

Caste Radicalism and the Making of a New Political Subject

In colonial India, print capitalism facilitated the rise of multiple, distinctive vernacular publics. Typically associated with urbanization and middle-class formation, this new public sphere was given material form through the consumption and circulation of print media, and characterized by vigorous debate over social ideology and religio-cultural practices. Studies examining the roots of nationalist mobilization have argued that these colonial publics politicized daily life even as they hardened cleavages along fault lines of gender, caste, and religious identity.¹ In western India, the Marathi-language public sphere enabled an innovative, radical form of caste critique whose greatest initial success was in rural areas, where it created novel alliances between peasant protest and anticaste thought.²

The Marathi non-Brahmin public sphere was distinguished by a critique of caste hegemony and the ritual and temporal power of the Brahmin. In the latter part of the nineteenth century, Jotirao Phule's writings against Brahminism utilized forms of speech and rhetorical styles associated with the rustic language of peasants but infused them with demands for human rights and social equality that bore the influence of nonconformist Christianity to produce a unique discourse of caste radicalism.³ Phule's political activities, like those of the Satyashodak Samaj (Truth Seeking Society) he established in 1873, showed keen awareness of transformations wrought by colonial modernity, not least of which was the "new" Brahmin, a product of the colonial bureaucracy. Like his anticaste,

non-Brahmin compatriots in the Tamil country, Phule asserted that permanent war between Brahmin and non-Brahmin defined the historical process. This was the foundation for politicized non-Brahmin communities identifying themselves as members of a political and ethical community, the *shudra-atishudras*, who shared a common identity across *jati* specificities, *jati* being the term to describe regionally distinctive caste clusters (e.g., Maratha, Mahar, Deshastha Brahmin) associated with long-term processes of state and society formation.

By the late nineteenth century, there were significant continuities between the new forms of sociopolitical critique and historical identity that Phule established for Dalit and non-Brahmin communities and a distinctively Dalit (largely Mahar) discourse of stigmatized existence. Dalit discourse, however, highlighted the *instability* of a collective *shudra-atishudra* identity (and the unique disabilities of being an untouchable) as Dalits confronted efforts to align non-Brahmin (especially Maratha) identity with the *varna* category, or the prescriptive pan-Indian category, of Kshatriya. Print journalism nurtured this Dalit public sphere. Between 1877 and 1929, many newspapers explicitly addressed the disabilities of caste while fashioning a new sense of Dalit identity.⁴ In their pages, Dalit reformers and publicists depicted the practice of untouchability as contingent and wrong, and associated the religio-ritual stigmatization of Dalits with their illiteracy, poverty, and social backwardness: upper-caste perceptions of untouchability as ritual transcendental were countered by an immanent, sociopolitical critique of caste relations. Exploring the intellectual formation I call caste radicalism, and the contexts in which it arose, clarifies how a Dalit critique initially allied with radical anti-Brahminism separated from it in the first decades of the twentieth century, with Dalit critique pursuing its own trajectory of distinctive analysis joined to activism.

MARATHAS, BRAHMINS, MAHARS

Over the last two decades, studies of the Maratha polity have moved away from frameworks wherein the Marathas were viewed as either predatory hordes of men from low-caste and nomadic communities relentless in their pursuit of revenue extraction or Hindu warrior-nationalists pitting their “Maratha” valor and manliness against Islam and the Mughal Empire. Revisionist historiography on the Marathas has long roots, for example, in the writings of the liberal economic nationalist, Mahadev Govind Ranade, who proposed a genealogy for Indian nationalism

through Maratha history in *The Rise of Maratha Power* (1900), and in S. N. Sen's *The Military System of the Marathas* (1928), which traced overlaps between Mughal and Maratha military regimes. While these works challenged the depiction of Maratha history as the unfolding of Hindu history, they nonetheless suffered from the malaise of claiming the Marathas for a contemporary anticolonial nationalism.⁵ However, recent scholarship has addressed the significant continuities between Mughal and Maratha political idioms, while studies of the Maratha polity have focused on those sociopolitical aspects that distinguished Maratha state formation: sophisticated structures of revenue contracts and collection, monetization of services, a market in patrimonial tenures, expansion of agriculture from the Deccan heartland into the frontier regions of middle India in the interest of settled revenue collection, and finally, an elaborate legal-bureaucratic regime distinguished by a system of fines and punishments.⁶ This Maratha polity accords with developments in various parts of the subcontinent between the sixteenth and eighteenth centuries, when new groups—Jats, Rajputs, Marathas—arose out of the contexts of military service and tenurial holdings under the Mughals (1526–1707).

“Maratha” was an expansive category (and an identity) that was intimately related to early modern patterns of labor mobilization for land and military markets, and included a range of persons whose bids for political and economic power had succeeded, from the lowly *kunbi* peasant-cultivator to the ninety-six elite Maratha families, the *shahannavkuli*, who claimed a genealogical link with the Rajputs. *Thus, state formation in the Deccan region was characterized both by the increased salience of the category Maratha in signifying emergent patterns of power, and by a growing number of persons laying claim to Maratha as identity.* Entry into the category Maratha was possible through marriage, political-economic control over land, and over time, through the fabrication of genealogical affinity with the *varna-jati* combination of the Kshatriya-Rajput. The inherent plasticity of Maratha social formation was tied to the redistributive economies of Old Regime polities: by embedding holders of service tenures within locality, Old Regime paradigms of land and power also enabled imperial service to function as a mechanism of localization.⁷ The Maratha polity transformed in the eighteenth century into what the historian Hiroshi Fukazawa has termed a “Brahminical” state ruled by Chitpavan Brahmins, the Peshwai.⁸ It suffices here to note that the state-society linkages of the Peshwai produced a unique collective memory of Brahmins’ political domination and not merely their rit-

ual authority. This situation and the tripartite caste structure of the Deccan—comprising Brahmins, untouchables, and especially that loosely defined middle group, Maratha-*kunbis*—enabled an unusual critique of caste oppression.

The consolidation of a Maratha polity was symbolically marked by Shivaji's coronation as Chatrapati in 1674. By then, the Deccan was characterized by a sedentarized populace, monetization of the economy, and a highly organized regime of revenue collection, though Maratha suzerainty was initially achieved through practices of social banditry and guerilla warfare. Significantly, Maratha dominance provoked challenges to Brahminical authority conducted within ritual idioms. The most famous illustration of the pattern is Shivaji's coronation as Chatrapati, or lord of the *chhatra*, a large parasol or canopy placed over Hindu gods and kings to signify grandeur and dignity. The controversy over Shivaji's claims to Kshatriya lineage—he came from a family of *patils* (village headmen) near Pune who acquired power through military service to the Nizam Shah of Ahemdnagar—arose when a section of Deccan Brahmins rejected the possibility of allowing Shivaji to be coronated with Vedic rites reserved for twice-born Kshatriyas. A Brahmin from Benares, Gaga Bhatta, supported Shivaji's claim to Kshatriya status after much persuasion and traced the Bhosle lineage to the Sisodia Rajputs of Udaipur. Though Brahmin authority sanctified temporal claims, ritual was powerful only when supported by idioms and practices of political sovereignty. The belatedness of Shivaji's coronation and its ritual recognition of Shivaji's consolidation of real power over the Deccan (and other Maratha families) are noteworthy. Even more important are the multiple significations of the term "Maratha" and growing conflict around efforts to align Maratha *jati* with Kshatriya *varna*.

