Caste, Religious Institutions and Domination

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The Tuljabhavani and Matangi temples in Osmanabad District in Maharashtra display the relation between religion, caste and power structure in society. The history of these two temples and a study of the priestly hierarchy and practice of rituals, one dominated by the Marathas and the other by the Mahars, shows how caste continues to maintain its stranglehold, albeit in different forms.

Caste categories were constructed through a complex interactive process. It involved the use and misuse of power manipulations by different castes and sub-castes to advance different social and political claims. These claims influenced categories of representations in politics and religion in regional particularities.

Central to the politics of the Marathwada region of Maharashtra are the Maratha–Kunbis, who were crucial to the emergence of political non-Brahminism and the Dalit movement dominated by the Mahar community (Rao 2009).

Maratha Identity

The term "Maratha" is used in three overlapping senses: within Maharashtra it refers to the single dominant Maratha caste or group of Maratha–Kunbi[1] castes; outside Maharashtra, the term loosely designates the entire regional population that speaks Marathi; and, historically, the term denotes the kingdom founded by the Maratha leader Shivaji in the 17th century (Deshpande 2004). This article follows the first definition of the term Marathas as a community.

Marathas were initially Marathi-speaking units in the armies of states in the region. By Shivaji's time in the 17th century, they came to be identified with the many local lineages and elites who had found avenues for social mobility through civil and military employment. Many of these chieftains, who claimed Rajput ancestry and descent from a set of elite 96 Kshatriya families, called themselves Marathas. So did the vast number of Kunbi cultivators of western India who served under them (Deshpande 2004).

In 1818 the British installed Pratapsinh, a descendent of Shivaji, as the nominal ruler at Satara to offset the recently deposed Peshwa and Brahmin power in Pune (Wagle 1980). Pratapsinh successfully used the changed power structure to claim Kshatriya and Vedic ritual status for his family, the Bhosales—and for other Maratha chiefs—in 1830, following a decade-long conflict with Brahmin opinion in Pune (Deshpande 2004).

As Rosalind O'Hanlon (1985) has argued, the public debate that finally secured Kshatriya status for Pratapsinh, however, brought to the fore and legitimised rituals and dining practices that were rather loosely defined and widely practised in rural society. From the mid-19th century, there was an increased tendency among upwardly mobile Kunbi groups, some of them newly urbanised, to wear the sacred thread and claim themselves as Marathas (O'Hanlon 1985). The early colonial period saw such assertions of higher caste status and ritual claims. There were attempts at social mobility in such a milieu.

Jyotirao Phule (1827–1890) founded the Satya Shodhak Samaj (Truth Seeking Society), one of the first efforts at creating an organisation of lower caste people. There was upward mobility within the "Maratha–Kunbi complex" of castes at the turn of the 19th century. At the same time, manipulation of ritual status became an important weapon in the rivalry between the elite Marathas and Chitpavan Brahmins. Maratha became an identity, associated with "rulership and martial" attributes—an identity distinct from Brahmins and other castes (O'Hanlon 1985). This also fostered a Sanskritising tendency among the Marathas, especially in rural societies. In this process, the Marathas not only gained social and economic mobility but also political and religious supremacy in rituals, especially in regions like Marathwada and the southern part of present-day Maharashtra.

In the 20th century, the non-Brahmin movement came under the patronage of Chhatrapati Shahu, ruler of the princely state of Kolhapur and Shivaji's descendent. Shahu, who began supporting the cause after a bitter clash in the 1890s with Bal Gangadhar Tilak and conservative Brahmin opinion over the use of Vedic rituals, provided the much-needed financial as well as symbolic support. He campaigned for the removal of untouchability, opened hostels and schools and provided jobs for non-Brahmins (Omvedt 1985). His campaign against untouchability

and support for B R Ambedkar was matched by a strident assertion of Vedic Kshatriya rights for the elite Marathas, including the establishment of a Kshatriya priesthood for Marathas to do away with Brahmins in ritual life (Omvedt 1985).

