

Caste and Political Leadership in Maharashtra

A Review and Current Appraisal

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AT midnight on August 14, 1954, Keshavrao M Jedhe made an announcement of possible far-reaching implications for the political scene in Maharashtra. From his family home in Poona, Jedhe made public his decision to rejoin the Congress. Thus four months after resigning from the Shetkari Kamkari Paksh (Peasants' and Workers' Party) Jedhe returned to the party he had quit in 1948. He described his return to the Congress as "the return of the prodigal son come astray due to bad company".

Jedhe's action must be viewed not merely in terms of the changed political outlook and beliefs of an individual, but in terms of a realignment and rebalancing of political power in Maharashtra. For Jedhe is one of the most respected leaders of "the Maratha caste—the caste that accounts for over 25 per cent of the population of Maharashtra, and which forms the largest single community in this region. And the Congress is by far the most powerful political organization in Maharashtra. It seems pertinent, therefore, at this time to present an analysis of this development in the light of the Maharashtra social structure and recent political history, and to assess its significance for leadership in this region, especially in view of the possible formation of a Samyukta Maharashtra State.

THREE-TIER CASTE STRUCTURE

The first background factor to be taken into consideration in this analysis is the caste structure of Maharashtra. There are altogether some 120 castes in the Marathi-speaking region, but in the present discussion we shall be concerned primarily with those three groups of castes which comprise about 47 per cent of the Hindu population—and about 90 per cent of the people here are Hindus.

The largest of these groups is the Maratha caste, accounting for 25 per cent of the population. The Marathas are sometimes considered together with the Kunbis—a caste reportedly striving for assimilation into the higher Maratha caste, but actually possessing customs, rituals and a dietary which distinguish it from the Maratha caste—and if considered together, these two castes account

for 33 per cent or more of the Hindus, and form the backbone of the agricultural population. Sometimes when circumstances demand a show of numbers Marathas and Kunbis are counted together, but actually over the past fifty years no two Census reports have agreed on how to handle the Maratha-Kunbi group, of castes. The Maratha caste itself is by no means homogeneous, and there are strata within it between which there is little or no intermarriage. There is a desire and a tendency among Marathas to override these very real distinctions and to encourage consolidation of the entire Maratha community.

Next in numbers to the Marathas is the Mahar caste, a scheduled caste which accounts for 10 per cent of Maharashtra Hindus, and which is by far the largest scheduled caste in this region.

Finally, the third largest group is the Brahman group of castes. These comprise some fifteen different Brahman endogamous groups, amounting to 4 per cent of the region's Hindus. The main Brahman castes are the Deshasth, Konkarnasth, Karhade and Sarasvat. In terms of the traditional caste hierarchy the Brahman 4 per cent is at the top of this three-tier social structure, the Maratha-Kunbi 33 per cent in the middle, and the Mahar 10 per cent on the lowest level.

The foregoing must be taken as a highly simplified picture of caste in Maharashtra, admittedly doing the injustice of omission to many smaller but certainly prominent castes; yet this outline should suffice for the present purposes of analysis of the relationship between caste and political leadership in the modern context of political democracy.

EARLY BRAHMAN LEADERSHIP

If we look at the history of Maharashtra in the past 150 years we will see that effective leadership in socio-cultural and political life has been drawn overwhelmingly from the Brahman group of castes. There are many reasons for this, the principal one doubtless being that the British administration in the nineteenth century looked for clerical and minor administrative personnel to those castes whose traditional occupations involved scholarship, teaching, and

record keeping, and whose members had had considerable experience in government administration during the immediately preceding Peshwai. As it became evident that in Western education lay the key to power and betterment of socio-economic conditions, it was the Brahmans who most eagerly and easily made the transition from indigenous to Western education, and who through it rose to positions of leadership in all fields of endeavour. Thus by the end of the nineteenth century the Brahmans as a group had assumed a position of dominance quite out of proportion to their numerical strength in Maharashtra. The early nationalist leaders were predominantly Brahmans, and most of them were Konkarnasth Brahmans.

