

The Mahars: A study of their religion and socio-economic life

Vishwas Sheshrao Padole¹, KR Rajani²

¹ Ph.D. Student, Department of Philosophy, Andhra University, Visakhapatnam, Andhra Pradesh, India

² Chairperson, Board Studies, Andhra University, Visakhapatnam, Andhra Pradesh, India

³ Director, Department of Philosophy, Centre for Religious Studies, Andhra University, Visakhapatnam, Andhra Pradesh, India

Abstract

There are scholars who suggest that the Mahars are the original inhabitants of the state. They are a large community found in every town in Maharashtra. There are fifty-three known endogamous divisions within the Mahar caste, however one can even find more. Among them the *Somvanshi* are the most numerous and they consider themselves superior to the other clans. The Mahars were also part of the *Balutedar* system of the village economy, performing certain duties and from which they also received their livelihood. In social status they were regarded as impure and hence they were not allowed to come in contact with caste Hindus for fear of making them impure. They were oppressed and considered worthy for doing the menial works. Traditionally the Mahars as a community never received any proper religious instruction. They had their own belief system and they venerated their deities however, they also celebrated the festivals of other Hindu castes.

Keywords: maharvada, balutedar, harijan, warkari, gosavi, chavadi

1. Introduction

The Mahars are one of the most important castes among the untouchable castes in Maharashtra. In nature, the status of the caste has always been low in the Hindu caste structure. Over the centuries, the Mahars are immensely important in the Hindu caste structure from a socio-economic and religious point of view. There was a common saying in Maharashtra, "Wherever there is a town, there is a Mahar quarter" ^[1]. This suggests that the fact that the Mahars or *Mhar*, a community of untouchables is found throughout the state of Maharashtra. For a *Marathi* person, the word Mahar was a tone of contempt. Referring to the way caste Hindus thought of them, R.V. Russell says, "The people say, 'Mahar *sarva jaticha bahar*', which means that, the Mahar is outside all castes. Having given them a bad name, they are also given an unwarrantably bad character; for 'Mahar *jaticha*' is a phrase used for a person with no moral or kind feelings" ^[2]. In the olden (former) days, when a Mahar met a man of higher caste, he would use the form of greetings peculiar to his people "*johar mayabapa, johar*". This was a traditional greeting, given by a Mahar to their masters and landlords. Robertson states that the moment a high caste person heard this greeting, he would know who was greeting him ^[3]. The caste is one of the most suppressed and neglected castes in the state, but the community has an important place in the tradition of the socio-economic system in the villages in Maharashtra, known as the *Balutedar* system. The Mahars were numerous, and found everywhere in the state. Over a period of time, they were called by different names. Like other outcastes of India, the British called them 'depressed classes', Mahatma Gandhiji, termed them '*Harijan*' (people of god) and the government of India refers to them as 'Schedule Castes'. However, like other outcastes on India, they prefer to be

called "Dalits" ^[4]. A good number of Mahars converted to Christianity. Similarly, a vast majority of them followed the great personality of their caste Dr. Ambedkar, and embraced Buddhism, evidence of their desire to free themselves from the bondage of the Hindu caste structure.

2. Purpose

The purpose of this article is to understand the community of the Mahars in their traditional and historical setting in Hindu society. The focus will be on the study of their religion and belief system. Then an attempt will be made to understand the Mahars, though placed outside the *Varna* system of the Hindu caste structure, and their socio-economic life in the larger Hindu fold. An attempt will be made to determine whether they have any rights and privileges within the existing social structure of caste, of which they were proud, and whether they were making any contribution in the on-going life in their villages.

3. Sources

Many of the sources consulted for this study are the outcome of the study of the Mahars, conducted by reputed scholars and then published by well-known publishers. In this article, such sources are treated as primary, since they are useful for its purpose and focus. The secondary sources were useful for elaborating the subject of the study.

4. Limitations

The Mahars claim to be the original inhabitants of the state of Maharashtra. Traditionally, they have been under the bondage of the Hindu caste structure and have suffered as a community for centuries. This study will picture their traditional and historical life setting in the larger Hindu fold.

¹ Alexander, Robertson, *The Mahar Folks: A Study of Untouchables in Maharashtra* (Calcutta: YMCA Printing House, 1938), 44.

² R.V. Russell and Hiralal, *The Tribes and Castes of the Central Provinces of India*, Vol. IV (Delhi: Cosmos Publications, 1975), 142.

³ Alexander, Robertson, op. cit., 10.

