CHAPTER : IX*

EPILOGUE

In the foregoing pages we have traced the emergence, development and present position of society and culture in the geographical region of India known as Maharashtra. We have described several facets of the society and culture of Maharashtra such as ethnic formation of its population, social organisation, nature and formation of its rural and urban communities and religion of its people. In this chapter we propose to present an birds-eye view of our discussion so as to gain a holistic view of the society and culture of Maharashtra which would facilitate our understanding of the way in which its past is related to the present and how the present is likely to influence its future.

A history of human settlement in Maharashtra takes us back to about a lakh years when the stone-age began in Maharashtra. The stone-age passed through three stages namely, palaeolithic old stone-age, mesolithic or middle stone-age and neolithic or new stone-age and it came to an end due to changes in the weather. After the end of the stone-age culture, chalcolithic culture made its appearance around 1500 B.C. During this period the people led a stable social life and political entities comprising a few villages came into existence. This culture disappeared from the scene in about one thousand years B.C. As a result we do not see any continuity of this culture with the later Megalithic-age culture. However, in the ethnic making of Maharashtra these early cultures might have made their contribution.

The chalcolithic culture was followed by the emergence of Megalithic-age which made its appearance in Maharashtra in 7th or 8th century B.C. These people knowing the art of melting iron entered Vidarbha region probably from the south India and established their colonies. Empires of Chandragupta Maurya and Ashoka flourished in north India during this period. A Buddhist missionary appointed by the Emperor Ashoka had visited Maharashtra for propagating Buddhism.

Development of society and culture in Maharashtra took place in a significant way with the rule of the Satavahana dynasty which gave Maharashtra its distinctive era. Then came the succession of Vakataka, Chalukya, Rashtrakuta, Kalchuri and Shilahar dynasties before the Yadavas established their rule over Maharashtra. It was under the rule of the Yadavas, Marathi, the language of Maharashtra flourished. The well-known commentary on Gita in Marathi, namely Dnyaneshwari was written in this period. These dynasties promoted the spread of Aryan culture and Sanskrit language in Maharashtra and thereby integrated

* This Chapter has been contributed by the Dr. T. N. Walunjkar.
it with the pan-Indian Aryan tradition of Varnashram Dharma and simultaneously being rooted in the local soil, encouraged the development of the regional language and culture. However, towards the end of the rule of Ramdeorao Yadav, which was marked by severe economic crisis, Brahmanical culture received royal patronage resulting in the rise of the Brahmanical orthodoxy in the society. Hemadri who was in the court of Ramdeorao, wrote his well-known treatise called ‘Chaturvarga Chintamani’ glorifying Brahmanical rituals. These developments internally weakened the society leading ultimately to the downfall of the Yadav dynasty at the hands of Allauddin Khilji, and the beginning of the era of the Muslim rule over Maharashtra. Major-structural features of Maharashtrian society took shape in this period. Mahanubhav and Virshaiv sects were brought about during the period. Several castes came into existence.

With the downfall of Ramdeorao Yadav Maharashtra came under the rule of Muslim dynasties from the north, namely, Khilji and Tughluq and later on the Bahamani dynasty belonging to the Deccan. The Muslim rulers ruled over Maharashtra with the aid of several Maratha Jahagirdars who had quietly accepted their suzerainty over the Deccan. These Jahagirdars and the Marathi language came under the influence of Muslim life-style and they joined their Muslim masters in the exploitation and oppression of the masses. The use of the term Maratha for the name of the caste began in this period. The Marathas distinguished themselves from the Kunbi peasants by virtue of their links with the ruling families and dynasties, and by becoming professional fighters and commanders in the army. By accepting the legitimacy of the Brahmans to their position as Maratha-Khastriyas, they established the Brahmin-Maratha domination over the society in Maharashtra. The masses continued to be oppressed under the rule of the Muslim Kings and the Maratha Jahagirdars. This prepared a very fertile ground for the rise of Shivaji Maharaj the Champion of the masses and founding of the Swaraj. This brought about an end to Muslim rule and the beginning of the Hindu rule over Maharashtra.