From being an appellation without social prominence and used loosely to describe all Marathi speakers in the early 19th century, "Maratha" was transformed into a very broad social category under which almost every social group working the land could claim inclusion.

Mahar Identity

Mahars[2] are an important social group in Maharashtra and in surrounding states. They were forced traditionally to live on the outskirts of the village and their duties included that of village watchmen, messengers, wall menders, street sweepers and removers of carcasses. Shivaji recruited Mahars into his army in the 17th century. The tradition continued, as a result of which the Mahar regiment was formed in 1941 by the Indian Army. Under the British, Mahars served in the army until the 1857 mutiny, after which they were pensioned off and retrenched from military service by 1892 (O'Hanlon 1985). However, socially, the Mahars were untouchables and deprived of basic fundamental rights.

The interactions between the Maratha and Mahar communities highlight the perceived and experienced relationship between these communities and the goddesses they worship. For instance, when the priest from the dominant Maratha community worships Tuljabhavani and performs rituals, he does so in accordance with the deity's presumed wishes. At the same time, when a priest from the Mahar community worships the goddess, it is primarily because of his gratitude towards the deity and the deity's large-heartedness in accepting the low caste priest into the area of worship. By analysing this phenomenon, we understand how deities and their connection with human worshippers are indigenously conceptualised and constructed and perhaps reconstructed.

The Tuljabhavani Temple

The Tuljabhavani temple in Tuljapur is one of the most well-known sites known to Hindus throughout India as well as in Nepal (Dhere 2007). Most pilgrims frequent the temple to pray for a male offspring, marriages and relief from disabilities. Tuljapur is known for the temple of the goddess Bhavani whose antiquity, it is claimed, goes back to the times of Ram, whom she is believed to have blessed and guided in his search for Sita (Sontheimer 1995). It is this goddess again, who is believed to have rewarded Shivaji, the founder of the Maratha state, with the legendary Bhavani talwar (sword) and inspired him to carve out the Maratha state.

The Tuljabhavani temple lies in what was the princely state of Hyderabad to the south-west of Osmanabad District in the Marathwada region today. According to the *Osmanabad Gazetteer* (1972), the temple was built in the 13th century by the Yadavas. The architecture of the temple is called Hemadpanti after the Yadava Minister Hemadri. The architecture of the temple is believed to have changed in the Mughal era. There are claims that the Muslim invaders destroyed some parts of the temple and built a shrine which, with its dome bears resemblance to Mughal architecture. However, during Shivaji's rule, it is said that the shrine was again replaced and the idol of the goddess reinstated.[3]

According to Ajnandas, one of the saints of the Bhakti Movement, Afzal Khan had desecrated several temples, including the Tuljabhavani of Tuljapur. Therefore, the killing of Khan by Shivaji is seen as a sacrificial offering to the Tuljabhavani (Laine 2003).

The imprint of the local culture was subdued almost from the beginning, under the impulse of legitimising Shivaji as the Hindu ruler. He was legitimised as a truly good Hindu, which meant, making him a quasi Brahmin, a saint and an ascetic (Laine 2003).

The Matangi Temple

Thousands of pilgrims flock to the Tuljabhavani temple daily. However, little is known about the goddess Matangi, whose shrine is located right next to the main temple. The place lies deserted on most days with only a few local people visiting it. The temple has remained in the background with little attention paid to its history.

What is it that makes the Matangi temple a specifically local shrine, albeit one of great local significance and revenues? While the Tuljabhavani temple is readily recognisable throughout the country, why is the Matangi temple so unambiguously local? The main reason is that the goddess is a local deity worshipped by the Scheduled Castes. Also, the temple has 16 head priests, all belonging to the Mahar community, unusual in Hindu temples. The Tuljabhavani temple remains the centre of all activities and worship while the Matangi temple, claimed to be the original temple by its priests, takes second place .

According to religious Hindu historic documents like Devi Mahatmya, Matangi killed the demon Matangsur and thus came to be known by her present name. Historian R C Dhere, in his book, *Lajja Gauri*, mentions Matangi as the incarnation of Durga who fought the demons to protect her followers from evil. He adds that the pilgrimage to Tuljabhavani is incomplete without worshipping Matangi first. This highlights the importance of the shrine in local culture. According to tradition, Matangi is worshipped before the devotee proceeds to the main deity.