⁴ The term 'Dalits' is derived from the Sanskrit work '*dal*' which means cracked, split, broken, down trodden, crushed, destroyed and oppressed. James Massey, *Indigenous People: Dalits* (Delhi: ISPCK, 1994), 6

The article will not cover the time when a good number of Mahars opted for a new religion and embraced it for various reasons and purposes.

5. Methodology

The methodology adopted in this article is historical, documentary, and also analytical.

6. Historical Background of Maharashtra

The state of Maharashtra, the largest state in population and size in the country, was inaugurated on May 1, 1960 as a distinctively Marathi state. Prior to this, the area was under the Bombay Presidency and the Central Provinces^[5]. Politically, the state is well known from ancient history. Many dynasties, both ancient and modern have ruled from here. The final defeat of *Peshva* Bajirao II and the annexation of the Kingdom of the Marathas to the British Bombay Presidency in 1818, opened a new era in the political history of Maharashtra^[6]. The predominant religion of Maharashtra is Hinduism. A large number of people adhere to it in one way or the other. The Aryans, who came to India in the middle of the second millennium B.C., imposed their social order upon the inhabitants of the country. The Rigveda refers to the four varnas - namely the Brahmans, the Kshatriya, the Vaishya, and last of all, the Shudras. Outside the above four varnas there are numerous outcastes^[7]. This caste structure existed throughout the villages in Maharashtra.

7. Origin of the Mahars

There are scholars who suggest that the Mahars are the original inhabitants of Maharashtra. The name Maharashtra is derived from the word Mahar. R.V. Russel^[8] and Enthoven^[9] seem to have argued that the Mahars could have been original inhabitants of the land, whom the Aryans first encountered. Robertson suggests that the saying, "Wherever there is a village, there is a *maharvada*" (living quarters of the Mahar community) may be taken literally to mean that, formerly, the Mahars were 'so great a nation that their remnants are found in every town throughout the state'^[10] He even goes a step further and suggests that the Mahars might have given their name to the state Maharashtra^[11]. Ketkar sums up the scholarly opinions by saying that the Marathi speaking region, where the Mahars were numerous and residing, was called Rashtra of Mahars or the place of Mahar^[12]. Risley suggests that the Mahars preserved their original name and many of their characteristics, but modified the

animistic practices more and more in the direction of Orthodox Hinduism^[13].

According to a popular belief, the Mahars are divided into twelve and a half castes^[14]. But according to Enthoven one can go further. He mentions fifty-three endogamous divisions within the Mahar caste. Among them the *Somvanshi*^[15] are the most numerous and they were found everywhere in Maharashtra. Moreover, they consider themselves superior to the other clans^[16]. There are various legendary stories that explain the origin of the Mahars in Maharashtra. "According to Hindu tradition, Mahars were originally night rovers (*nishachar*), whom the god Brahma transformed into men, lest they eat his whole creation"^[17]. People who lived in the Nasik region believe that the founder of the Mahar caste was Svarup Somaji who originated from the sole of Brahma's foot^[18]. People living in the Ahmednagar region believe that they are the descendants of Mahars who came from one of the four cow-born castes^[19].

8. Religions and Religious life of the Mahars

The study done by Vetschera on the Mahars shows that most Mahars are not deeply religious^[20]. The Mahars attend *yatras* (religious fairs) with enthusiasm, which take place at Hindu temples in different places. Often, their motives will be entertainment or to do business rather than religious. Many actively participate in the festival of god *Khandoba*, the *warkari* cult, and make the pilgrimage to *Pandharpur*, *Alandi*, *Jejuri* and *Tuljapur*^[21]. They also are devoted to various non-*Sanskritic* gods.

The Mahar as a community never received any proper religious instruction. Though they were not allowed to enter Hindu temples they practised Hinduism. They celebrated the festivals of other Hindu castes^[22] like *Holi*, *Dasahra*, *Dipavali* *Gudhipadva*, *Akhadi*, *Vata Pornima* (*Vata Savitri*), *Naga-Panchami*, *Rakhi Pornima*, and *Pola*. On the festival of *Nag-Panchami*, they made images of *Nag* (snake) out of flour and sugar and ate it^[23]. A special bathing-*ghat* is set apart at *Ramtek* near Nagpur for the Mahars living there. Russell states, after the bath they can enter the citadel leading up to the temple to offer their worship and believe that god accepts their offerings from a distance. In a place in Wardha, they could stand before the shrine of Mahadeo, with hands folded but will not touch the shrine^[24]. The Mahars in Berar had high regards for Muslim tombs^[25].

⁵ S.C. Bhatt ed. *The Encyclopaedic District Gazetteers of India, Western Zone*, Vol. 7 (New Delhi: Gyan Publishing House, 1997), 303.