MARATHA AWAKENING AND ADVANCES

At the same time Western ideas and education began to make a mark on the Maratha and Mahar castes. The education of Marathas was taken up in particular by the Maharaja of Kolhapur, Shahu Chhatrapati, at the end of the nineteenth century. Along with education came a rankling awareness of the dominance of Brahmans in so many fields, and with this too came a development of political consciousness on the part of the small number of newly-educated Marathas. This political consciousness generated and centered on a frankly anti-Brahman attitude, and the main manifestations of this anti-Brahmanism were found in Kolhapur State and Satara District.

The progress of education has, however, not been rapid among Marathas in general, and a recent estimate places their literacy rate as low as 7 per cent. A partial explanation for this lies in the fact that Marathas are predominantly peasant-fanners, with powerful ties to the land, and with little incentive to indulge in schooling. Many of those Marathas who have gained positions of leadership in Maharashtra today come from among the top "96 Families" who have inherited wealth in the form of lands, and who can trace, their family prestige back to the days of the Maratha hero, Shivaji, in the seventeenth century.—Keshavrao Jedhe is a Maratha with such a background, and it is this as well as his personal qualities (rather than

high educational qualifications) that saves him a place of honour and respect in the eyes of Maharashtrians, and especially of Marathas.

Other Maratha leaders, such as the 'late B S Jadhav, who was a Minister at various times, during the 1920's, and V D Ghaté—a prominent educationist and presently an MLA—rose to their positions through the channels of education rather than of family lineage. At the present time in view of the competitive examinations for entry into the higher levels of administration, Marathas are finding that if they are to gain positions of real leadership and responsible posts commensurate with their proportion in the population, they are going to have to pay greater attention to raising the general level of education in their community than is at present the case.

IMPORTANCE OF THE MAHARS

The Mahars constitute the largest and most important scheduled caste in Maharashtra. A leading member of this community, Dr B R Ambedkar, has undoubtedly held higher positions in the Central Government than any other of the former "untouchables". Unlike the Marathas, the Mahars have apparently been particularly conscious of the advantages to be gained from education. In fact, the literacy rate for Mahars is at present said to have reached 11 per cent, compared with 7 per cent for the Marathas. Mahatma Jyotirao Phule, the Mali (caste just below Maratha) founder of the reformist and anti-Brahman Satyashodhak Samaj, opened a school for Mahars in Poona in the mid-nineteenth century, and Christian missionaries have been especially sensitive to the educational disabilities and needs of the Mahar caste.

The British administration recruited freely from the Mahars, and through army service a great number of Mahars gained a general and often specialized education. Moreover, Mahars were early attracted to the industrial areas as labourers and unskilled workers, and having far fewer ties to the land, as well as having lost their traditional occupation of village watchmen, members of this caste have, on the whole, proved to be a relatively stable element in the industrial labour force. This contact with urban centres has also had the effect of exposing Mahars to new ideas of social equality and so forth, and of impressing on them the possibilities of using education as a means of by-passing their traditional low status in Maharashtra Hindu society. Comprising

as they do about 10 per cent of the population of this region, Mahars are an increasingly important and self-conscious community whose co-operation Maharashtrian leaders must gain, and with whom Marathas in particular will have to establish closer and more harmonious relations than now exist between these two groups.

RECENT POLITICAL HISTORY

During the first World War a large number of Marathas saw army service in other parts of India and abroad, and as a result of this many ex-servicemen returned to their villages with considerably broadened horizons. Furthermore, the Montagu Chelmsford Reforms of 1910 made provision for reservation of seats in the Bombay Legislature for "Marathas and Allied Castes". At the same time the various education programmes instituted by Shahu Chhatrapati of Kolhapur began to bear fruit in the shape of a number of enthusiastic young Non-Brahman leaders such as Bhauroo Paul, A B Latthe, Madhavroo Bagal and others.