Shivaji Maharaj challenged the might of the Muslim rulers by mobilizing the masses in the Swaraj movement and forming their army. He established his rule based on justice and prevented exploitation of the masses. He worked for the establishment of the Hindu nation based on the ideals of Varnashram a Dharma. His military and revenue policies generated socio-economic mobility among lower castes. Many capable individuals from these strata were recruited in his army and some were holding high positions in it. Several such individuals became acceptable among the high caste Marathas and they became socially integrated in this stratum through hypergamous marriages. The social consequence of this process was narrowing the social gap between the ruling Maratha and the peasant Kunbis.
After the death Shivaji Maharaj the Maratha power became weak paving the way for the emergence of the Peshwas over Maharashtra. The Peshwas succeeded in expanding the Maratha empire in different directions and providing more avenues to Brahmins in general and Chitpavans in particular for attaining economic mobility. The Peshwas appointed several Chitpavan Brahmins in administration as Mamledars and Subhedars and thereby attempted to curb the power of Maratha Patils and Deshmukhs in rural society. This contributed to the growth of animosity between the Brahmins and the Marathas. There was greater integration between different sub-castes of the Brahmins resulting in the creation of the non-Brahmin Shudra group. The orthodox Brahmins propagated a myth of the disappearance of the real Kshatriyas from the society and the existence of only two orders, the Brahmins and the Shudras in the society. The condition of the untouchables became miserable. The Varkari tradition of the masses propagating egalitarian ethos became weak and in its place the Brahmanical tradition of Harikatha which glorified Varnashrama Dharma received royal patronage. The rule of the Peshwas came to an end in 1818 as a result of internal conflicts and competition between the Maratha Sardars and Peshwas and inability to meet the challenge posed by the superior British power.

At the beginning of the British rule over Maharashtra, the social structure was characterized by extreme degree of social inequality based on caste and gender. Oppression of the untouchables had reached extreme proportion contributing to their alienation from the society. Due to the unfair land revenue policies of Bajirao II the peasants suffered good deal of exploitations. The socio-economic life was regulated by the institutions of village, caste and Vatan, and agriculture was mainly subsistence oriented. The Marathas continued to occupy the position of dominance. However, they resented growing religious, economic and political power of the Brahmins in general and Chitpawan Brahmins in particular. Child marriages were rampant and the proportion of widows especially child widows was considerable among the Brahmins and the upper castes. Although the practice of Sati was not very common, widows were forced to shave their heads and lead a life of virtual slavery within the four walls of the house.

With the advent of the British rule over India, forces of modernization swept through Maharashtra bringing about an era of revolutionary change. In the sphere of technology, introduction of railway, post and telegraph, printing press and modern industries were the major innovations. The traditional village-based agrarian economy was slowly becoming a part of the world economy resulting in the cultivation of cash crops. Changes in the land revenue system were also made by introducing Ryotwari system over a large part of Maharashtra. Uniform and centralized administration based on modern principles of bureaucracy was introduced in Maharashtra and the rest of India. Modern educational system based on the values of secularism, equality, individualism, and science was introduced primarily with a view to meeting the needs of the
administration for trained personnel, and secondarily to promote
western learning among the Indians. Modern judiciary, law
enforcement machinery, introduction of modern professions such as
law, medicine, and engineering facilitated the emergence of modern
urban society. With a view of achieving this objective construction of
district towns and industrial centres was also undertaken. Modern
military was established providing career opportunities in it to all
irrespective of caste or creed. All these changes provided new
opportunities for the people of Maharashtra for attaining socio-
economic mobility. Although access to these opportunities was open
to all in principle, in actual practice it was decided by one’s location
in the traditional social structure which was inequitarian in nature.
Thus Maharashtra in the early days of the British rule showed the
existence of inconsistencies between the rising level of aspiration
and inequitarian opportunity structure which created strain and
tension in the society. As a result varieties of social movements aiming
at reform in the social structure which included the caste system, the
family, and the village, began to appear in Maharashtra.