⁶ M.D. David, "Christian Influence and social Change in Maharashtra in First Half of the Nineteenth Century", In ICHR, Vol. XI, No. 1 (April 1977): 48.

⁷ Vetschera, op. cit., XVII.

⁸ Russel and Hiralal, op. cit., 130.

⁹ R.E. Enthoven, *the Tribes and Castes of Bombay*, Vol. II (Bombay: Government Printing Press, 1920), 401.

¹⁰ Robertson, op. cit., 44

¹¹ Ibid, 52.

¹² Sridhar Ketkar, ed. *Maharashtra Dnyankosha: Encyclopaedia of Maharashtra* (Pune: Maharashtra Dnyankosha Mandal, 1924), 535.

¹³ H. Risley, *the People of India* (Calcutta: Thacker & Co., 1915), 75-76.

¹⁴ Various explanation given about the half-caste in Mahar. Marriage law did not permit intermarriage between various clans, and the children born out of such intermarriage belonged to the half-caste. If the parents of particular child did not belong to the same clan, he was mixture element from the other caste. Cf. Vetschera, op. cit., 18-19.

¹⁵ Various opinions and theories have been existing in among the Mahars. The popular one is that *Somavanshi* trace their descent from the five

Pandavas. They claimed to have taken part with *Pandavas* against the *Kauravas* in the war of the Mahabharata and subsequently settled in Maharashtra. Cf. R.V. Russell and Hira Lal, op. cit., 132.

¹⁶ Enthoven, op. cit., 405.

¹⁷ Ibid, 405.

¹⁸ Ibid, 402.

¹⁹ According to this legend the Mahars descended from *Mahamuni* who was a foundling picked up by the goddess Parvati on the bank of the Ganges. When the divine cow, *Tripad Gayatri* died, the gods determined to eat dead cow. At this time beef had not become forbidden food. While eating, a piece of flesh fell out of the pot. *Mahamuni* ate this fallen piece for which he was cursed that he would live on the flesh of dead cow.

Cf. Russell and Hira Lal, op. cit., 132.

²⁰ Vetschera, op. cit., 141.

²¹ Enthoven, op. cit., 413.

²² Vetschera, op. cit., 198.

²³ Russell and Hira Lal, op. cit. 137.

²⁴ Ibid, 138.

²⁵ Enthoven, op. cit., 413.

9. Beliefs System and the Deities of the Mahars

Vows (*Navasa*)

Vows were very important for Mahars. "If somebody in the family is very sick, other members take vows to make offerings for the person to get cured; or if a couple had been married for a long time without having a child, and offering is made"^[26]. Various *navasa* were made to various deities. Sometimes girls were promised to serve in the temple of *Khandoba*. Many of the *Murali* and the *Waghaya* devotees of god *Khandoba* of Jejuri are drawn from the Mahar caste^[27]. Sometimes vows to go through the *hook swinging*^[28] ceremony were taken and sacrifices of goats or buffaloes are offered.

According to Enthoven, "the favourite deities of the Mahars are *Bhavani*, *Mahadeva*, *Chokhoba*, *Jnyanoba*, *Khandoba*, *Vithoba*, and *Mhaskoba*"^[29]. Robertson states, the Mahars maintained castes or sub-castes, which are further divided into *kula* or *gotra*, each having its own name. Each *kula* has a *devaka*, represented by a small metal *taka* or plate bearing the likeness of the clan totem^[30]. Numerous *kula* or clans are found among the Mahars.

Mariai

Mariai is a goddess worshipped by the Mahars and Mangs (another outcaste in Maharashtra) all over the state. Buffalo sacrifice is very important in the worship of *Mariai*. Sometimes this goddess is compared with *Durga* and *Kali*. Vetschera says that, in the minds of the people *Mariai* is a beautiful woman, dressed up with precious ornaments, and holding an arrow in her hand, she rides on a lion. For Mahars, *Mariai* is an important goddess with many different forms or appearances, according to her wishes^[31]. For this reason, the Mahars have very high regards for her.

Whenever any epidemic strikes, certain rituals are performed by the community of Mahars and Mangs for its removal^[32]. When misfortunes or diseases occurs, people believe that she is angry, whereas they emphasize her kind and warm heartedness, in granting children to her devotees^[33]. According to Robertson, the Mahars are the guardians of the goddess *Mariai* whose shrines are found in every *Maharwada*^[34].