Brahmins continued to deny the Bhosle royal family's claim to Vedic rites and thus rejected their identity as twice-born Kshatriyas. Instead, they argued that the Bhosles were Shudras entitled to rites performed according to the Puranas. Symbolic insults to Maratha identity gained traction across the nineteenth century as the Chitpavan Brahmin community gained political visibility as a consequence of the Brahmin *peshwa*, or prime minister's increased centrality in political affairs. By 1749, the transfer of real power from the Chatrapati to his Brahmin ministers was an established fact, and Shahu I had been banished to Satara from Poona and confined to his fort, almost a prisoner of the *peshwa*. The declining political fortunes of the Bhosle family popularized the growing perception among upwardly mobile Maratha-*kunbis*, that a repetitive struc-

ture of Brahmin insult and non-Brahmin humiliation was *the* governing logic of history. Indeed Brahmins had long maintained that the genocide of Kshatriyas by the Brahmin Parashurama, the sixth incarnation of the Lord Vishnu, as related in the Dasavatara, or the ten incarnations of Lord Vishnu, was proof that there were only three castes in the Kali Yuga: Brahmins, Shudras, and untouchables. Thus the Vedokta controversy between Pratapsingh and the Chitpavan Brahmins of Poona between 1820 and 1830, and again in 1900 between Shahu Chatrapati of Kolhapur and his *rajopadhyaya* (priest to the royal family), resuscitated the long-standing battle over Maratha demands for recognition as Kshatriyas in the face of Brahmin efforts to reiterate their Shudra identity. Shahu's response was distinctive, however, and it is a symptom of the extent to which conflicts between Brahmins and non-Brahmins (and the emergence of political non-Brahminism) defined the sociopolitical landscape: in 1913, he challenged Brahmins' exclusive control over scriptural knowledge and ritual performance by establishing a school to train non-Brahmin priests, and by 1921 he had established an alternative locus of Kshatriya ritual authority.⁹

By then the Deccan had undergone significant political transformation, and both Brahmin and Maratha responses were mediated through a powerful new presence, the East India Company. The Peshwai ended when East India Company forces defeated Peshwa Bajirao II in 1818.¹⁰ From then, the colonial state increasingly played a significant role in defining the meaning and social experience of the term "Maratha"; produced a set of affective attachments and institutional investments in history and (caste) identity, and enabled the rise of a newly salient, oppositional term, "non-Brahmin." Ironically, colonial intervention accelerated two seemingly contradictory processes: the secularization of caste *and* its novel association with Hindu religion. The colonial government abdicated direct responsibility for adjudicating issues of ritual status, religious rights, and community standing, though these were important realms of state intervention under the Old Regime.¹¹ While this produced new openings for challenging caste discipline and Brahminical norms, the mediation of Brahminical knowledge (and the secularization of the Brahmin's power as state functionary) played an important role in colonial knowledge formation. Power was no longer exercised through explicitly hierarchical registers, but through binary distinctions between "religious" and "political" arenas that respected neither social experience nor popular categorization. The emancipatory possibilities and the novel closures of colonial modernity thus produced a distinctive conjuncture.

For non-Brahmin communities, colonial modernity had a twofold effect. It produced new investments in history and caste identity, and it provoked affinity with a new range of modern institutions—schools and colleges, law courts, hospitals—spaces through which social mobility for the downtrodden and exploited might be accomplished. Colonial infrastructure, and its multiple and dispersed effects in the form of a colonial “sensorium,” was inextricably linked to new experiences of the self and enabled radical egalitarian ideology to percolate through caste radicals’ discourse, from ideas of self-respect and equality among intimates to a critique of the structured political-economic inequities of Brahminism.

A distinctive Mahar history was the ground from which other claims to social inclusion emerged and on which differences from non-Brahmins set a divergent trajectory for Dalit politicization. In drawing on a racial theory of conquest to explain the subjugation of non-Aryan Kshatriyas, the Shudras and *atishudras*, by Aryan Brahmin invaders, Jotirao Phule transvalued colonial-national fascination with theories of Aryan conquest to argue that a permanent and irreconcilable hostility between Brahmin and non-Brahmin had characterized caste society from its inception.¹² Phule never used the term “Hindu” in his writings, lest it appear that he was describing a consensual religio-cultural formation. He always wrote of Brahmin interests antagonistic to the *bahujan samaj*, the “majority community.” However, by the time Phule was writing the terms “Arya” and “Aryan” had come to symbolize a set of associations between language and territory and between territory and religion, enabling a particular vision of the national-archaic: the civilizational history of India was now aligned with a territorially bounded, geographically distinctive protonational (Hindu) space, Bharat or Bharatvarsha.¹³

Reversing European narratives about the divergent civilizational status and material development of Indians and Europeans, both Hindu reformer Bal Gangadhar Tilak and Arya Samaj leader Dayanand Saraswati positioned Aryan society as coeval with Vedic religion, even as they posited Bharat—expansively defined by B. G. Tilak as spanning the North Pole to the subcontinent¹⁴—as the home of modern-day Hindus who had exported their religious values to the European world long ago.¹⁵ Even the downtrodden communities had a place in this reconstituted Vedic past: because their degraded lifestyles were a consequence of forgetting their Aryan identity, they could be redeemed through *shuddhi* (purification).¹⁶ Indeed, the desire to reconstitute a glorious Aryan past in India’s present was evident across the board. Phule’s conception of *history as caste conflict*, however, recuperated a non-Aryan Kshatriya past for Ma-

harashtra's downtrodden. Arguing that the word "Kshatriya" originated in the Sanskrit *kshetra* (field), he imaginatively linked agricultural labor with military service, fields of cultivation with battlefields, and the humble peasant-cultivator with a past of military prowess. Then he went even further, asserting an exceptional role for the downtrodden, the Mahars and Mangs, who had offered the strongest resistance to the Aryan-Brahmin invaders.¹⁷ Interpreting the term "Mahar" as Maha-ari (Great Enemy), Phule argued that the Mahars had twenty-one times freed their Dravidian brothers from conquest by Aryan Brahmins but were finally defeated through chicanery and cunning.¹⁸ Subsequently, the *bhat* Brahmins, Phule's pejorative term for these ritual specialists, composed sacred texts—the Smritis, the Samhitas, the Shastras, and the Puranas—to justify their ill treatment of vanquished Dravidian Kshatriyas: "So that [the Maha-ari, or Mahars] would never lift their hand against the brahmins [Parashurama] had a black thread tied around their necks, and prohibited even their Shudra brethren from touching them. He [Parashurama] started the practice of calling these Maha-ari Kshatriyas by the names ati-Shudra, Mahar, antyaj, Mang, and Chandal."¹⁹

As punishment for resistance, the Mahars were defined as untouchables and banished from society, condemned to poverty, feeding on dead carcasses and wearing the black thread as a symbol of servitude.²⁰ A *pada* (poem) written by the president of the Bombay Shri Somavanshi Mitra Samaj (Association for Friends of the Somavanshi),²¹ Pandit Kondiram, who was influenced by Phule, drew on this imagery to communicate the continued effects of past horrors.²² In addition to wearing the black thread, Mahars could own no new clothes or jewelry. They dressed in clothes taken from corpses, wore iron jewelry, ate from broken clay pots, and owned only "dogs and asses; rats and mice."²³ They were dispossessed, shadowy figures reduced to begging and eating food unfit even for animals.

