

CHAPTER : II

PEOPLE OF MAHARASHTRA*—ETHNIC AND CULTURAL FEATURES

Introduction

Geographically the State of Maharashtra falls midway between the North and South India. As a result, the racial and cultural composition of Maharashtra shows the influence of the North and the South. Anthropologists use the term race with reference to observable physical characteristics of a group of people. Black skin colour, thick lips and curly hair are regarded as the main characteristics of Negrito race, while fair skin, white colour, blue eyes, straight and narrow nose and light hair colour are considered to be the characteristics of the Nordic race. In the early quarter of the twentieth century some nations in Europe advanced a doctrine of racism claiming that some races had inherent intellectual superiority over the others. However, anthropologists have exposed the unscientific character of this theory and have made it clear that the concept of race implies some physical features only. In this discussion the term race is used in this anthropological sense.

The first attempt to study the racial composition of the people of India was made by Sir Herbert Risley in 1891. He identified three main racial groups in the racial composition of the people of India. They were Indo-Aryans, Dravidians and Mongolians. The typical physical features of these groups were determined on the basis of the anthropometric method. The physical features of the Indo-Aryans were determined on the basis of the anthropometric study of some communities in Punjab and in Uttar Pradesh. Accordingly, the physical characteristics of the Indo-Aryans are as follows : long head and straightened nose, average forehead index varying between 70 to 75, and average nasal index varying between 65 to 75. On the basis of Risley's study and Dr. Ghurye's observation of the same we can specify physical features of the Dravidians as follows: long head with average cephalic index 75, medium nose with nasal index less

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'Editorial Note' - Information about major Castes and Tribes in Maharashtra has been given in a historical perspective. The Socio-Cultural aspects and the occupational characteristics have been highlighted. These notes are based on the research data available in various authentic works of sociologists, anthropologists, census data etc. During the last three decades there have been phenomenal changes in the socio-cultural as well as economic life of various communities. Efforts have been made to incorporate this social change but it is very likely that all changes could not be included as these kaleidoscopic changes were too fast to be incorporated. As a result, it is very likely that some information could be left out.

Since 1975-76, due to the implementation of various schemes for development, many communities and particularly tribal communities have attained higher levels of education, awareness etc. This in turn has positively influenced their socio-cultural and occupational life. Wherever possible such changes have been noted.

than 77, dark complexion and very little or no hair on cheeks and chest. Some communities in Tamilnadu and Kerala show the presence of these features. The Mongoloid type is found mainly in the area of Nepal, Assam and Himachal Pradesh. Yellow skin colour, flat nose, and epicanthic fold on the eyelid are the main characteristics of this physical type.¹

Several shortcomings in Risley's study were revealed by subsequent scholars who suggested further improvement in his classification and presented new classifications. Among these were Hadden, Hutton and Guha.² According to Hadden there were three racial groups in India, namely, the Pre-Dravidian, the Dravidian, and the Indo-Aryan. Hutton was of the view that the Negritos were the first inhabitants of India. In course of time, the Negrito element disappeared from India, and subsequently came the proto-Australoids, the Mediterranean, the Armenians, the Mongols, while the Indo-Aryans were the last to arrive. B. S. Guha had identified six racial groups in the formation of the Indian people. These were, Negrito, the Proto-Australoid, the Mongoloid, the Mediterranean, the Western Brachycephals and the Nordics. Guha's classification was based on the Anthropometric measurements of the representative individuals of various communities at the time of 1931 Census Inquiry.

Anthropometric study of various castes and communities in Maharashtra was made by Dr. Iravati Karve.³ No one after her has done a worthy study like hers. In view of this it would be proper to take into consideration her observations about the ethnic composition of the people in Maharashtra.