Cholera is closely connected with the goddess *Mariai*. The priest of the goddess is called '*Potraja*'. Men of every Mahar sub-caste can become *potarajas*. The Mahars were granted all the rights to perform all ceremonies connected with the goddess^[35]. In this regard citing from the Solapur Volume of the Bombay Gazetteers Roberson states,

When cholera rages in village the people raise a subscription and hand the money to the headman. The headman brings a robe and a bodice, some rice and flour, a he buffalo or a sheep and flowers, camphor, frankincense, red powder, betel-nut and leaves. He takes three carts through the village accompanied by music and a band of the villagers. The carts then go to the Mahar quarters outside the village where the shrine of *Mariai*, the cholera goddess, is. The headman and

the other villagers stand at a distance while the Mahar bathes the goddess, dresses her in the robe and bodice, fills her lap with rice, betel-nuts, dry dates and a coconut, waves burning frankincense and camphor before her and with joined hands begs her to be kind. All the villagers lift their joined hands to their heads and ask the goddess to be kind and retire leaving the Mahars and the Mangs. The buffalo is led in front of the goddess and a Mahar chops off its head with a sword or a hatchet and touches the goddess' lap with a finger dipped in its blood. The cartloads of food and meat are shown to the goddess and are distributed among such of the villagers as do not object to eat them. This concludes the sacrifice^[36].

Bhadavi

In Poona and Ahmednagar regions, the Mahars worshipped a goddess by the name of *Bhadavi* with great awe. It is said that the Mahars feared making any false oath in the name of this goddess. They were cautious about the manner of worship of this goddess. The images of this goddess were not found in stones or brass. But in the month of *Bhadrapada* the images of *Bhadavi* were made in dough in human forms. It is said that the images were made and also eaten in the night itself. The chief purpose of worshipping this image was to enquire about the coming of the rain. Robertson pointed out that the Mahars alone worshipped this goddess but the *Marathas*, high caste donated the flour and oil for making the images and for burning the lambs^[37].

Bhavai

Bhavai is a goddess represented by a stone figure of a height of about three feet. There is no specific temple for the goddess. The idol was always kept in the open, near the Mahar *cavadi* (social meeting place). The Mahars on village duty as the watchmen (*vesakara*) were especially important to the goddess *Bhavai*. It was believed that the goddess would help them to perform their duties. They also conducted the festival of *Bhavai*, when newly appointed *vesakara*, after making his duty round in the village, would be required to go to the idol and to worship the goddess. The other Mahars joined the *vesakara* in worship of *Bhavai* only in the month of *Bhadrapada*. At this time special food would be prepared to feed five women. A *puja* was performed with *haladi* (turmeric) and *kunku* (vermilion), when food was offered to the image of goddess *Bhavai*^[38].

Ghoduai

Another goddess whom the Mahars gave great importance to was *Ghoduai*. Therefore, the idol was kept in the *Maharwadadas*. They believed that the goddess had great power to guard their lives from anything evil. The idol, made of crude stone and about twenty centimetres in height, was kept in a shallow recess specially made in the walls. New-born babies, when 13 days old, were required to be brought before the goddess for ensuring protection in life^[39].

²⁶ Ibid, 163.

²⁷ Robertson, 70.

²⁸ *Hookswinging* was commonly practiced in western Maharashtra mostly by women who perform this to fulfil their vows this is done primarily to acknowledge the divine favours received from god *Khandoba*. Their bodies were suspended by an iron hook pierced through the flesh on their backs and attached to the end of a horizontal pole, to maintain the balance. In this position woman was required to take few rounds as her vow required.

²⁹ Ibid.

³⁰ Robertson, op. cit., 54.

³¹ Vetschera, op. cit., 151.

³² Vetschera, op. cit., 151.

³³ Ibid, 150.

³⁴ Ibid, 23.

³⁵ Ibid, 156.

³⁶ Robertson, 69.

³⁷ Ibid, 70.

³⁸ Vetschera, 158.

³⁹ Ibid, 157.

Satavai

Satavai was another goddess worshipped by the Mahars for the protection of small children. Vows were made in her name. The goddess had a special temple or image. The Mahars believed that the goddess resided inside the houses near the grinding stone^[40].

Superstitions

Apart from the worship of gods and goddess, the Mahars also believed in sorcery, witchcraft and soothsaying, and attributed sickness to evil spirits. They cast various spells to cure a man possessed by evil spirit or stung by a snake or scorpion. For driving out the *vaita najara* (evil eye), they made a small human image of powdered turmeric and threw it into boiled water, reciting as they did so, the name of the person whom they suspected of having cast an evil eye upon them. In several other ways as well the Mahars sought to protect their children from evil. *Vala* (copper rings) are tied around the ankles of small boys and girls to protect them from diseases. *Managati* (beads of black colour) are worn for general protection. It was a practice that a small baby would be presented *vala* or *managati* on the fifth day after its birth. *Karaduda*, black or red colour cotton thread, is worn around the waist. At the time of engagement, marriage and at the *Dipavali* festival, this *karaduda* was presented to all males. Some Mahars do not believe in rebirth, but most do^[41].