Concrete manifestation of these movements, their ideological
contents and action programmes were shaped by the nature of the
inequitarian structure of the caste system in Maharashtra at the
beginning of the British rule. This structure comprised various layers
arranged in the descending order of ritual purity, and economic and
political power. At the top were: the Brahmins who not only enjoyed
the highest ritual rank, but considerable economic and political power
under the rule of the Peshwas. Next came the Marathas belonging to
ruling lineages of Maharashtra, and also those who had established
kinship relationship with them, in the ritual sphere this group claimed
status of the Kshatriya which was not always acknowledged by the
Brahmins. This group enjoyed large agricultural land as J ahagir for
their services in the army of the Maratha and the Peshwas. The third
group comprised the Maratha peasant-folks, Kunbis, and the other
peasant communities. These were mostly owner cultivators, who
normally owned small or medium landholdings. Ritually this group
along with the rest of the other Savarna castes were given the status
of Shudras in the society. The fourth group comprised various
Balutedar and other castes who mainly rendered specialized services
to agricultural communities, or were engaged in non-agricultural
activities not covered by the Baluta system. The fifth group comprised
various castes who were regarded as untouchables as their occupations
involved contact with impure objects. Internally this group was
heterogenous with diverse traditions of folk religion and occupations.
In this category of untouchable castes, the Maharas enjoyed
demographic dominance over others in view of the large size of their
population, and also claimed superiority over others in socio-religious
spheres. Thus it is obvious that various castes that had made up this
group in Maharashtra were characterized by divergent socio-economic
and political interests, and mobilizing them in common movement was
beset with various problems of accommodation and adjustment of
conflicting interests.
The first response to the western social and religious ideology preaching humanism, piety and brotherhood of mankind came from a small group of English educated middle class in Bombay city belonging to different religions, who established Paramahansa Sabha in 1850. The Sabha adopted ritual practices of Christianity and was opposed to the idol worship and observance of caste distinctions. Widow remarriage, spread of education among women and untouchables received support of the Sabha. However, the Sabha shied away from the public and remained a secret society. Alongwith Hindus, Muslims and Parsees were also given membership of the Sabha. The Sabha withered away after 1860 as a result of its elitist character and exclusiveness. Some of the members of the breakaway Sabha established Prarthana Samaj under the leadership of Dr. Atmaram Pandurang in 1867.

Prarthana Samaj which took inspiration from the leaders of Brahmo Samaj of Bengal aimed at reforming Hindu religion and incorporated religious tradition of masses of Maharashtra. Abhangas of Tukaram and other leaders of Varkari sect found a place of honour in its anthology of prayers and religious discourses. The early intellectual leaders of Maharashtra, notably Ranade and Bhandarkar, formulated its theology. The Samaj preached monotheism, that is belief in one god and acceptance of basic truths of all religions. It was opposed to renunciation of worldly life and idol worship, and regarded prayer as the only way of worshipping God. The prayers were selected from the religious verses of Kabir, Nanak, Tukaram, and other Saints of Bhakti movement. The Samaj held Tukaram in high esteem and observed Tukaram Bij, the death anniversary of the Saint-poet. The Prarthana Samaj encouraged social reform. It ran several schools in Mumbai and established orphanages. Although the Samaj was sympathetic to the social cause of the masses it remained an elitist movement, confined to the English educated urban upper-caste section of the society and failed to mobilize the masses in their reform programme. This task of mass mobilization for social and religious reforms became the central objective of a revolutionary socio-religious movement started by Jotiba Phule which culminated in the establishment of Satyashodhak Samaj in 1873.