The [Mahars'] condition is so deplorable, that they come begging
For the rotten food scraps that have been thrown to the cows [lit.
"thrown into the cow shed"]
Which even the cattle will not touch²⁴

Kondiram ended with the powerful image of Mahar children sitting on a dung heap, their bodies covered with ash, sores on their eyes, rags covering their buttocks, their stomachs "sunken and empty."²⁵ Kondiram's imagery echoed the detailed prohibitions of texts such as the Manusmriti, which relegated untouchables to the very edge of human society, near graveyards and on dung heaps.²⁶ While Pandit Kondiram, like Phule,

agreed that the *shudra-atishudras* were Dravidian Kshatriyas, he presents here a very specific set of images of Mahars' destitution. Though Phule had argued that the *shudra-atishudras* were a political collective, he had also held Brahmins responsible for creating divisions among them. Coached by wily Brahmins to "hate the Mahars and Mangs," Shudras had forgotten that the untouchable communities were once brave Kshatriyas.²⁷

Early Dalit activists such as Gopal Baba Valangkar (?-1900) and Shivram Janba Kamble (1875-1942) drew on Phule's recuperation of a militant history for the Dalit communities.²⁸ Both, however, hitched a martial Mahar identity as Dravidian Kshatriyas to a new goal—a claim to continued employment in the British Army. Army service and its suspension deeply affected the first generation of Dalit publicists who had experienced social mobility and relatively little discrimination in the military. The significance of military service for Mahar Dalit is best understood by examining Valangkar, whose experience in the army, combined with immersion in Phule's Satyashodak ideology, resulted in a systematic Dalit critique of caste injustice. Gopal Vithalnak Valangkar was a Mahar native of Ravadhul, about five miles from the town of Mahad. He was an active member of the Satyashodak Samaj while in the military. In 1886, he retired as army *havaladar* (native sergeant) and went to Dapoli in the Ratnagiri district of the Konkan to become a schoolmaster. Dapoli was a unique settlement of Mahar and Chambhar military pensioners. According to the 1872 census, Dapoli had a population of 8,513 Mahars. In the Ratnagiri district, 2,180 Mahars were on the military rolls, 1,150 of whom were listed as pensioners. In fact, Mahars were described as "owning much land" in Dapoli.²⁹

By 1892, however, Mahars were collateral damage of a decision by the British government to stop recruiting untouchables. They were victims of the "martial races theory" adopted by the British Army after the Mutiny to justify reorganization of the military along caste lines by excluding Dalits and Brahmins (as well as South Indians, communities from east India, etc.), who were regarded as weak, effeminate, and incapable of martial courage.³⁰

If the British army justified military exclusion, Mahar Dalits mobilized Phule's concept of history as race war to emphasize their martial identity.³¹ Educated up to the Normal School examination in Poona's Shri Ganesh School, Valangkar was deeply influenced by Phule's critique of Brahmin hegemony and the radical egalitarianism of Satyashodak thinking.³² Subhedar R. S. Ghadge, a military pensioner who later became a member of the Poona branch of Vithal Ramji Shinde's Nirashrit

Sahayyak Mandal (Depressed Classes Mission; DCM), recalled that when he was stationed in Poona along with Valangkar, they heard Jotirao Phule lecturing the Mahar regiment about the bravery of the Chambhars, Mahars, and Mangs who had valiantly fought the Aryan Brahmins in ancient times.³³ Another member of the Satyashodak Samaj, Govind Ganpat Kale, recalled that Phule was a frequent visitor to Valangkar's home in the Maharwada in Bhavani Peth and that Phule often tested members of the Samaj by seating them in the same *pangthi* (row) as Valangkar, while food was served.³⁴ While the Samaj might have tolerated such experiments in Phule's lifetime, Valangkar himself became a victim of caste prejudice a few years later. In 1895, five years after Phule's death, the Samaj decided to ban Dalits—Chambhars, Dheds, Mahars, and Mangs—from their meetings.³⁵

Valangkar's activism manifested both significant continuities with and new departures from Satyashodak thinking. In 1888, Valangkar wrote a *Vinanti Patra* (Petition Letter) in which he offered an extensive critique of caste exclusion in the form of a series of questions regarding the divine rationale for *jati* and *varna* distinctions, and for the practice of untouchability.³⁶ In this text, as well as in his reply to Census Commissioner H. H. Risley's questionnaire regarding the origins and practices of various castes, which he composed in 1894, Valangkar provided a genealogy of Dalit humiliation and suffering and framed arguments for Dalit rights and social recognition in the language of humanitarianism and social justice.³⁷ Elaborating upon Phule's account of the defeat of the Shudra-*atishudras*, Valangkar argued for a repetitive structure to the outcasting of the untouchable communities after their original defeat by Aryan Brahmins, and he historicized Dalits' social stigmatization to the *peshwa* period, when lower castes and untouchables had faced severe religious exclusion and social violence. Valangkar argued that the Mahar Kshatriyas had been stigmatized after eating meat to survive the Mahadurga famine of 1396. Again during the Peshwai, the lower-caste and untouchable communities had found themselves subject to severe caste discipline under a Brahminical state. As in Phule's account, the abject position of the Dalit was historically produced through the foundational conflict between Aryan Brahmins and the autochthonous Dravidian communities of western India. In Valangkar's account, however, originary conflict was overlaid with an argument that specified a key element of Dalits' degradation, their eating of carrion. This became a recurrent theme in Valangkar's explanations of Dalit stigma, which drew on the real-life experiences of Mahar communities.³⁸

In addition to founding the first Dalit organization in the Bombay Presidency, the Anarya Dosh Pariharak Mandali (Society for the Removal of the Misdemeanors of the Non-Aryans) (ADPM),³⁹ Valangkar was a frequent contributor to the newspapers *Sudharak* and *Din Bandhu*. In the 1890s, he toured western India performing *kirtans* (religious songs) against the ill treatment of the Dalit communities.⁴⁰ When he was nominated to the Mahad Local Board in 1895, caste Hindus and Muslims boycotted the board's meetings. This provoked a series of reports in the *Din Bandhu* criticizing Valangkar's treatment.⁴¹ Ironically, this incident occurred in the same year that the Poona branch of the Satyashodak Samaj decided to ban untouchables from their meetings.