These and other factors combined to make the 1920's a decade of intense caste-consciousness in Maharashtra. The Non-Brahman Party in the Bombay Legislative Council gained strength partly because of factors such as the above, and partly because of the huge number of politically-conscious persons (most of them Brahmans) who were at that time boycotting the Councils as part of the nationalist struggle. As a reflection in part of the aid and sympathy extended to Non-Brahmans by the British (in an attempt to offset anti-British attitudes and actions of an influential group of Brahmans, particularly those led by Tilak), and in recognition of the special considerations accorded them in the IQI Reforms, the Non-Brahman Party tended to go along with the Government in the Legislature, and was therefore deemed to be anti-nationalist.

Also during the twenties a large section of Marathas and other Non-Brahmans under the leadership of the Satyashodhak Samaj (among whose leaders was Keshavrao Jedhe) conducted various activities in Satara District, Kolhapur State and other places in this general area designed to harass Brahmans and, quite frankly, to drive them from their positions as priests, petty government officials, money-lenders, and teachers in the rural areas.

By the 1930's however, the Congress had gathered strength nationally and in Maharashtra; and when

the Non-Brahman Party and the Satyashodhak Samaj petered out for a variety of reasons, it was the Congress which provided a welcome to all and sundry, and whose stated principles of social equality were definitely acceptable to persons who were anxious to get away from alleged Brahman domination. The fact that Gandhi, though a non-Maharashtrian, was a Non-Brahman seems to have played a significant part in attracting Marathas and other Non-Brahmans into the Congress.

When Keshavrao Jedhe entered the Congress in the early thirties, the top figures in the Maharashtrian Congress were Shankarrao Deo and N V Gadgil, both Brahmans. Jedhe brought with him into the Congress a large number of his followers, and rapidly he rose to join Shankarrao Deo and Gadgil at the top. Jedhe's caste-membership was certainly not without significance, for due to his personal prestige as a Maratha leader, Congress influence was greatly strengthened in Maharashtra, and particularly among the Marathas.

Actually, during the peak years of the nationalist struggle overt caste consciousness and inter-caste tension were reduced to a minimum, yet it is possible to say that all along in various ways caste has exerted an important though at times subtle effect on the Congress organization in Maharashtra. It was always, and still is, something to be reckoned with, in spite of protestations to the contrary.

ANTI-BRAHMAN VIOLENCE IN 1948 AND ITS CONSEQUENCES

Grim evidence of the deep-rooted nature of caste-consciousness and potentialities of inter-caste conflict in Maharashtra came in January and February 1948. The assassination of Mahatma Gandhi by a Maharashtrian Brahman provided the occasion for widespread anti-Brahman demonstrations, looting and burning of Brahman houses, factories, shops, dispensaries, and printing presses. These disturbances marked the culmination of a more or less suppressed movement on the part of the Non-Brahmans, and of Marathas in particular, to assert themselves over the previous three or four decades. Also, by and large, Maharashtrian Brahmans had not been enamoured of Gandhi's policies, and in the couple of years before 1948 the predominantly Brahman-owned and edited Marathi press had indeed been extremely critical of Gandhi. These factors, in the general all-India context of unrest and violence that followed on partition in 1947, and the

specific event of Gandhi's murder brought on the worst, and what is likely to be the last, open, sustained, and violent expression of anti-Brahman feeling in Maharashtra.

During and after these disturbances there was confusion in Congress circles over the cause of the trouble and the placing of responsibility. There was a tendency on the part of Congress leaders, at least in public utterances, to maintain that these disturbances were not related to any anti-Brahman feeling of long-standing, and that they were merely spontaneous reactions to the murder of their beloved leader—the caste to which the assassin belonged being naturally the target. However, it is more than a coincidence that in April 1948 a large bloc of the Maharashtra Congress—the Bahujan Samaj, or "Party of the Masses", bloc—seceded from the parent organization. The leaders of this bloc were Keshavrao Jedhe and Shankarrao More. These two Maratha leaders carried with them a significant number of followers of their own caste, and in a proclaimed effort to serve the predominantly Maratha rural population, and the Non-Brahman industrial labour force, they formed the Shetkari Kamkari Paksh, or Peasants' and Workers' Party. The formation of this party may be regarded both as an attempt to protest against what was considered overtly "capitalist" domination of the Congress, and to by-pass what was claimed to be continued Brahman control over positions of leadership in the Maharashtra Congress organization.