In a true sense Satyashodhak was a socio-religious movement of the masses in Maharashtra. Its founder Mahatma Jotiba Phule possessed only school education. Most of its members also possessed only school education. Phule wanted to bring about social revolution in Maharashtra by promoting rational religious outlook which would be in harmony with modern science. He launched a frontal attack on the inegalitarian Vedic tradition of the Aryans which was the root cause of the socio-economic inequality in Hindu society and championed the egalitarian tradition of the non-Aryans which in his opinion was the tradition of the mass. He not only denounced the caste system based on the consideration of birth but the entire Varnashram order which was unjust and inegalitarian in nature. He denounced priesthood as it exploited the mass by taking undue advantage of their belief. In fact he was opposed to the class of
middlemen in religious as well as in economic sphere. He believed in the existence of one God who created this universe and called it by a neutral name Nirmik. Towards the end of his life he wanted to rename the Samaj as Sattyadharma Samaj, a wish which could be materialized on 24th May 1891, one year after his death in 1890.

Membership of the Samaj was open to persons belonging to all castes including the Brahmins, if they firmly believed in the basic principles of the Samaj. In this respect he drew a fine distinction between Brahmins and Brahmanism. According to him, Brahmanism was an attitude of mind which treated people as high or low on the basis of birth and such an attitude could be found not only among the Brahmins but also among some non-Brahmins as well.

The Sattyashodhak Samaj worked for the abolition of untouchability, caste system and gender inequalities and promotion of education among the masses the untouchables and the females. It raised its voice against the exploitation of peasants by the money-lender and the village accountant or Kulkarni. Since the major thrust of the Samaj was on social reform, it adopted politically neutral attitude and co-operated with British Government in achieving it. Political debates were not allowed on the platform of the Samaj.

Because of its thrust on the abolition of caste distinctions, removal of untouchability, and abolition of priest-hood, the Samaj received the support from the rural as well as urban areas of Maharashtra. Among the followers of the Samaj were sizeable number of persons living in the cities like Mumbai and Pune, belonging to intermediate castes practising new professions such as contractors, lawyers, doctors, businessman etc. who had gained considerable economic advantage due to the economic policies of the British rulers. Participation of upper caste non-Brahmins such as Maratha, Kayastha, Lingayat, and Jain during the life time of Phule was almost nil but increased considerably in the Brahmanetar or non-Brahmin movement under the leadership of Maharaja Shahu of Kolhapur.

Sattyashodhak Samaj movement was a direct attack on Brahmanism and its evil consequences such as social inequality, untouchability, lack of education among the masses child marriage and ill-treatment of widows. The Samaj actively promoted spread of education among the backward castes and women and created consciousness among the mass regarding evils of drinking. It also made efforts to organize peasants against the money-lenders and landlords. In brief, it may be said that Jotiba Phule attempted to bring about a cultural revolution in Maharashtra through Sattyashodhak Samaj movement and aimed at taking the society towards the goal of universal humanism.

After Phule's death, Sattyashodhak Samaj movement languished for sometime until it was revived by Maharaja Shahu by providing it dynamic leadership and royal patronage. This was a period which witnessed the rise in the domination, of Maratha elites. Under the leadership of Shahu the movement acquired a political dimension, which was scrupulously
kept away by Phule. As a result the movement deviated from its cultural goal of establishing Sattyadharma and became a political anti-Brahmin movement which came to be known as ‘Brahmanetar’ or ‘non-Brahmin’ movement.

In 1911 the non-Brahmin movement made its appearance on the socio-political scene of Maharashtra. It was an offshoot of the Sattyashodhak Samaj. Although all members of the Sattyashodhak Samaj became the members of non-Brahmin movement, all followers of the non-Brahmin movement did not believe in the moral ideals of the Sattyashodhak Samaj. The non-Brahmin movement in Maharashtra maintained close links with its counterpart in the south and on several occasions formulated a common political policy. The non-Brahmin movement opposed the struggle for Home-rule as its leaders feared that such a step would revive the rule of the Brahmins over the masses. It adopted the policy of collaboration with the British rulers as it enabled the Marathas and others to pursue their economic interest. It opposed the Indian National Congress as a party dominated by the upper-caste leadership. It demanded castewise representation in the Legislative Council for Marathas and other backward communities. In 1920 the Brahmanetar League was established with a view to contesting elections. After 1930 due to changing economic scene at the national level the policy of collaboration with government was not found to be helpful to achieve economic interest of the peasantry. Also there was a greater realization about the political strength of the Indian National Congress and its ability to solve the problems of the peasants and the weaker sections. All these developments contributed to the exodus of the members of the non-Brahmin movement into the Congress Party, leading ultimately to the extinction of the Brahmanetar party in 1939.