Valangkar was adept at the organizational practices of the Satyashodak Samaj, but he was also familiar with the workings of colonial institutions such as the school, the army, and finally, the colonial bureaucracy. When faced with evidence of social exclusion and stigmatization specific to the untouchable communities, Valangkar responded by seeking colonial intervention to safeguard Dalits' historical rights. In July 1894, Valangkar drafted a petition on behalf of the ADPM to the Bombay government demanding equal employment and civil rights for the untouchable communities.⁴² This inaugurated a spate of petitioning from other Dalit activists, including petitions from 1905 and 1910, drafted by Shivram Janba Kamble, demanding Mahars reinstatement into the British Army and employment in police forces.⁴³ None of these petitions received a positive response.⁴⁴ However, the petition became a crucial forum for writing Mahar Dalit history and for self-representation. In this genre, Dalits positioned themselves as supplicants and pleaded that historical wrongs to proud warriors required redress, while drawing on new discourses of social inclusion and civic equality to make their case.⁴⁵

Phule's historical conflict between Brahmin and non-Brahmin produced the *shudra-atishudra* as a revolutionary subject. Like the Dalit to come, *shudra-atishudra* named a community that did not exist: it signaled a potentiality, but also defined that group historically by valorizing their military prowess and indigeneity while challenging their defeat at the hands of wily *bhat* Brahmins. The power of Phule's narrative lay not only in the refusal of Brahminical hegemony but also in the claim to self-representation by the *bahujan samaj* (majority community) of the down-trodden and toiling castes, now valued as key political actors against alien interlopers. They were the Rakshasas, the protectors of the land, who, once vanquished, appeared in Hindu mythology as *asuras*, or demons.

History was a counter to historical forgetting, an antidote against religious superstition and ideological indoctrination. Valankar took up the narrative of *shudra-atishudra* bravery and military valor and the critique of Brahmin chicanery and cunning. Unlike his notable predecessor, Jotirao Phule, whose investment in Enlightenment rationality and humanism was combined with efforts to reinterpret Hindu popular culture, especially the Puranic tradition, Valankar turned to the Rg Veda and the Bhagavad Gita, and argued that they put forth competing views on the origins of untouchability: the former relied on a model of descent codified in the Manusmriti, while the Gita (and the Vayu Purana) were based on a theory of *karma*, or doing.⁴⁶ Valankar's argument regarding a key contradiction between caste as religious transcendental and caste as derived from a theory of action gave the practice of untouchability a more specific history, even as it allowed Valankar to challenge religious ethics from *within* the scriptural tradition. This was distinct from Phule's rationalist humanism, belief in a formless Universal Creator, and his efforts to propagate his Sarvajanik Satya Dharma (the True Religion for All), each of which verged on atheism. It allowed Valankar to specify the nature of Dalit stigma and to seek its redress through a set of sociopolitical strategies, from petitioning to challenging the religious bases for untouchability through an alternative reading of a humanistic *bhakti* Hinduism.

If Valankar's critique was enabled by forms of anticaste critique popularized by the Satyashodak Samaj, the Samaj's expulsion of its Dalit members in 1895 was an early sign of fissures within this imagined community of the *shudra-atishudra*. By the early decades of the twentieth century, anti-Brahminism had transformed into political non-Brahminism with a focus on converting the demographic predominance of the non-Brahmin into political power. By the time the movement was incorporated into the Indian National Congress in the early 1930s, non-Brahminism had moved from ideological critique to political contestation.⁴⁷ Concurrently, the once expansive, incorporative Maratha identity associated with anti-Brahminism became an exclusive identity tied to the realization of ritual Kshatriya status, or to forms of peasant populism.⁴⁸ As non-Brahmins poured into the Congress, Dalits' conflicts with the Congress were increasingly inflected with a Dalit/non-Brahmin antagonism.⁴⁹ Crucially, emerging distinctions between Dalits and non-Brahmins were played out on the field of intimate life and familial relations, gender and genealogy. The regulation of sexuality, in particular, was an important axis for the politicization of caste identity.

GENDER, SEXUALITY, ANTI-BRAHMIN POLITICS, AND THE DALIT HABITUS

Widows are cursing the religion that prohibits a woman from remarrying
Those who persecute women shall find themselves in hell
The Peshwas created this ignominious treatment of women
And for that reason their kingdom was destroyed

GOPAL VITHALNAK VALANGKAR,
DB, July 19, 1896, Akhand 5, verse 1-3

Hindu scriptures, especially the Manusmriti, defined both lower castes and women as impure, polluting, and subject to detailed regulation. It is not surprising that Phule and Valangkar equated the plights of these groups. Phule's earliest reform efforts addressed both lower castes and women: he opened a school for untouchable students in 1852 and a home for upper-caste widows in 1854. Placing gender and sexuality at the heart of caste distinctions enabled a powerful critique of the reproduction of caste through the regulation of gender.

Enforced widowhood, an important target of caste radicals' critique, focused on the inhuman treatment of the widow, who was tonsured, subject to severe sartorial codes, prohibited from wearing jewelry, and forced to observe dietary restrictions to control her passions.⁵⁰ Sexual anxieties about the widow were long-standing, but Hindu reformers' and caste radicals' renewed focus on the treatment of widows coincided with the colonial state's efforts to reform the Hindu joint family.⁵¹

Caste radicals were distinctive and vociferous in emphasizing the importance of caste respectability and sexual purity to the reproduction of Brahminical patriarchy. Thus, when Phule and his wife, Savitribai, opened a home in 1854 for upper-caste widows who faced intimate violence ranging from physical abuse to impregnation, they were criticizing a Brahminical order that sanctioned such practices, even as they were challenging upper castes' capacity to protect "their women."⁵² Tarabai Shinde extended their critique in *Stri-Purush Tulana* (A Comparison between Women and Men), written in 1882 in response to the conviction of an upper-caste widow, Vijayalakshmi, of infanticide.⁵³ Shinde attacked the hypocritical stance of criminalizing women rather than challenging the sexual excesses of men and argued that all men, not merely Brahmins, were implicated in the ill treatment of women.⁵⁴ The upper-caste widow also played an important role in Valangkar's critique. He compared the tonsure of widows with cows going to the slaughterhouse and argued that widows were deeply susceptible to sexual advances by "as-

cetics, mendicants, and priests” who congregated at holy places to take advantage of them.⁵⁵ Indeed, an established trope in anticaste polemic was Brahminism’s ideological reduction of women and the lower castes to beasts of burden: their sentience and physicality were inversely related to their value as persons.