10. The role of the Gosavi

The religious teachers of the Mahars are called *gosavis*, usually followers of the Nath cult^[42]. To be a disciple of a *gosavi*, a Mahar has to go through *kana phunkane* (ear blowing) ceremony. The rite of *kana phunkane* is very popular among the Mahars. There have been cases where small children also were made to go through the ceremony. Enthoven describes, how a Mahar *guru* performs this rite by whispering sacred verses into the right ear of children as young as one year of age^[43]. If an adult wants a *gosavi* to become his or her religious teacher, he tells the *gosavi* who performs *kana phunkane* ceremony as a sign of consent to accept the candidate by opening their ear for religious teaching. Then the *gosavi* will recite some mantras in the ears of the person and his ears are opened for religious teaching. The disciple has to give presents to the *gosavi* for having accepted him as a disciple. The Mahars believed that religious instruction, which the *gosavi* gives, helps a person to have peace of mind in the face of difficulties^[44]. Any Mahar could become a *gosavi*. Often *gosavis* travel with wife and children on his tours, so that the children learn popular songs and to play musical instruments. However, it is not mandatory for a *gosavi*'s son to become a *gosavi*^[45]. Each *gosavi* has several disciples.

11. Social Practices of the Mahars

In villages, the *chavadi* was the place in *Maharwad*s where

people met for interactions^[46]. The caste also has a vast number of exogamous groups that derive their names from plants, natural objects, or even animals. The social problems of the Mahars are solved by the institutions of *taraphe* and *mehetre*. But caste disputes are settled by the men of the village with or without the help of the head man. The *mehetre* has the power to expel a Mahar from the caste. This position was given to the people belonging to the *Somvanshi* clan. The *Somavanshis* claimed that they have descended from the moon, and are superior to the rest^[47]. The *taraphe* are in charge of about 10 villages and responsible for informing the caste problems to the *mehetres*, who basically lived in the largest village. The *taraphe* received the information from the in-charge in the village, called *karabhari*. He was an old man, living in village, and so well informed about all village affairs. He settled the minor problems but for major he always had to consult the institution of *taraphe*^[48].

12. Marriage Customs

The Mahars are very particular about marriage rites. All members of the family, clan or caste are involved in a wedding of a particular couple. Usually, the marriage is arranged by the father of a boy and girl, and the mothers do not interfere in the selection process^[49]. A man must not marry from his own clan, but may take a wife from his mother or grandmother's clan. Different rites of marriage are practised in different regions among the Mahars. A quaint custom of serving the wife is also practiced. In this custom, a boy will have to serve his father-in-law for a period varying from one to five years. In Berar area, Mahar weddings are believed to have been officiated by Brahmins. "But the priest will not come to their house. The wedding is held on the same day as among the higher castes, and when the priest gives the signal, the dividing cloth (*antarpai*) between the couple is withdrawn and the garment of the couple is knotted"^[50]. The Mahar observed all the rituals from a distance, pretending that a Brahmin (priest) was performing their own wedding. The barber too has a specific role at a Mahar wedding; in some places, when he cuts the bride's nails, he will also cut the nails and hair of the bridegroom^[51]. Widow marriage is permissible; however, it must be taken first to the caste panchayat or committee, but it is regarded as inauspicious. She does not have right to select her new husband, but has to accept the man whom the father or brother will select. A simple wedding will be conducted for such woman, in moon light after nightfall. After the marriage, she can wear *mangalsutra*, bangles and apply *kunku*, but she should not participate in other marriage functions. Marrying more than one wife is permissible under certain conditions and rules^[52].

13. Customs Connected to Death

The person who is breathing his last and may die at any time will be lowered from the cot to the ground. It is believed that cot should not be polluted by the corpse, as is it considered as

⁴⁰ Ibid, 158.

⁴¹ Ibid, 163-167.

⁴² This cult had emerged and became popular in Maharashtra in 13th century because the Vedic religion had become ostentatious and was dominated by meaningless rituals and corrupt practices. The most prominent follower of this sect was Dnyaneshwar who was the pioneer saint of the Bhakti Movement. Cf. P.N. Pranjpe and Nishikant Mirajkar. *Marathi Literature: An Outline* (New Delhi: Maharashtra Information Centre, n. d.), 2.