The accomplishments of the non-Brahmin movement following may be mentioned thus. Joshi Vatan bill was passed in 1926 thereby putting an end to the practice of giving Dakshina to the priest on the religious occasions requiring his services, as a matter of right irrespective of availing of such services. Opposition to the bill proposing division of land and increase in the land revenue. The movement gave importance to solving the problems of peasants. Spread of education among the masses, and eradication of superstition was given top priority by the leaders of the movement.

The non-Brahmin Lenders, shunned any co-operation with the liberal Brahmins in the social reform programmes undertaken by the Samaj. Anti-Brahmin attitude rather than anti-Brahmanism reflected in their outlook towards various issues shows that the non-Brahmin, movement had deviated from the universalistic humanism of Jotiba Phule and had become anti-Brahmin Brahmanism or Kshatriyanism. Although abolition of caste distinctions and removal of untouchability were given very high
priority in the reform programme of the non-Brahmin movement several Maratha, Jain and upper-caste followers of the movement were not emotionally committed to these social ideals and were paying only lip sympathy to them as a pragmatic strategy to overthrow domination of the Brahmins. Privately many members observed untouchability at home and were not in favour of inter-dinning with persons of the lower castes.

These radical non-Brahmin movements which occurred in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century were preceded by what is known as Vedokta movement which occurred in the nineteenth century at Satara, Baroda, Kolhapur and Pune. Parties to the dispute were the royal families of Satara, Kolhapur and Baroda, and Kshtriya Marathas and the C.K.P.s on the one side, and the Brahmins led by the orthodox Brahmins of Pune who had declared them as Shudras and as such not competent to perform Vedokta rites. By taking full advantage of the changing political and legal reality and by breaking the monopoly of the Brahmins of Maharashtra who had refused to perform the Vedokta rites, and by inviting the Brahmins from the north and the south for performing these rites, the royal families, Maratha-Kshtriya and C.K.P., communities asserted their right to perform Vedokta rituals.

In the early days of the colonial rule moral and social degradation of Dalit castes in Maharashtra received the sympathetic attention of the enlightened social reformers, Christian missionaries and the British administrators. As a result of their efforts and sympathetic outlook indigenous leadership began to appear among Dalits especially among the Mahars who took upon themselves the task of reforming Dalit communities; Gopalbaba Walangkar was the first leader produced by the community who was followed by Shivram J anba Kamble. In Vidarbha region Kisan Phagu Bansode, Ganesh Akaji Gawai, and Kalicharan Nandagavali were active in organizing the Dalits and securing for them equal rights on par with other castes in Hindu society. Kamble made valiant efforts to abolish the practice of Murali which was a great scourge of the Dalit community. Spread of education and freedom from vices received considerable importance in his reform programmes. These programmes aimed at securing life of honour and dignity for Dalits in Hindu society.