The temple has around 30 pujaris under the head priests and is run by the Mahar community who live in Maharwada, behind the Tuljabhavani temple. The Mahars also administer the Adishakti Adimaya temple located near the exit of the Tuljabhavani temple. Compared to the Matangi temple, the Adimaya temple is more popular because of its proximity to the Tuljabhavani temple. This temple provides the Mahar priests their primary income, through donations received in the form of food and money. This is largely because the pilgrims have very little knowledge of the fact that the temple is administered by the Mahar community.[4] But Matangi, the deity of Mahars, is sidelined by the dominant Hindu community—in much the same manner as the Mahars are sidelined by the dominant Hindu community.

The Temple Priests

The performance of any religious ceremony by a Brahmin priest, for the member of another caste, expresses the relations of ritual power. This is governed by the notions of purity and pollution which make up the basis for the Hindu religious

hierarchy. Ritual not only represents the broader relationship between Brahmins and others, but actively affects relationships within communities themselves. It is in ritual that the divine power is invoked to sanction the acts of individuals, such as marriage, which become thereby a part of the public structure of the community and contribute to its unified moral life (O'Hanlon 1985).

The Tuljabhavani and Matangi temples are quite different. These temples are unlike Hindu religious institutions because they do not have Brahmin priests to perform rituals. As we have seen, the Tuljabhavani temple has Maratha priests while the Matangi temple is run and administered by priests from the Mahar community.

Although documents in the possession of the Tuljabhavani temple do not provide much authentic information, Kulkarni and Khare (2005) hold that the Bhope family held the office of *patil* (headman) and maintained a strong armed guard, to deal with frequent incursions of "Muslim rulers." The priests of the temple are called Bhopa or Bhope (head priests), while the other assistant priests are called pujaris. The term Bhopa is probably derived from the word "Bhupal," meaning protector of the earth or the king (Dhere 2007). Apart from the 16 head priests, there are 128 assistant priests who perform rituals for pilgrims. The head priests of the Tuljabhavani temple reside within the temple premises in the Kadam–Patil wada which also doubles as a lodge for the tourists. They are all a part of the same lineage, Kadam–Patil, the dominant Maratha community in the region.

The priests distribute among themselves the donations given by pilgrims and the earnings from performing rituals. According to the local communities, the Kadam–Patils began officiating as priests in the temple around 150 years ago. Earlier, the Brahmins had absolute authority over rites and rituals of the temple. Their rights were taken over by the Marathas in the region who led the anti-caste struggle against the Brahmins (O'Hanlon 1985). The Marathas bolstered their position with claims of "royal roots." That Shivaji was described as the saviour of Hinduism gave a fillip to their demand to perform religious rituals

like the Brahmins. Families of Maratha priests slowly took charge of the temple, pushing out the Brahmins. They became economically strong, gained social supremacy and eventually controlled the politics of the region which today is totally in the hands of a few Maratha families who hold power virtually by rotation.

The Tuljabhavani temple is administered under the temple trust created under the Bombay Public Trust Act, 1950 in 1962. The collector of Osmanabad District is the chairperson of this temple trust. In spite of being administered by the state government, the power to make decisions lies with the *panch*, the committee whose members are from the dominant Maratha community—the district collector appoints this committee.

According to Mahar priests, at one time, the Matangi temple was the main temple and the entry to the Tuljabhavani temple was from the Matangi temple's gate. But the social and cultural dominance of the Maratha community meant that more importance was given to the Tuljabhavani temple.

According to the Maratha priests, the temple was a small shrine till the late 1980s and early 1990s. The bigger structure we see today was built later. Since the Marathas wanted to build their ritual supremacy through the temple, the step to mainstream it came to be taken by the administration. The Matangi was positioned in such a way that it came up along the exit of the Tuljabhavani temple, almost half a kilometre to its north. This not only reduced its visibility to the pilgrims coming from outstation areas but also had an impact on the social and economic life of the Mahar community whose livelihoods depended on the temple. This interpretation leads us to the caste dynamics of the region and how modern-day caste system plays an important role in sidelining the exuntouchable community.