⁴³ Vetschera, op. cit., 57.

⁴⁴ Ibid, 160.

⁴⁵ Ibid, 161.

⁴⁶ Specific area located outside the main village, where the Mahar community had to live, *chavadi* was the place where Mahars met for social gatherings.

⁴⁷ Enthoven, op. cit., 410.

⁴⁸ Vetschera, op. cit., 48-50.

⁴⁹ Russell and Hira Lal, Op. cit., 134-135.

⁵⁰ Russell and Hira Lal, op. cit., 134.

⁵¹ Ibid, 135.

⁵² Vetschera, op. cit., 110-112.

belonging to the goddess *mata Bhavini*. Moreover, it is believed that a dying person should be close to the 'mother earth'. A woman is regarded fortunate if she dies before her husband. In this regard Vetschera writes, if a woman whose husband is still alive, dies, her right hand with her palm upward is put on her forehead and filled with *kunku* powder. The other married women who are present, will in turn, take *kunku* from the dead woman's hand and apply it to their own foreheads. By doing so, they wish to be as fortunate as she is [53].

The Mahars either buried or cremated their dead and the mourning lasted for three days. When a member of the community died, close relatives and people belonging to the community would gather in the house of the dead person. The dead body is given a bath with hot water without mixing any *isna* (that is, cold water) [54]. The dead body is then laid on a *tiradi* [55] and carried to the burial ground in a procession. Three days after the burial, a feast is given to the members of the community. The chief mourners are required to shave their heads and immerse the hair in a river, as a symbol of honour and respect to the dead [56].

14. The Social Status of the Mahars among the Hindus

The social position of the Mahars was one of distressing degradation. They are considered to be impure and live in the Mahar quarters (*Maharwadass*) outside the village. Describing their status Enthoven says, "As he (Mahar) passes the village well, he may be seen crouching so that his shadow may not fall on the water drawers. The village barber will not shave the Mahars, nor are they allowed to take water from the village well. Formerly an earthen pot was hung from their necks to hold their spittle, and they were made to drag thorns to wipe out their footprints. When a Brahmin came near, they were forced to lie far off on their faces, lest their shadow might fall on him" [57].

Their very touch, and even their shadow, was thought to be unclean. The poems of the Mahar poet Chokhamela, who lived in the fourteenth century, show that the Mahars were engaged in menial occupations and went begging for leftover food. The temple authorities persecuted them. Everyone kept a distance from them and any food touched by them was considered defiled. Jayashree Gokhale reported that such a low status was an accepted reality by the Mahars themselves, which was an outcome of the orthodox system of Brahmin customs. She quotes from one of the poems of Chokhamela.

Johar maybap johar/I am your Mahar's Mahar
I am hungry/for your leftovers
I am hopeful/I am the servants of your slaves
For your leavings/I have brought the basket [58]

The expression '*Johar maybap johar*' was a traditional greeting by a Mahar to their masters and landlords. The moment a caste person heard this, it was understood that the

caller was an untouchable Mahar [59].

Like other outcaste communities of India, the Mahars, too, were the victims of ritual, social, and economical difficulties as well as disabilities [60]. Any Mahar going against the caste rules was punished severely. Vetschera writes, "In earlier times if a Mahar, ventured close to a temple to hear the sacred texts being recited and was caught, molten metal was poured into his ears" [61]. A Mahar entering into a temple was an act of violation of caste rules and was liable to punishment.

Among all the Hindu castes, the Mahars had a close working relationship with the *Marathas*, who were numerous in western Maharashtra; in other words, the Mahars were made to toil under the *Marathas*. They were the landlords and the Mahar community provided field labour. The treatment that the Mahars received was no less than a slave. If a Mahar was found refusing the work assigned to him, he would be beaten up severely and dragged to the field by force. After beating a Mahar, the concerned *Maratha* would take a bath in order to purify himself.

15. The Rights and Privileges of the Mahars

A Mahar was an integral part of the traditional *Balutedar* system, that ensured him certain rights and privileges. Jayashree Gokhale points out that the rights claimed by the Mahars were officially approved by the rulers of the 15th century and subsequently, were accepted by the rulers who came after them [62]. According to Enthoven, Mahars had fifty-two rights in the olden days. However, he listed twenty rights that were in practice during the time of the Muslim and Maratha rulers [63]. The Mahars were the most important *balutedars* who worked for the village landlords, and were the first in the list of those who were due payment of allowances or *haks*. Vetschera quotes Artre who said that about 2.5% of the total agricultural production of grains was the share of the Mahars [64]. Apart from their share of the agricultural produce, the Mahars also had other rights in the olden days, called as *sanadas* [65]. There were *sanadas*, which described the list of the rights (*haks*) that the Mahars, were entitled to get from the villagers for their services [66].