According to Karve there are almost no traces of Negroid and Mongoloid racial elements among the people. In certain parts of Konkan, especially in Murud-Janjira region we come across few individuals having Negroid features, *Viz.*, thick lips and extremely curly hair. This is because in historic times there was a small chiefdom of the Habshis, that is the Abyssians in the region. In Marathi the word Habshi is used for persons belonging to Negroid race. These Habshis were apparently slaves at the Deccan Moghal courts. In some estates in Konkan, imported Negro labour were used and the progeny of these people possess Negroid features. Recently this negroid element is not specifically observed and hence it is negligible. The Mongoloid element is also not traceable among the people of Maharashtra. The people in Maharashtra mainly belong to the Australoid European racial stock. The skin colour varies from very dark to light brown. The colour of the eye varies from very dark or black to light brown. In some castes there are few individuals with light greenish brown eyes. The colour of the hair is predominantly black, but in rare cases one finds brown or red hair. A majority of the males have hair on their cheeks and chest. People in Maharashtra are short or medium in stature. The height ranges from 1.48 meter to 1.66 meter. In all castes there are some individuals

who are taller (1.83 meter). Persons with very long or very broad head are rarely found in Maharashtra. The form of the nose varies from mesorrhine (middle nosed) to platyrrhine (broad nosed). People with narrow nose (leptorrhine) are very rare in Maharashtra.

The Maharashtra society is composed of castes including sub-castes. There are about 250 castes, and within each caste there are several sub-castes. Mrs. Karve took anthropometric survey of 50 castes which were distributed in different territorial divisions as shown below.

Berar and Central Province : (Purna, Wardha, Vainganga river valleys) : (1) Kunbi (Tirole, Dhanoje, Khaire); (2) Maratha, (3) Brahman (Charak, Madhyandin); (4) Gowari; (5) Korku, (6) Koshti, (7) Halba or Halbi, (8) Powar, (9) Bawane Mahar, (10) Kohali, (11) Gond, (12) Dheever and (13) Kolam.

Khandesh (Tapi valley) : (1) Brahmin (Madhyandin, Rigvedi Deshastha) (2) Vanjari, (3) Leva Patidar, (4) Leva Gujar, (5) Bhill (Mavchi, Tadvi etc.), (6) Ahir Sonar, (7) Bari and (8) Maratha.

Desh (Godavari and Krishna Valleys) : (1) Maratha, (2) Brahmin, (3) Phulmali, (4) Mahar, (5) Koli, (6) Chambhar, (7) Teli, (8) Mang, (9) Shimpi, (10) Sali, (11) Nhavi, (12) Pareet, (13) Gurav, (14) Burud, (15) Andha, (16) Sonar, (17) Bhavsar, (18) Dhangar (Hatkar and Khutekar).

Konkan : (1) Maratha, (2) Vaishya Vani, (3) Bhandari, (4) Brahmin (Saraswat, Chitpawan, Karhade), (5) Sonkoli, (6) Pathare Prabhu, (7) Chandraseniya Kayastha Prabhu, (8) Daivadnya Brahmin-Sonar, (9) Tvashta Kasar, (10) Pathare Kshatriya, (11) Khatri, (12) Somavanshi Vadaval, (13) Agri, (14) Thakur, (15) Varli, (16) Malhar Koli.

A brief description of the racial or physical characteristics and social and cultural traditions of these major castes and tribes of Maharashtra is given below. This description is based on the studies done by eminent scholars of castes and tribes in India, namely R. E. Enthoven, R. V. Russell, Rai Bahadur Hiralal, Syed Siraj-Ul- Hasan, Irawati Karve and others as well as the Census Reports of the Bombay Presidency and C. P. and Berar Province of 1901, 1911 and 1931, the latest editions of district Gazetteers of Maharashtra State, and the most recent publication or the Anthropological Survey of India entitled '*People in India*' edited by K. S. Singh. Although an attempt is made to maintain as much uniformity as possible, in the description of various castes and tribal communities, it has not been possible to achieve this objective in all respects, in view of lacuna in the available information.