For instance, the Mahar community even today does not have access to perform the rites and rituals in the Tuljabhavani temple. Even the Mahar priests are denied access to the sanctum sanctorum. The Maratha priests do not touch the idol of Matangi and do not conduct the main rituals of the temple. That is the preserve of Mahar priests. This according to the

Mahar priests is a retaliation of sorts against the Marathas by the Mahars.

The Mahar community is largely influenced by the Ambedkarite movement. The community, including the priests, in spite of being in the Hindu fold and having close associations with the temple, believes in the teachings of Buddha and Ambedkar. According to the priests, they are involved in the activities of the temple, not only because of their historic association with it but also because priesthood is livelihood to them—they lack other livelihood options.

Goat Sacrifice

Goat sacrifice is one of the ritual practices of the Tuljabhavani temple. According to tradition, the animal is sacrificed to satisfy the demon Mahishasur, who was killed by the goddess. The act of slaughtering the goat is performed by the people from Mahar community in both the temples. The Marathas do not perform this ritual, but the community holds sway in the performance of other rituals. This again is an act of historical discrimination reinterpreted in the context of modern-day ritual observance.

Historically, Osmanabad District has been dominated by Muslims. However, in Tuljapur taluka, the temple largely influenced the lives of all communities. Moreover, while the district has beef shops in every corner, there is not a single beef shop in Tuljapur in spite of Muslims and Dalit presence in the region. Since the cow is regarded as a holy animal for the Hindus, slaughter houses are not found anywhere in the taluka.

The local and regional media in Maharashtra regularly highlight events and practices of the Tuljabhavani temple. However, not one piece of news about the Matangi temple finds a mention in the media. This is an indication of the media's caste bias. The nature of authority and hierarchy in the Hindu temple cannot be entirely divorced from considerations of power of the deity and the rank of its human worshippers (Appadurai 1981).

Conclusions

A study of the priestly structure and practices at the Tuljabhavani and Matangi temples, and the statements and narratives of the priests and members of the Mahar

community, shows the common phenomenon of "believing without belonging." While the Mahars are largely influenced by Ambedkar's ideology and Buddhism as a religious identity, they continue to be practising Hindus due to the lack of alternative livelihood options.

The upper castes continue to look down upon the scheduled castes, more importantly the Buddhists, as they are mainly from the Mahar community (Jaffrelot 2005). It is important for the Dalit movement today to have a strong presence in all spheres, including the political, cultural, economic as well as religious milieu and have its own symbol for confronting the upper castes.

In Marathwada, the Marathas have created a stronghold over the resources through their political, cultural and religious dominance. The portrayal of Shivaji as the ideal Hindu king and a symbol of Maratha power is propaganda of the Hindutva forces in the state. The linking of Shivaji to the Tuljabhavani and making the goddess a symbol of Maratha supremacy is a way of creating space for sustaining caste relations and power structure. The temple administration is also actively playing its part in making Hindu religion the dominant force by representing the institutional opportunity for controlling resources as ritually supreme. While Dalits have been symbolically reincorporated into the formal political arena through Hindutva politics, especially its anti-Muslim agenda, the emergent Dalit politics continues to challenge Hinduisation (Rao 2009). The Dalit community, especially the Mahars, has been resisting the religious domination by struggling for a respectable place within the Hindu social order or by rejecting the hegemonic Hindu social and religious practices.

NOTES

1 The term Kunbi is the generic term in Marathi, for all those who work on the land.
2 The term Mahar, Dalit and "Scheduled Castes" are used interchangeably, within the context of the article. However, the article exclusively deals with the "Mahar" community (also included in the list of Scheduled Castes and one of the Dalit communities in Maharashtra) contesting Maratha hegemony in a temple sphere.
3 Based on interviews with priests and elders in the temple.
4 Information based on interviews with pilgrims (7 November 2011).

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