Because enforced widowhood exposed the structuring relationship between caste hegemony and control over female sexuality, the practice provided the occasion for early critiques of the caste order and of Brahminical mores in particular. A dialogue between a widow and her father in a Satyashodak *jalsa* (folk drama) uses the widow’s physical disfiguration to stage a broader critique of enforced widowhood and to challenge its growing acceptance among non-Brahmin communities where *pat* (second marriages) had previously predominated.⁵⁶

I am your loved one [*ladki*], Anna,⁵⁷ your loved one
 How can you make me bald [*bodki*]⁵⁸
 My form
 Glitters [*chamchamki*]
 Like a dazzling diamond in a foil
 I am as delicate as a flower garland
 I ornament my plaits with flowers
 Give up your adamant behavior
 Hurry and fix my [second] marriage
 Allowed among lower castes
 Bhimrao says
 Don’t cause sorrow
 Or you will be sorry [lit. “you will fall on your noses”]⁵⁹

In the first decades of the twentieth century, Satyashodak *jalsas* were the main vehicles for spreading the Samaj’s message to the rural populace. Traditional *tamashas*, renowned for their word play and sexual innuendo interspersed with song, typically began with an invocation to Lord Ganapati. The stories centered on the theme of Lord Krishna’s dalliances with his *gopis* (milkmaids). Instead, the Satyashodak *jalsa* invoked the *gana* (the people) as leaders (*pati*, or “the source of rule”). Satyajī’s dialogue with Brahmin women on the irrationality of Hindu ritual, discussions about the exploitation of the peasantry, and critiques of the Brahmin-moneylender (*shetji-bhatji*) were popular.⁶⁰ The use of coarse and insulting language was standard. Bhimrao Mahamuni from Otur is credited with having staged the first *jalsa* with the support of Shahu Chattrapathi and Krishnarao Bhalekar. Ramachandra Ghadge (Kale, Satara district) started his famous *jalsa* troupe in 1915.⁶¹ Colonial reports in-

dicating the extent to which the Satyashodak Samaj relied on the *jalsa* and other popular cultural forms. A brief note by District Magistrate Satara, dated October 11–12, 1919, recorded: “It was found necessary in April 1919 to issue an order under Sec. 144 Cr. P. C., preventing the religious sermons, kirtans, and ‘tamashas’ of the Samaj at Karad for two months. District Magistrate reported that the so-called religious ‘tamasha’ and kirtans of the Satya Samaj consisted of coarse abuse and ridicule of the Brahmans and were rightly stopped.”⁶² By 1929, more than twenty-nine troupes were performing in southern Maharashtra. By 1932, however, the Bombay government noted a marked decrease of the performance of Satyashodak *jalsas*, but attested to their continued cultural significance: “The Satyashodak Samaj hit on tamashas as a means of propaganda amongst illiterate rustics and the points they make are probably coarse, but though the Brahmans have complained to me of the coarseness of the attacks made on them in these tamashas by the Satya Samaj, I have never yet been able to get a statement of any particular words they consider offensive. What happens, apparently, is that songs are sung containing offensive stories from sacred books and these are represented as Brahman morality.”⁶³

Satyashodak activists experimented with new social forms and intercultural strategies to challenge Brahmin hegemony and exploitation of female suffering. Like the *jalsa*, another important effort centered on politicizing Hindu marriage as the hinge between intimate and public political life, and as the site where ideologies of caste purity and gender respectability were articulated *as caste power*. Thus the Satyashodak marriage eliminated the need for a Brahmin priest and emphasized self-respect and equality within marriage.⁶⁴ This challenge to the social reproduction of caste through religious exploitation of the non-Brahmin communities, and the sexual regulation of (their) women, inspired Ambedkar, who urged Dalits to perform Satyashodak marriage. He even presided over one in Vidarbha in 1927.⁶⁵ Similarly, Self-Respect marriages in south India in the movement’s heyday (1925–39), took the politicization of marriage to new heights. Self-Respecters, especially their leader, Periyar, or E. V. Ramasamy Naicker, urged activists to perform intercaste and widow remarriages and celebrated them in movie halls and theaters, where they were performed at ritually inauspicious times. By so doing, they staged the theatricality of politics and the significance of sexual politics for radical anti-casteism.⁶⁶

The political import of the Satyashodak marriage is reflected by a legal case from Otur in Poona district, a site of radical Satyashodak activism.⁶⁷ A Brahmin *joshi* (priest) demanded his traditional fees for performing a

marriage even though the Satyashodak marriage had eliminated his role.⁶⁸ On appeal to the Bombay High Court, Balaji Patil argued that his fellow caste members had performed his daughter's wedding in keeping with ancestral tradition. His legal representative recognized the novelty of the Satyashodak marriage, however, and argued: "The marriages were performed without any prescribed ceremonies, and no priest as such, was employed. There was no *ganeshpujan* (inauguration of the marriage ceremony through a prayer to Ganesha). There was nothing beyond the placing of garlands on the necks of the bride and bridegroom. There was no distribution of fees (*dakshina*); therefore the village joshi cannot claim any fees. *There is a separate ritual for the Sudras of the defendant's caste. That ritual was not performed.*"⁶⁹ The 1888 judgment by Justices Sargent and Candy supported the Satyashodaks' argument that because the wedding of Patil's daughter was not performed as a (legally) recognizable non-Brahmin or Shudra marriage, the *joshi* was ineligible for fees. By refusing to sacralize marriage *on the Brahmin's terms*, the Satyashodak marriage positioned itself as an explicit challenge to the social reproduction of caste through the sexual regulation of women. This was of a piece with challenges to Brahmin sacerdotal power and ritually "pure" status in important rationalist texts such as *Svayampurohit* (Your Own Priest) and *Gharache Purohit* (Household Priest) that empowered non-Brahmin communities to perform religious rituals without Brahmin intervention.⁷⁰ Schools for training priests were similarly established in villages, so that rituals could be performed without Brahmin intermediaries.

Though caste radicals were preoccupied with challenging caste ideology by rethinking marriage and sexuality, they were by no means immune to the extension of novel patriarchal practices into their own households. In the last quarter of the nineteenth century, enhanced regulation of women became a mechanism to resolve anxieties about social status among upwardly mobile, politicized Marathas.⁷¹ Sociocultural practices such as Marathmola percolated down from royal families and landed gentry to young women from upwardly mobile families. This partial segregation of women involved withdrawing their labor and physical presence from public space and became a status marker for Maratha families claiming elite Kshatriya status. Meanwhile, Dalit publicists and reformers underlined the susceptibility of Dalit women to sexual violation according to "custom" and focused on enforced sexual servitude through womens' ritual dedication.⁷² Even as Dalit publicists launched a severe critique of the interdependence of sexual compulsion and the material

deprivation of Dalit communities, their efforts to modify Dalit intimate relationships also enhanced the authority of male Dalit reformers.

The contradictory effects of the social reform of gender by caste radicals can be explained by the fact that Dalit and non-Brahmin political subject-formation increasingly involved the politicization of Dalit and lower-caste men through the reform of family and female subjects. Earlier, colonial paradigms of social reform had intersected with (and enhanced) Brahminical models of caste and sexual purity to produce hegemonic ideologies of domesticity, female enfranchisement, and companionate marriage. They had been vigorously criticized by anticaste radicals, who drew attention to the supplemental relationship of gender and caste and the reproduction of caste norms through sexual regulation. In the first decades of the twentieth century, however, non-Brahmin critiques of the gendered character of caste were muted by emergent forms of caste conflict that increasingly framed the modernization of gender as dependent on the reconstitution of caste masculinity.

