

Distress in Marathaland

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The Marathas, Maharashtra's dominant community, have been protesting against the Scheduled Castes and the Scheduled Tribes (Prevention of Atrocities) Act, 1989 and demanding reservations for themselves and a hike in minimum support prices. This study reveals that these demands do not address the source of Maratha distress—stagnation of farm incomes and the failure of the government to improve agricultural productivity. Poor farmers, whether Maratha or Dalit, have the same grievances, and therefore, a caste-based mobilisation may actually be counterproductive.

Maharashtra witnessed the state's dominant community, the Marathas, who form a third of its population, marching silently for a number of demands in September. The ostensible trigger was the brutal rape and murder of a Maratha girl by a Dalit youth in a village called Kopardi.¹ The size of the crowds and the intensity of feeling, however, suggest that it is much more than a reaction to a single ugly incident. This mass movement is an outpouring of a deeper pool of discontent.

The marches are truly unprecedented. Judging by the numbers, they have found universal appeal across the Maratha community. The poor are marching side by side with the rich. What is especially noteworthy is that young women and men are in the vanguard and the *netas* (leaders) have been consigned to the back rows. In fact, some of the marchers have claimed that “this is a protest of the deprived against the privileged.” The whole set-up, including the exemplary discipline they have displayed, is completely uncharacteristic of mass movements in India. However, the demands of the movement remain somewhat unclear. Normally, a mass movement begins to further a specific cause, its demands articulated at the outset. The Marathas, on the other hand, began marching first, their demands being voiced almost as afterthoughts. The three demands raised so far are: stop the abuse of the Scheduled Castes and the Scheduled Tribes (Prevention of Atrocities) Act, 1989 legislate reservations for Marathas; and raise minimum support prices (MSPs).

Would any of these demands help reduce their distress? The answer depends upon the fundamental source of their distress. What is that source? In this article, we will attempt to answer these questions based on data collected for an empirical study carried out in 2007.²

We view these marches as a manifestation of the hopelessness experienced by a historically dominant community of

farmers. Farm incomes have stagnated in the dryland agriculture of Maharashtra, while alternative income-earning opportunities have not emerged. This is largely because of the failure of government policy to improve agricultural productivity despite the fact that Maratha elites have ruled the state for much of the period since independence. This view is consistent with the claim that the “deprived” are marching against the “privileged.”

However, the explicit demands voiced so far seem to be missing the point. The problems afflicting the Marathas are not caste-specific. The fact that poverty is declining much too slowly while aspirations have revved up is a generic Indian problem. Why this movement has taken the form of a caste movement is a question that we will answer at the end.

Our argument may not be unfamiliar to keen observers of the rural scene in Maharashtra. What this article attempts to contribute is “evidence” that is based on primary data.

We will begin with a look at an empirical picture that sheds light on some little-known facts. First, though the Marathas are a dominant community, they span a whole income spectrum, and the vast majority of them are very poor. Second, despite their political dominance, they can claim no advantage in educational achievements. This is especially true of Maratha women, an indication that they are a backward community. Third, Maratha leaders, when in a position of power, have done very little to uplift their own community.

Our Survey

In 2007, we surveyed approximately 9,000 households from a random sample of 300 villages in three regions (Western Maharashtra, Marathwada and Vidarbha) of Maharashtra. Our villages were relatively small, with populations of around 2,000. They were primarily agricultural, and society is typically caste-based (the percentage of tribals in our sample was negligible). More than 40% of our households were below the state poverty line. In Maharashtra, a gram panchayat usually covers a population of approximately 2,000. As a result, in our sample, the gram panchayats are village-specific. We

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administered questionnaires at the household and village level, and to the gram panchayats directly. The household questionnaires asked about the economic activities of household members, their social capital (for example, the level of trust they have towards other people in the village), and their views on the functioning of the gram panchayat. For some information, particularly to obtain the balance sheets of gram panchayats, we had to use the Right to Information Act.

Numerical Dominance of Marathas

Of the 9,000 households we randomly surveyed, 37.6% were from the Maratha caste, 27.8% from Other Backward Classes (OBC) caste groups, and 25.6% from Scheduled Caste (SC) groups. As a single *jati* (caste) group, Marathas overwhelmingly dominate the population of the state at close to 40%, as compared to the next three largest *jatis*—the Mahars at 12%, the Kunabis at 8%, and the Dhangars at 6%.