Besides these indigenous leaders, liberal minded sympathizers from non-Dalit castes namely Vitthal Ramji Shinde, Shahu Maharaj of Kolhapur, Senapati Bapat and S.M. Mate were also actively engaged in bringing about improvement in the socio-economic condition of Dalits. Shinde established Depressed Classes Mission society of India in 1906 and gave organised form to the task of the removal of untouchability. He adopted the policy
of establishing composit schools for the promotion of primary as well as vocational education among Dalits and to the creation of good-will between Dalits and non-Dalits. Shahu Maharaj was committed to the upliftment of Dalits. He not only provided all facilities for their educational advancement, but provided free education to them in the state, opened schools exclusively for Dalits, constructed hostels and provided jobs to them. All public places, such as wells, Schools, Colleges, Government Offices etc. were declared open to Dalits. He practised interdinning with them publicly. However, all these efforts proved to be inadequate in the removal of untouchability and a need for taking more aggressive position on this issue was felt by Dr. Ambedkar who dominated the political scene since 1919. Through the editorials of Muknayak, Bahishkrit Bharat, Samata and Janata, Dr. Ambedkar fought for the equal rights for Dalits. By launching Chowdartale agitation at Mahad and temple entry agitations at Pune (Parvati temple) and Nashik (Kala Ram temple) he taught Dalits to fight for their rights. He fought for a separate identity of depressed classes and a proportionate share in political power for them with the Hindus and Muslims. He presented a Bill for the abolition of Mahar Watan in 1937 which was a revised version of the earlier Bill presented in 1928. Feeling disgusted with the diehard outlook of Savarna Hindus to the temple entry agitation Dr. Ambedkar declared his intentions on 13th October 1935 to for give up Hinduism.

Although the Dalit movement under the leadership of Dr. Ambedkar produced a revolutionary change in the mental outlook of Dalits by making them conscious of trans rights and creating feeling of self-respect among them, these gains were largely confined to the Mahar caste who were his largest followers. Other Dalit castes notably Mang, Chambhar and Dhor distanced themselves from his movement. This was probably due to their fear of being dominated by the Mahars who enjoyed numerical strength among Dalits and had a greater exposure to urban-industrial life. They opted for the eradication of untouchability programme of the Congress party under the leadership of Mahatma Gandhi.

The colonial rule over India came to an end in 1947 and with that an era of social movements aiming at the total transformation of society came to an end. Among the major changes brought about by these movements in the social structure of Maharashtra, the following may be mentioned. There was a significant decline in the domination of Brahmans in Maharashtra in religious, economic and political spheres. The Maratha caste had enhanced their domination in society, especially in economic and political spheres. Among the Dalit group, the Mahars had emerged as a self-conscious and self-respecting community asserting their right to equal treatment in society, while other Dalit castes, numerically smaller in size and therefore moderate in their expectations and outlook, opted for the patronage of Congress for getting better deal in society.
After Independence India became a sovereign democratic republic and adopted a multi-party parliamentary system of government. In the new political set-up the caste system received a new lease of life. Periodic elections to various organs of the Government raised the political importance of the numerical strength of various castes to a new level and brought in the picture the political importance of the dominant caste. Numerically weaker castes were now required to align themselves with the dominant caste and seek their patronage, or form their own coalition, in order to elect their representatives, or fade into political insignificance. In Maharashtra the first alternative of smaller castes aligning with the dominant Maratha caste became successful in meeting the political aspirations of the numerically small castes for a long period of time, which is reflected in the stability of the Congress Government for a sufficiently long time. Several factors contributed to the consolidation of the dominant position of the Maratha-Kunbi caste in Maharashtra. Creation of the unilingual state of Maharashtra in 1960 was one of the most important factors in this respect. In the earlier set up the Maratha political elites were required to share political power with elites from Gujarat and Karnatak. Realizing these limits to the exercise of political power for pursuing the interests of the people of Maharashtra the Samyukta Maharashtra Movement which was the movement of the people of Maharashtra was launched in 1957, which ultimately succeeded in carving out the State of Maharashtra of the Marathi speaking population. In the social structure of the newly created state of Maharashtra the Maratha Kunbi caste cluster constituted nearly half of the population. Among them the elite Marathas were approximately 15 to 20 per cent. The development; policies of the Government began to be shaped by the Maratha political elites and they largely served the interests of this community. Growth of co-operative societies, educational institutions and Panchayat Raj further contributed to the consolidation of the position of economic and political dominance of this caste. The leadership of the Maratha community exhibited a flexible outlook towards the aspiration of the elites of the numerically weaker castes including the Dalits and co-opted within their fold elites from this segment in a controlled manner. However, after a certain period of time this mechanism of providing mobility opportunities to the non-Maratha elites and the newly educated younger generation proved to be illusory creating social tension and unrest in rural as well as in urban areas. Manifestation of this unrest was visible in the rise of Shivsena in the first place in Mumbai and subsequently in other parts of Maharashtra. The frustration of the Dalits with the outcome of the Developmental process and the ill-treatment given to the Dalits in rural areas were responsible for the rise of the Dalit Panther in Mumbai and later on in other cities of Maharashtra.