An important consequence of the discrete, if mutually entailed, trajectories of gender reform and the politicization of caste by anticaste radicals was that the subject of non-Brahmin and, later, Dalit politics was imagined as male.⁷³ Let me clarify that my argument in no way refuses the significant public presence of women and the centrality of female labor to the household economy of Dalits and lower castes. As well, bourgeois ideologies of femininity carried a very different valence for stigmatized communities, since coerced sexual labor constituted a key site of collective humiliation. While such developments speak to divergent genealogies of the feminist subject, they also help to explain the specific conditions that set the ground for a masculinist anticaste politics.

By the early decades of the twentieth century, Jotirao Phule's resonant narrative of Brahmin invasion and political usurpation was redirected to serve an argument regarding the impure, miscegenated origins of the Chitpavan Brahmins. Maratha masculinity was directly engaged in the resulting narratives, while Dalits—excluded from Kshatriya status—were rendered marginal to the conflict. The emphasis on Dalit and Maratha masculinity was the result of caste radicals' initial emphasis on the importance of gender and sexuality in the constitution of the (political) community of caste. Their divergent trajectories can be explained, however, through caste radicalism's intersections with the institutional contexts of colonial modernity and the discursive logics of an emergent cultural nationalism. Below, I address the polemical centrality of narratives of sexual violation for the justification of Brahmin hegemony *and* for coun-

terarguments that challenged Brahminism by questioning the Brahmin's putative "purity." My focus is on two things: (1) the manner in which gender and genealogy discursively constituted the difference between Brahmin and non-Brahmin; and (2) how the renewed politicization of caste identities around the axis of gender and sexuality demarcated emergent non-Brahmin and Dalit public spheres.

In Maharashtra, it was said that there were only Brahmins and Shudras in the Kaliyuga (the present, corrupted age). This indicated a Brahmin-centric view of the degradation of the all intermediate castes to Shudra status. Constant conflicts over Shudra status were in evidence from the 1700s, if not earlier, and became especially virulent by 1830 with regard to Chitpavan Brahmins' determination to downgrade the Kayastha Prabhus to Shudra status.⁷⁴ But who were the Chitpavan Brahmins? Phule had framed them as aliens and interlopers. Valangkar embellished Phule's account: the Konkani Chitpavan Brahmins were Semitic people who had fled the Barbary coast, were shipwrecked off the Malabar coast, married low-caste women from the Konkan region, and became a caste of fishermen. They won power and Brahmin status through cunning.⁷⁵ Valangkar went further to explain the distinctions between Mahar and Maratha. He described the Mahars as *varnas* of mixed *jatis* who shared the lineage of other Dravidian Kshatriyas—Surya, Chandra, Shes, and Yadu. However, he defined Rajputs and Marathas as Turks who had been sent to annihilate Buddhism and Jainism in India. If Valangkar distinguished the Marathas from other Dravidian Kshatriyas, it is because this was a pronounced theme of Maratha genealogies produced in the early decades of the twentieth century, which sought to redefine Marathas' status as *Aryans* and as Kshatriyas.

Dalits and Marathas past felt compelled, however, to engage with the Chitpavan Brahmins' genealogy related in the Sahyadrikhand, a caste origin myth that referenced an act of genocide in the Dasavatara to explain the disappearance of Kshatriyas from the Deccan.⁷⁶ In the Dasavatara, the axe-wielding Brahmin Parashurama, an incarnation of Vishnu, is said to have exterminated all Kshatriyas during the Treta Yuga, in retaliation for his father's murder.⁷⁷ (Recall that in Phule's account, the Maha-ari had risen against Parashurama twenty-one times, only to be subjugated.) To extirpate his sins, Parashurama tried to perform penance. Unable to find Brahmins in the Konkan, he created the Chitpavan Brahmins by purifying a group of sixty fishermen at a funeral pyre. The Chitpavans were rendered pure (*pavana*) through funereal ashes (*chitta*).

If this genealogy rendered Chitpavan Brahmins of dubious distinction,

it created an even more compromising account of non-Brahmins. The Shudra-Kshatriyas of Kaliyuga, it was said, were the product of illicit intercaste unions between Brahmin sages, *rishis*, and enslaved Kshatriya women.⁷⁸ The term “Shudra,” in both popular discourse and legal texts, conjured the dishonor of impure origins, a bastard identity born out of bondage, sexual degradation, and servitude. No less than B. R. Ambedkar was impelled by this account of sexual violence to argue that, “[i]n every case, the Kshatriyas are shown to have undergone an abject surrender . . . [in many stories] the surrender of the Kshatriyas was so to say purchased by them by offering their women to the victorious brahmins. The stories are all doctored with a view to glorify the brahmins and humiliate the Kshatriyas. Who can take such dirty, filthy, abominable and vainglorious stories of reconciliation as true historical facts? Only a supporter of Brahminism can do so.”⁷⁹ Indeed, Maratha assertions in the early twentieth century challenged this foundational narrative of sexual violence and caste miscegenation by addressing the *Brahmin’s* miscegenated identity.

In order to align themselves with region and nation, Marathas asserted that they were the original inhabitants of Maharashtra and thus true nationalists. To make their case they drew on colonial racial typologies inflected by regional caste conflicts and made sometimes confusing and inconsistent distinctions between Aryans and Dravidians, and Hindus and Brahmins.⁸⁰ By the turn of the century, Maratha purity had become a sensitive issue for Maratha activists and elite Maratha families alike. The latter distinguished themselves from Marathas of uncertain status, referred to by a range of terms—*kadu*, *akkarmashe* (lit. “miscegenated,” “bastardized”), and *kharchi* (semi-legitimate)—and sought to legitimize status through ritual incorporation into varna hierarchy.⁸¹ Marriage advertisements seeking pure alliances between elite, wealthy Maratha families began to appear in the pages of the Kolhapur newspaper *Vijayi Maratha* (Victorious Maratha) and the more conservative, Belgaum-based *Rashtraveer* (Patriot).⁸²

Such practices were doubly inflected by the desire to challenge Brahmin hegemony and to claim for Marathas a distinctive Kshatriya identity by aligning *jati* with *varna* status. The net result was a shift away from Phule’s tradition of radical egalitarianism and critique of religious orthodoxy toward an embrace of Aryan identity for Kshatriya Marathas, now increasingly represented as Hindus with full access to Vedic rituals in contrast to Brahmins, who were portrayed as being of questionable origin. Notable exceptions to this tendency are Mukundrao Patil, editor

of the *Din Mitra* (1910-30), who repeatedly urged an expansive identity for non-Brahmin castes as non-Aryan Hindus ranged against Brahmin domination;⁸³ and the non-Brahmin activists Keshavrao Jedhe and Dinkarrao Javalkar. They were increasingly confronted, however, by growing Dalit-Maratha conflict as an organized Dalit movement exacerbated economic tensions on a rural field polarized between Dalit laborers and non-Brahmin, especially Maratha, landlords.