Heterogeneity within Caste Groups

In Tables 1–3, we see a significant heterogeneity within the Maratha caste, as represented by landownership and education levels. Compared to both OBCs and SCs, the proportion of landless Marathas is significantly lower, and the proportion of landholders holding more than five acres is significantly higher. Table 1 points

Table 1: Landownership by Caste (%)

| Landownership | Marathas | OBCs | SCs |
|---------------|----------|------|------|
| Landless | 13.4 | 31.0 | 62.1 |
| < 2.5 acres | 23.0 | 21.1 | 17.4 |
| 2.5–5 acres | 29.9 | 23.7 | 14.7 |
| > 5 acres | 33.7 | 23.8 | 5.8 |

Table 2: Male Education by Caste (%)

| Male Education | Marathas | OBCs | SCs |
|----------------|----------|------|------|
| Illiterate | 9.5 | 11.3 | 19.1 |
| < Primary | 3.5 | 4.2 | 5.3 |
| Primary | 9.8 | 9.8 | 11.3 |
| Middle | 30.9 | 28.7 | 27.8 |
| Secondary | 26.6 | 26.9 | 20.8 |
| > Secondary | 19.7 | 19.9 | 15.6 |

Table 3: Female Education by Caste (%)

| Female Education | Marathas | OBCs | SCs |
|------------------|----------|------|------|
| Illiterate | 28.9 | 27.8 | 42.5 |
| < Primary | 5.7 | 5.3 | 5.5 |
| Primary | 15.5 | 13.8 | 12.3 |
| Middle | 30.5 | 26.8 | 22.4 |
| Secondary | 14.2 | 17.0 | 12.1 |
| > Secondary | 5.2 | 9.1 | 5.2 |

out that 33.7% of Marathas have viable landholdings (> 5 acres), while majority are small and marginal farmers and labourers like other castes.

In terms of education, particularly for males, Marathas are not on an average more educated than members of the OBC. Although Marathas are more likely to be literate compared to SCs, at slightly higher educational levels (that is, higher than primary), the differences are not very big. It is noteworthy that despite being better-off in terms of landholdings, their educational achievements are not any better than those of the OBCs.

A comparison of female education amongst Marathas and OBCs reveals similar findings. If anything, OBC females are more educated than Maratha females.

Maratha cultivators have better access to irrigation and produce higher yields (kharif) on their land. Tables 4 and 5 report these differences for small (< 5 acres) and large (> 5 acres) landowners respectively. Clearly, Maratha farms are better irrigated and hence their yields, and consequently incomes, are higher.

Table 4: Irrigation and Yields (Kharif) by Caste—Small Landowners

| | Marathas | OBCs | SCs |
|-------------------|----------|--------|--------|
| Acres owned | 2.1 | 2.1 | 2.0 |
| % land irrigated | 33 | 23 | 15 |
| Private tube well | 28% | 18% | 10% |
| Yields/acre (₹) | 20,108 | 17,324 | 13,414 |

Table 5: Irrigation and Yields by Caste—Large Landowners

| | Marathas | OBCs | SCs |
|-------------------|----------|--------|--------|
| Acres owned | 9.9 | 9.0 | 6.8 |
| % land irrigated | 45 | 33 | 23 |
| Private tube well | 37% | 28% | 20% |
| Yields/acre (₹) | 35,006 | 30,442 | 18,590 |

We find, even amongst Marathas, after controlling for education and the size of landholdings, yields per acre are strongly and significantly correlated with irrigation. This indicates that the key to improving agricultural incomes in the dryland agriculture of Maharashtra is irrigation. It allows wider crop choice, double-cropping, and higher yields for the same crop. It is surprising that irrigation has not been voiced as a demand by the marchers.

Maratha Political Representation

Although the Maratha caste comprises roughly 38% of the population in our sample, they fill 63% of the unreserved

gram pradhan positions. Likewise, when a gram pradhan position is reserved for a woman, they fill 62% of those positions. In the gram panchayats without reservations, where a Maratha does not fill the gram pradhan position, Marathas are very much a minority, forming on an average 17% of the village population. In these unreserved villages without a Maratha gram pradhan, 44% of villages have no Marathas at all. This implies that if Marathas are present in the village, they almost always fill the gram pradhan position if there are no reservations in place for the lower castes.

Maratha gram pradhans are typically larger landowning cultivators—the majority of them own more than five acres of land and almost all of them (84%) depend on cultivation for their primary livelihoods. Moreover, Maratha gram pradhans tend to be better educated, and more than 80% of them have at least middle school education.

We would expect that households benefit from having a gram pradhan belonging to their own caste. Using our survey data, we can compare outcomes for villages where the gram pradhan is of the same caste with villages where they are not.

Anderson and Francois (2016) found that lower castes (OBCs and SCs) report significantly better provisioning of public goods in their caste neighbourhoods if the gram pradhan is from the same caste. They also have a more positive perception of their gram pradhan's honesty and ability to provide public goods, believing that a gram pradhan who shares their caste is significantly more likely to cater to the particular needs of their caste.

In contrast, we see none of these effects for Marathas. Average Maratha households do not report any significant positive effects of having a Maratha gram pradhan in their village. They perceive no improvement in public goods provisioning in their caste neighbourhoods, and they do not feel that the needs of their caste groups are better looked after. Nor do they have a more positive view of the gram pradhan if he or she is a Maratha rather than a lower caste group (OBC or SC).