Shivsena was established by Bal Thackeray on June 19, 1966 in Mumbai. It emerged as militant response to the problem of unemployment among the Maharashtrian youths. It adopted the doctrine of jobs for the sons of the soil and launched an agitation against the south Indians in Mumbai who were preponderant in the service sector. As a
corollary of its ‘sons of the soil’ doctrine the Shivsena adopted anti-communist stance in the industrial sector which increased its political importance. It glorifies Shivaji Maharaj for establishing Hindu rule over Maharashtra and emulates him as a cultural hero.

Just as the birth of Shivsena was a response to increasing unemployment and consequent frustration among the youths of Maharashtra, the birth of Dalit Panther in Bombay in 1970 was a militant response of the Dalit youths to the atrocities committed on Dalits in rural areas of Maharashtra by the Savarna Hindus. Two important factors among others contributed to the emergence of this situation. The first was the mass conversion of Dalits who belonged to the Mahar caste to Buddhism and the growth of social tensions in rural areas for their refusal to perform their traditional duties like removing dead animals etc. The second was the emergence of the new middle class among Dalits, especially among the new Buddhists as a result of the policy of protective discrimination. The restlessness of Dalit youths, arising out of their new socio-economic status and the refusal on the part of the caste Hindus to recognize this change and give them equal treatment in society, found political expression in the establishment of Dalit Panther in Bombay and literary expression in what came to be known as Dalit Sahitya. Raja Dhale and Namdev Dhasal were the leading figures in the Dalit Panther movement who subsequently developed ideological differences with regard to the scope of the movement. Dhale viewed Buddhism as an ideology of protest and argued that only converts to Buddhism could be true Dalits. In fact the label Dalit was subsequently dropped by his followers in favour of the nomenclature Buddhist. Dhasal on the other hand attempted to bring Ambedkar's ideology in line with Marxism and treated all those who were oppressed in society as Dalits irrespective of their caste. The movement declined in the 1980.

The policy of protective discrimination for the scheduled castes and tribes implemented by the Central and the State Government gave rise to the new middle class of educated persons among these sections. Simultaneously there existed in society a group of intermediate castes who were socially superior to Dalits but educationally backward. Hence, this section started demanding similar facilities in the educational institutions and in Government services. By accepting Mandal Commission recommendation’s and implementing them the Government of Maharashtra has taken a step forward in meeting the aspirations of this section of society. However, this has created a ticklish problem for the unity and identity of the Maratha-Kunbi caste cluster. While the Mandal Commission has included the Kunbi section in the category of O. B. C. the Marathas are left out of it. The Maratha caste is thus faced with a dilemma of preserving the unity and identity of the larger Maratha-Kunbi
caste-cluster which has enabled it to exercise its domination in social, economic and political spheres on the one hand and maintaining superiority in the caste system on the other hand. Should they ask their Kunbi brethren to forego the advantages of the protective discrimination to preserve the internal unity of the caste-cluster or should they allow them to declare as O. B. C. and pose a threat to the emotional integration of the caste-cluster. This has led Maratha Mahasangh to plead in favour of the adoption of secular criterion for protective discrimination.