Maratha assertions of pure Kshatriya origin positioned them as Aryan originators of Hindu scriptures with a first claim to Vedic authority, and Maratha polemicists urged non-Brahmins to take up the thread ceremony and other Vedic rituals to assert their superiority over Brahmins.⁸⁴ This erased the illegitimacy Phule had attributed to the scriptures as signs of Brahmin cunning and made for the Maratha Kshatriyas a central place *within* Hindu history. It also left intact the narrative of the defeat and humiliation of the Dravidian Shudra.

The reconstitution of the Maratha self (and of Maratha masculinity) was thus inherently unstable. At one level it constituted a challenge to Brahmin power (and Brahmin-centric history) across the *longue durée*. However by positing a direct correspondence between the uneven political regimes that produced Maratha as a resonant caste identity in western India and the ritually exclusive *varna* status of Kshatriyas, Maratha assertion relied on a genealogy that denied salience for Phule's imagined collectivity of *shudra-atishudras*. The rewriting of Maratha history left little room for Marathas of questionable status and increasingly rendered alliances between Dalits and Aryan-identified non-Brahmin groups difficult. As debates over caste identity intersected with narratives of sexual violence and structural analyses of the sexual reproduction of caste, complex political tensions between Brahmins, non-Brahmins, and untouchables were also staged. Between 1922 and 1926, an aggressively masculinized counterdiscourse became a major node of conflict for non-Brahmin challenges to Brahmin superiority.

Ganpati and Shivaji *melas* [festivals], started in the 1890s by radical Hindu nationalist Bal Gangadhar Tilak (1856-1920), had countered Muharram processions by politicizing public space and religion through everyday cultural symbols and historical figures associated with intimate practices of Hindu religiosity. The *melas* included street marches, singing, and the staging of plays that created a context for displays of anticolonial rhetoric and patriotic fervor. They also accommodated inflammatory anti-Muslim rhetoric and derogation of women and anti-Brahmin radicals.

In turn, Chatrapati *melas* counterstaged Maratha masculinity. Participants wore warrior costumes, carried spears and javelins, sang *mela* songs criticizing Brahmin hegemony, and asserted the true national patriotism of non-Brahmins.⁸⁵ The Peshwas were blamed for losing Maharashtra to the British. Insults were common.⁸⁶ By 1924, nightly fracas between Tilakites and non-Brahmin activists brought the *melas* under extensive police surveillance and caused the banning of many songs and publications by both sides.⁸⁷ The liberal organ, *Servant of India*, noted that the Chatrapati *melas* showed that “they [non-Brahmin activists] could beat the originators of the festival on their own ground, that is, in the employment of indecent language. Their attacks were directed against the very people who introduced this sinister element into the public life of Poona.”⁸⁸

This aggressively masculinized non-Brahmin political culture exacerbated caste antagonism through a sexual politics. Popular pamphlets made sexual innuendos about Brahmin women and represented widows as symbols of Brahmin tyranny. They cast aspersions on the sexual purity of Brahmin communities, characterizing them as the illicit offspring of Maratha men and Brahmin women. Brahmins were routinely described as *dasiputras* (colloq. “bastards”) in polemical texts,⁸⁹ thus reversing the Brahmins’ narrative of the Marathas as Shudras and the offspring of *das* (enslaved women). Indeed, Brahmins complained that one of the taunts employed by the activists was, “the Chatrapati *mela* has come; Brahmin women better run.”⁹⁰

Gender and genealogy were discursively central to this emergent non-Brahmin public sphere. Non-Brahmin activists emphasized the history of concubinage and Brahmin men’s sexual exploitation of lower-caste women (and their own wives) through popular-cultural representations of the Peshwai as a period of sexual debauchery.⁹¹ To suggest that Brahmins were foreigners and the offspring of caste miscegenation threatened the Brahmins’ claim to caste purity and, therefore, to ritual authority. Government censorship of “inflammatory” or “obscene” texts illustrates the growing significance of a public sphere of print and performance in exacerbating Brahmin/non-Brahmin conflict in Poona, hotbed of Tilakite activism.

Let us begin with publication of *Deshache Dushman* (Enemies of the Country) in 1925, with an introduction by Keshavrao Bagade.⁹² The controversy over the text was preceded by demands that same year that the Poona municipality honor Phule with a statue. The deep-rooted resistance of Brahmins and conservative non-Brahmins—including Phule’s rel-

ative, Baburao Phule—who accused Phule of being a Christian convert who destroyed Hindu religion, intensified friction and set the stage for a spirited response. The Oriental Translator described the book as “written in the most intemperate and objectionable language; in places the violent fury of the writer has so carried him away that his whirling words are barely intelligible.”⁹³ Bagade admitted that “the language and mode of expressing ideas employed in this book will not please Brahmins.”⁹⁴

Deshache Dushman branded Brahmin leaders as traitors sprung from a stock of foreign invaders of low status and questionable origins. The authors argued that Brahmins were well known for using any means to assert their superiority—from chicanery and cunning to falsifying history. Tilak and Vishnu Shastri Chiplunkar—the latter famous for his vitriolic criticism of Phule and the social reformer Gopal Hari Deshmukh, or Lokahitawadi, in his 1874 *Nibandhamala* (Garland of Essays)—were referred to as enemies of the country “born from the vomit of Brahmins” (in reference to Brahmins’ claims that they were birthed from the mouth of Purusa, or “the original man”).⁹⁵ Chitpavan Brahmins were generally described as “Satan,” “cobras,” “sons of prostitutes,” and “mother goers.”⁹⁶ Indeed the litany of complaints against Brahmin patriotism comprised an account of Brahmin treachery, sexual licentiousness, and female exploitation. This text, like others that followed, described Peshwa history as a period of maximal corruption, when Brahmins sold their daughters and loaned their wives.⁹⁷ Shivaji’s protection of Brahmin women from the depredation of Muslim men was mentioned in conjunction with Brahmin hypocrisy about the behavior of their women—“the Bhat mind thinks religion is destroyed when a Shudra is crowned king but cannot comprehend when a Brahmin woman comes jumping from the bed of a Shudra.”⁹⁸ Brahmins, it was noted, had the vile tendency to “suspect their mother’s chastity,” “shave women,” and to allow widows to throw their illegitimate children on “crossroads eight times a week.”⁹⁹ At the same time, the Brahmin priest “who calls the non-Brahmins Shudras an enemy is a badmash dacoit [bandit] who casts evil glances at their women.”¹⁰⁰ Equating Brahminism with slavery, the text noted, “it is a sin to give alms to a Brahmin who smokes ganja, drinks wine and ascends the staircase of houses of ill repute. To get marriage solemnized by Brahmins is tantamount to polluting an auspicious occasion [and] writing the horoscope of a future slave generation.”¹⁰¹

The controversy over *Deshache Dushman* was heightened by a set of parallel publications that challenged Brahmin hegemony and its ritual and material enslavement of non-Brahmins. R. N. Lad, the editor of