Economic and Political Power

To reproduce a paragraph quoted in our earlier article (Anderson et al 2015b):

Drawing on the work of Dr Suhas Palshikar, describes the transformation of the Marathas from a backward community to being the dominant caste in Maharashtra. She cites the following numbers: 'From 1962 to 2004, of the total of 2,430 MLAs, 1,336 or 55% were Maratha. Nearly 54% of the educational institutions in the state are controlled by them. Of the 105 sugar factories, 86 are headed by Marathas, while 23 district cooperative banks have Marathas as chairpersons. Marathas dominate the universities in the state, with 60% to 75% presence in the management. About 71% of the cooperative institutions are under the control of this community. In Maharashtra, 75% to 90% of the land is owned by the community. In addition, all the milk cooperatives and cotton mills are either owned or controlled by them. In 54 of the 288 assembly constituencies, only Marathas have ever been elected—even without any reservations.' (Menon 2012)

In addition, Sharad Pawar, a prominent Maratha leader, had been the union agriculture minister for 10 years from 2004, and the Swaminathan Report³ that the marchers are demanding implementation of, was accepted at the beginning of his tenure. Maharashtra has had 18 chief ministers since it became a state in 1960, 10 of whom have been Marathas. There is little evidence that the Maratha elite (leadership) has done much for the rank and file of Marathas. In fact, as we have shown in our previous work (Anderson et al 2015a; Anderson et al 2015b), they have actively suppressed the demand for the Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Act (MGNREGA) projects that would have benefited the Maratha poor. As television interviews with some of the young marchers have affirmed, "those long deprived are marching against the privileged."

Reforming the act may be a justifiable demand if it was being misused, but it would certainly not affect the vast majority of the community. Reform or even abolition of the act will do very little to address the distress of the Maratha community, even while it endangers the safety of Dalits.

Reservations, as the Maharashtra chief minister has pointed out, would make only 900 additional seats available in engineering colleges, and 7,500 government jobs. It would not make a dent in

the problem, considering that there are a few million Marathas aspiring to get admission to engineering (clearly their stated preference) colleges and jobs. Note also that 38% of the seats remain unfilled, though under the economically backward class (EBC) families with annual incomes below ₹1,25,000 get their tuition fees paid by the state government, irrespective of caste. The only explanation for the unfilled seats then seems to be that many households with incomes greater than the threshold for EBC cannot afford the full tuition fees that colleges charge. This points further to the indifference of the Maratha elite who own 58% of the private colleges in rural areas and run them as profit-making businesses. Clearly then, reservations will not solve the fundamental backwardness of Marathas.

An increase in the MSP for crops grown in Maharashtra is the only demand that is related to improving agricultural incomes, and therefore makes more sense than the other two demands. However, its benefits would be disproportionately lower for the poorer Marathas as their staples become more expensive.

What is needed is a boost in agricultural productivity that will increase the incomes of farmers across the spectrum—irrigation, greater connectivity to markets, more helpful agricultural universities and extension services—as well as a reduction of uncertainty about government price policy (for example, export bans). If rural incomes grow, there will be greater demand for non-agricultural services, and consequently more jobs will be created even outside of agriculture. An increase in purchasing power in rural areas would inevitably bring better-quality educational and healthcare institutions. This is the only way out of their distress for Marathas and all other agricultural castes.

If the fundamental source of distress is the agricultural stagnation that affects all agriculturalists, irrespective of caste, why has this movement become caste-based? There are two reasons. First, when the pie (opportunities available to the masses) is not growing, the share of the pie for your own kind becomes important. This is one possible explanation for

the demand for reservations. Second, caste networks facilitate organisation of a mass movement. Marching in solidarity with people you identify with is more appealing than marching for an abstract cause.

The marches have achieved the goal of unity across different Maratha sub-castes, but it is not clear to what purpose. On the negative side, it may have deepened the Maratha–Dalit divide. Poor farmers in dryland areas of Maharashtra—whether Maratha or Dalit—have the same grievances, and therefore, a caste-based mobilisation could be counterproductive. Instead, what is needed is a farmers' movement across all agricultural castes to champion the cause of productivity improvement in agriculture. Such a movement should, for a start, demand a reversal of the trend of declining public investment in agriculture. This would not only help to relieve the distress in Marathaland but to induce a change across the country by reorienting the course of development.

NOTES

- 1 Ironically, an equally heinous crime in the same area in 2013, the "Sonai Murders" (<http://www.thehindu.com/news/national/three-dalit-men-murdered-in-apparent-case-of-honour-killing/article4383182.ece>), where the victims were Dalits and the perpetrators Marathas, failed to produce similar outrage among the Marathas.
- 2 This study aimed to understand why poverty alleviation programmes are not implemented in rural Maharashtra despite the formally democratic structure of panchayati raj. The data revealed the key role of the dominance of the Maratha caste. The research findings from this 2007 survey were published in 2015(a) and 2015(b).
- 3 The National Commission on Farmers was constituted in November 2004, chaired by M S Swaminathan, to recommend policies to address the general malaise afflicting Indian agriculture. The fifth and final report was submitted in April 2006.

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