In certain circumstances, the Mahars were given some land-share, called *vatan*-land, which were not productive. This was given to them as a reward for their faithful services. Vetschera observed that the Muslim ruler Shah Alam Khan rewarded the Mahars of western Maharashtra with *vatan* lands, whereas Mahars in the Deccan claim to have received such rights from Akbar, the great. How far such liberty was a reality for the Mahar may be questioned. But the fact that the Mahars did hold *vatan* lands is widely accepted [67].

Mahars as Traditional Village Servants

On the one hand, the Mahars were untouchables and unmentionables; but on the other hand, they were an integral part of the village society. Robertson observes, "Untouchable

⁵³ Ibid, 131-133.

⁵⁴ Cold water normally used for mixing in hot water while taking bath. It is considered as a symbol of life. Since the dead person has no life *Isna* is not used for giving him final bath.

⁵⁵ A bed like structure made out of bamboo for the purpose of carrying corpses.

⁵⁶ Enthoven, op. cit., 415.

⁵⁷ Ibid.

⁵⁸ Jayashree Gokhale, *From Confession to Confrontation: The Politics of an Indian Untouchable Community* (Bombay: Popular Prakashan, 1993), 42.

⁵⁹ Robertson, op. cit., 1.

⁶⁰ Sunanda Patwardhan, *Change among Indian Harijan: Maharashtra a Case Study* (Bombay: Orient Longman, 1973), 33.

⁶¹ Vetschera, op. cit., 41.

⁶² Gokhale, op. cit., 29.

⁶³ Enthoven, op. cit., 417.

⁶⁴ Vetschera, op. cit., 293.

⁶⁵ *Sanadas* were the copper plates that could not be deciphered. They were given to a group of people or to an individual person for their remarkable services rendered to the rulers. The kings of that time granted particular privileges to them, which were recorded on these *sanadas*.

⁶⁶ Robertson, op. cit., 26-27.

⁶⁷ Vetschera, op. cit., 295.

and nameless though he may be, the Mahar is an indispensable part of the village organisation in so far as he is employed in the execution of village duties... certain duties by village law and custom throughout Maharashtra can only be performed by men of this caste".^[68] The duties that a Mahar had to perform were of a social and religious nature and at the same time Mahars were also entitled to certain rights and privileges in connection with those duties. These rights and duties of the Mahars in Maharashtra can be best understood in the context of the *Jajmani* system that was widely practised in the entire north India^[69]. In Maharashtra, the system was more or less the same as that which existed under a *Balutedar* system. The concerned person was entitled to get his allowances that were called *baluta* or *hak*. The system accommodated the Mahars in the form of village servants with various duties to perform.

Assistants to the Patils

The Mahars assisted the village *Patil* in various matters. The *Patil* could ask him to perform any work, official or private. R.V. Russell stated, "As *Balutedar* on the village establishment the Mahar holds a post of great importance to himself and convenient to the village. To the *Patil*, *Patwari* and big men of the village he acts often as a personal servant and errand-runner, and for a smaller cultivator he will also at times carry a torch or act as an escort"^[70]. The *Patil* was responsible for the village administrative matters, civil as well as law and order. He was assisted by a Mahar in collecting the revenues from the villages for the state. In this way a Mahar was directly a part of the village administrative system to some extent. Jayashree Gokhale says that the relationship between the *Patil* and the Mahars was frequently invoked with resentment and bitterness. One the major benefits received by the *Patil* from the Mahars was access to free labour and services^[71].

The duties that the Mahars had to perform determined their social status and classed them as untouchables. Certain duties they performed demanded skill, high intelligence as well as moral integrity. They had to clean the horses of the travellers and carry their baggage^[72]. In those days the streets were not safe. A traveller would request the village *Patil* for the needed help and the *Patil* arranged a Mahar to accompany him on the journey^[73].

The Mahars were also authorities in boundary matters^[74]. Their knowledge of boundary matters was helpful in avoiding land disputes. Jayashree Gokhale opines that the knowledge of boundary matters confirms the view that the Mahars were the ancient inhabitants of the land^[75]. They also carried government official messages to different villages, conveyed death notices, swept village roads, and repaired village wells^[76].