The Maratha Mahasangh was established by Annasaheb Patil, a leader of Maratha-Kunbi Hamals or Mathadis with the avowed objective of protecting the interest of the Marathas and ensuring the advancement of the poor Marathas. The Mahasangh views Mandal Commission report as posing threat to the Maratha hegemony. In its opinion protective discrimination provided to the Dalits has become hinderance to the advancement of poor Marathas. This has led the Mahasangh to advance the adoption of secular criterion for protective discrimination.3

Thus we find that the changes taking place in the caste system in Maharashtra with the advent of the British rule and later with the attainment of independence and adoption of the Parliamentary system of democracy reveal complex patterns. There has been a significant decline in the importance of the ritual dimension of hierarchy in the caste system. The non-Brahmin movement virtually destroyed the religious supremacy of the Brahmins in Maharashtra. Performance of Mahapooja of well-known deities of Maharashtra at the hands of the non-Brahmin leaders of the masses has become a common feature. All castes are now allowed entry in the temples in Maharashtra. However, the caste system continues to be economically and politically significant. Control over the means of production is still largely in the hands of the upper-castes, notably the Maratha-Kunbi caste. The stratum of the Dalit castes is predominantly the stratum of the landless labourers.

As a result of the process of economic development several castes have developed internal differentiation. Thus there are groups within a caste. But the political mobilization of the people, on the basis of universalistic economic criterion, cutting across caste distinctions, is still not feasible because of the strong primordial caste loyalties. These loyalties are products of common historical experience, ethnic background, cultural achievements etc. and they continue to have sway over the minds of the people even in contemporary times.

The caste system in Maharashtra has influenced the formation of political parties and the political process. Parties which were avowedly secular in their orientation namely, the Congress, and the Communist Party of India also had to take into consideration the caste factor especially at the time of elections. Similarly some political parties in Maharashtra which were or are apparently secular and universalistic such as Peasants and Workers Party, or Shetkari Sanghatna are mainly serving the interest of certain caste groups.
It appears that through the process of differentiation among factors which constitute hierarchy or inequality in the caste system, namely ritual, economic and political, the caste system in Maharashtra has adopted to the conditions of industrial urban democratic society.

Although ritual criterion has lost its importance, the economic and the political dimension of the caste continues to enjoy importance. The break through in this situation can come about only when the cultural diversity characterizing various caste groups is lessened and is replaced by greater degree of cultural homogeneity. In this task the role of modern communication media such as T.V. is going to be a decisive one. This will also encourage intercaste marriages which form only a trickle at present. This takes us to the consideration of changing nature of the position of women in Maharashtra in the colonial and post-independence period.

Women's Position—Marriage and Family:

Position of women in the Hindu religious tradition is very well summed up in the well-known dictum of Manu 'A woman does not deserve liberty'. In childhood she is protected by her father. After marriage, in youth, she is protected by her husband and in old age she is protected by her son. Service to husband and her family was considered to be her only role and it received religious sanction. Along with this attitude of treating a woman as her husband's property the practice of Sati was glorified.

In Maharashtra, although the practice of Sati was upheld as a religious ideal, it was rarely practised. There were only a few instances of Sati in the Maratha and the Peshwa rule. The last recorded case of a woman going Sati, took place in Pune on 11th September 1819 which promoted Robertson, the District Collector of Pune, to assess the opinions of the Shastris and Pandist as to whether going Sati was religiously binding on a Hindu woman. The Shastris upheld the view that Sati was not an obligatory religious practice. This cleared the way for the Government to resort to legislation in order to put an end to the inhuman treatment meted out to girl-child and women in Hindu society. This measure also received the support of the enlightened reformers in Maharashtra. Bal Shastri Jambhekar, Lokhitwadi Deshmukh, Jotiba Phule, Telang, Agarkar, Karve, Pandita Ramabai and many others strived to create in Maharashtra a favourable public opinion to the cause of women's reform. Propaganda drive undertaken by reformers and legislative measures facilitated the emancipation of women from the hold of the age-old tradition.

The enactment passed by the British Government to improve the position of women was in 1829 legally prohibiting the practice of Sati. Child marriage was a common practice in Maharashtra and this created the problem of child widows in society. In 1856 law permitting remarriage of widows was passed. Co-habitation with the child-wife, even if she was not physically mature, was regarded as the lawful act on the part of the husband. This caused serious physical injuries to several child-wives. To put an end to this situation in 1891 the Age of Consent Bill was passed after persistent efforts of the social reformer B. M. Malabari, preventing