OPPOSITION TO CONGRESS

One of the aims of the Shetkari Kamkari Paksh was to build up a strong and "progressive" opposition to both the Congress and the Communist parties, basing their strength on the sturdy, tradition-bound and essentially politically-unaware Maratha peasantry. "The SKP did manage to gain 15 out of the 316 seats in the Bombay Legislature in the 1952 elections, and was on its way to becoming the largest party (though no real threat) in opposition to the Congress. However, internal differences, centering on controversial intrusive Communist elements, and the personal ambitions of Shankarrao More, have in the past two years led to a chaotic jumble of personality clashes in the party leadership and uncertainties in the theoretical basis of the party. It was Keshavrao Jedhe who headed the group within the SKP which attempted to forestall Communist infiltration and domination, but he finally resigned in April

1954 on account of irreconcilable differences with the other party leaders. A meeting of the residual party executive on September 25 and 26 will decide the fate of the SKP in the light of recent events.

JEDHE'S RE-ENTRY INTO CONGRESS

Between April and August 1954 Jedhe was trying to make up his mind where his political future lay. Some indication of the importance of his temporary lack of affiliation with any party, and of the importance of the decision he was to make, may be gauged from the fact that Jayaprakash Narayan, Shankarao Deo, and others from various parties contacted him, and doubtless tried to influence his decision. Finally, after much cogitation, and at the dramatic hour of midnight on the eve of Independence Day, Jedhe announced that he had decided to return to the Congress. In his public statement, he said that he felt he could better serve his country through membership in the Congress, he disclaimed any expectation of reward in the form of a ministership or any other high post. However, in the event of the formation of Samyukta Maharashtra, it seems unlikely that Jedhe could be overlooked in the selection of a ministry, and having returned to the Congress at this opportune moment he would be on the right side of the fence, since there is no possibility of Congress power being eclipsed or even lessened in the near future in this region.

On the contrary, there is every indication that Jedhe's action has immeasurably strengthened the Congress position in Maharashtra, for the only other source of potential effective opposition, the SKP, appears to be on the verge of complete disintegration—those SKP members who do not join the Congress being most likely to join the Communist Party, with a possible trickle into the Praja Socialist Party. Since Jedhe's announcement on August 14, it is reported that a sizable number of local district SKP leaders in Bombay and Hyderabad's Marathi-speaking districts have followed his example and joined the Congress.

Congress has thus received new strength in Maharashtra, and in particular it can be said that the Maratha element in Congress has increased its influence, and indeed is likely to increase it still further, if other Maratha leaders, such as Madhavrao Bagal in Kolhapur (who left the SKP last year), make similar decisions. When the Maharashtra Provincial Congress Committee annual elections are held at the end of

the year, it will be possible to evaluate Jedhe's action better in terms of Congress leadership in this region.

In conclusion, we may refer to a lengthy statement issued by Bhausaheb Hiray, Bombay's Minister for Revenue, Forests and Agriculture, on August 28 (published in the Marathi weekly, Sarathi, on September 9, 1954). In this statement Hiray, a leading Maratha, and several times President of the Maharashtra Provincial Congress Committee, welcomed Jedhe back into the Congress, and paying a glowing tribute to Jedhe's qualities as a leader (even though for a while outside the Congress), claimed to have been long a follower and admirer of Jedhe's, and indeed to have received his early political training from him in the 1920's. Jedhe is thus officially accepted back into the Congress, and it would appear, straight into the top ranks of the organization. We may view Jedhe's action, therefore, in terms of its significance for the course of Maharashtrian politics in the immediate future, and at the same time in the context of the continuing (though nowadays perhaps more subtle, but nonetheless important) relationship between caste and political leadership in Maharashtra,



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