As Village Watchmen

As watchman, a Mahar was called a *Vesakara*. Guarding the village as well as the crops was his responsibility. Any

stranger who came to the village first encountered a Mahar on duty at the village *chavadi*. The tribes such as *Gopala* and *Nandivale*, the singing bands and entertainers, could proceed to the village only after getting the permission from the Mahar on duty. In case of any emergency, he was to report to the village *Patil*^[77].

Practices of Religious nature

Some of the responsibility of the Mahars were of a religious nature. He was responsible for making special decorations for marriage ceremonies and arranging a horse for the bridegroom. He could stand at the village gate, in front of the bridegroom, as if to hinder his proceeding to the village. He cleared the way for him only after he was given a white turban and cotton shoulder cloth. On the bride's arrival at the village after the marriage ceremony, a Mahar woman waved a lamp over her head and recited a mantra to bless them. For this act she was given a cheap bodice as a present.

As Scavengers

As an untouchable, a Mahar was obligated to perform those tasks, which were considered as polluting by the higher castes. A Mahar carried firewood and cow dung cakes for burning the dead of a higher caste. The worst of all his duties was to remove dead cattle from the village streets, and skinning them. Enthoven says, "They (Mahars) have the monopoly of the dead village animals, and of the copper coins which in the name of the dead, are thrown to one side at the resting place or *visaviachi jaga*"^[78]. The heinous thing that a Mahar did in the eyes of the higher caste was eating the flesh of the dead animal^[79].

16. Antagonism between Mahars and Mangs

In the Hindu caste structure, Mangs were the lowest among the untouchables in Maharashtra. Numerically, too, the Mangs were less than the Mahars. As per the 1901 census report Enthoven listed 2,50,573 in number comprising 1,24,268 males and 1,26,305 females^[80]. In each village, besides a *Maharwada*, there would be a *Mangwada*. An outsider could not easily make out where the *Maharwada* ended and where the *Mangwada* began. According to Enthoven, like Mahars, Mangs were also considered impure. Describing their status, he says, "Being an impure caste, Mangs will not be allowed to draw water from the village well or enter the village temple. The village barber will not shave them and the village washer man will not wash their clothes"^[81]. The Mangs were traditional rope makers and also were the hangmen for the rulers. In certain districts they were in charge of *Mariai*, the goddess of cholera. They were also casual labourers and known for thieving. For this reason, they were the most wanted people by the police *Patil* in the village^[82].

Vetschera commented that, the Mangs lived in close proximity but in permanent animosity with the Mahars. Such animosity was traditional and carried on for centuries. The

⁶⁸ Robertson, op. cit., 8.

⁶⁹ O.M. Lynch, *The Politics of Untouchability* (Delhi: Lumbia University Press, 1969), 35

⁷⁰ Russell, op. cit., 145.

⁷¹ Gokhale, op. cit., 31-32.

⁷² Russell, op. cit., 145.

⁷³ Vetschera, op. cit., 289.

⁷⁴ Enthoven, op. cit., 416.

⁷⁵ Gokhale, op. cit., 32.

⁷⁶ Oliver Mendelsohn & Marika Vicziany, *Contemporary State Asia: The Untouchables Subordination, Poverty and the State in Modern India* (New Delhi: Foundation Books, 2000), 91.

⁷⁷ Robertson, op. cit., 21.

⁷⁸ Enthoven, op. cit., 417.

⁷⁹ Vetschera, op. cit., 290.

⁸⁰ Enthoven, op. cit., 434.

⁸¹ Ibid.

⁸² *The Bombay Diocesan Magazine, a Monthly Chronicle of Church Work* (Diocese of Bombay, Vol. II, No. 6, January, 1921), 300.

greatest joy for a Mang was “to prepare the rope with which a Mahar would be hanged”^[83]. Even now it is difficult to identify friendliness among them but there are no open conflicts.

17. Conclusion

In this article, an attempt has been made to highlight the religious and socio-economic life of the community of the Mahars, despite the paucity of primary sources written by the Mahar themselves. The Mahars who lived in the villages in *Maharwadas*, claim to be the original inhabitants of the state. They participated in the religions of the other Hindus castes, but had their own deities too, whom they regarded and venerated as a community. They were included in the village system of *Balutedar*, which ensured their *haks* of their livelihood. Some of them had *vatan*-land which were not productive. A large number of them were dependent on the villagers by serving them as village servants.

Religiously they were outcastes, deprived of entry in the Hindu temples, socially untouchable, unmentionable and economically dependent on others. The higher castes suppressed them in every way and paid their wages in kind. They suffered indignity, injustice and deprivation. Therefore, the conditions under which the Mahars lived were oppressive and the treatment they received were inhuman.

18. References

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⁸³ Vetschera, op. cit., 46.