilak - who stressed on the militarised brahmanic element in which the real hero was Ramdas - it fits the agenda of unity with literate/Brahmin elites in western India on a common plank against other, more subversive interpretations of the same history.