Mazur, and Annabhau Chavan, writer of “The Marriage Ritual of the Bhats According to the Shastras, or Their Foolish Foolishness,” were sentenced to nine months rigorous imprisonment for promoting communal enmity.¹⁰² In his piece of June 5, 1926, which described a marriage ceremony that took place in Masur on May 25, Chavan issued a challenge to “the extremely foolish, wicked, mean Bhats in Masur, the daredevil donkeys, the Bhat sons of prostitutes, who seek the evil of the benefactor, who give the form of untruth to truth, and truth to untruth, the cruel Bhats who put the barber’s razor on the heads of their mothers and sisters.” He called them hypocrites “intent on securing their own selfish ends,” who despised Europeans, yet flattered them in “servile ways” and saluted them “by bending down again and again.” Chavan argued that Brahmins refused to tolerate the reforms of the Satyashodak Samaj because it challenged them directly. He described Brahmin priests as Gollaks, or the illegitimate offspring of “shaved widows,” and warned of dire consequences if they cheated non-Brahmins or clamored for “more Dakshina” in the future.¹⁰³

Antagonism between Brahmins and non-Brahmins was at an all-time high in Pune in August 1926—and the writers of *Deschache Dushman* were in jail—when a young Maratha man named Hari Narayan Dhanavade was accused of attempting to molest an eighteen-year-old Brahmin woman named Dwarakabai. An inflammatory newspaper article reported that a witness had seen “the accused in the act of moving his face towards her” when he was dragged away from his victim.¹⁰⁴ Dhanavade maintained that he had been standing in a doorway, far from the incident, when he was set upon by thirty to thirty-five Brahmin youth.

Tilak’s *Mahratta* editorialized: “It is an insult to the womanhood of Maharashtra. . . . To the brahmans we have only to say one word. If they wish to live in honour then they must face the crisis with courage, manliness and bravery. They must take every step to defend the honor of their sisters and daughters. They will, we trust, prove equal to the occasion. . . . it is said that this assault is a most cowardly campaign that is being carried out through some leaders of the non-Brahman party against the Brahman community and their womanhood.”¹⁰⁵ The newspaper noted the increased frequency of such incidents in the prior six years in southern Maharashtra, where a concerted campaign to boycott Brahmins had been taking place.¹⁰⁶ The *Vijayi Maratha* challenged this view and noted that “public rudeness to women was originally inculcated by the Tilakites and Brahman Ganapati melas and Tilakite and Brahman anti-feminist movements,” and that there was an “old tradition” (among Brahmins)

of “composing abusive song against educated women” and “reviling them at will.” The paper went on to note that it was non-Brahmin men who had protected Brahmin women when they were abused and set upon by Brahmin men for supporting the Patel (Intercaste Marriage) Bill.¹⁰⁷

In the first decades of the twentieth century, a set of mutually constitutive if deeply contradictory sociopolitical processes were at work: emergent forms of upper-caste female mobility and domestic modernity; the heightened centrality of Maratha genealogy and of Kshatriya status for upwardly mobile non-Brahmin families; a long-standing critique of Brahmin hegemony and Hindu history; and finally, a burgeoning anti-colonial movement that sought political unity among disparate castes and classes and that took distinctive regional shape. Partha Chatterjee has argued that cultural nationalism revalued the Hindu domestic through women’s alignment with the spiritual interior of the nation, even as it gave women a new place in public life and allowed them to navigate the public spaces of work and politics without imputation of sexual impropriety.¹⁰⁸ Chatterjee’s argument describes the logic of anticolonial nationalism as *derivative* of colonial categories and *reactive* to the colonizer’s discourse about the colonized, so that cultural nationalists could value the domestic intimate even as they sought to transform gendered relations within the family. Chatterjee’s account addresses the affective centrality of the domestic sphere—and the Hindu upper-caste woman who symbolized it—for nationalist thought, but fails to take note of the political ambiguity that surrounded this figure. Given the centrality of gender and sexual regulation to the discursive hegemony of Brahminism in western India, the Brahmin woman had long personified elements of non-Brahmin critique, even as she became the rallying point for a renewed politics of Brahminism. Here, the historic conflict between Brahmins and non-Brahmins was staged through competing narratives of caste masculinity and differential claims over women.

In contrast to this public, explicitly confrontational, masculinist politics, Dalit reformers’ masculinity was predicated on the reform of gender within their community and the defense of community honor against the disdain of outsiders. In 1908, the *Somavanshiya Mitra* published a letter from Shivubai Vallad Lakshman Jadhav-Sonkamble, who identified herself as a *murali*. *Muralis* were young girls from the Mahar, Mang, *kunbi*, and so-called nomadic communities who were married off to the god Khandoba at his temple in Jejuri in fulfillment of a vow.¹⁰⁹ *Muralis* wore a *mangalsutra* of seven cowrie shells¹¹⁰ and, although human marriages were denied them, as nominal wives of the god they were obli-



Figure 2. Notice of a *tamasha* performance at Grant Road's New Elphinstone Theater in Bombay on June 28, 1898, with top billing to Tukaram Mahar Turewala Kundalwadikar. Namdev Vhatkar, *Marathi Loknatya Tamasha: Kala ani Sahitya* (Kolhapur: Yashashree Prakashan, n.d.), appendix. Author's collection.

gated to provide sexual services to men. *Murali* dedication was among a range of regionally distinctive practices involving women of all statuses, which came to be glossed by the colonial state as ritual “prostitution.” The lives of dedicated women, however, were more complex. Many remained with one partner all their lives. As temple servants, others acquired property in the form of tax-free *inam* lands. Women from Dalit

and nomadic communities were historically associated with the traditions of courtly performance, especially the erotic *lavani*.¹¹¹ By the twentieth century, they were more closely associated with *tamasha* performance, now depicted as a lewd and raunchy popular cultural form.¹¹²

The legendary Pavalabai was dedicated as a *murali*, though her exquisite beauty and performative skills brought her to the attention of the famous Brahmin *tamasgir* (tamasha performer), Patthe Bapurao, born Sridhar Kulkarni (1866–1948). Pavalabi joined Patthe's troupe and became his companion.¹¹³ Though she was a famous performer, Pavalabai's career mirrored the reduced significance of traditional popular culture to an emergent Dalit politics and the growing presence of a reformist critique of (Dalit) female sexuality. Thus the new performative medium of the Ambedkari *jalsa*, which is discussed in chapter 2, was composed solely of men and reflected long-standing efforts of male reformers to break the association between *tamasha* and the sexual promiscuity of its (female) Dalit performers.

Shivubai's letter was written against this backdrop of male reformers working to abolish stigmatizing practices, especially ritual dedication and sexual servitude. She responded to a letter written by a Mahar *panch* (religious head) castigating *muralis* as social evils whose sexual promiscuity was ruining Dalit men and their families.¹¹⁴ Shivubai objected that she was forced to do her job by the men of her community. She noted that many women converted to Islam and Christianity to avoid prostituting themselves.¹¹⁵ Indeed, Shivubai held the men of her community responsible for perpetuating the practice and called for a campaign against fathers who dedicated daughters. Shivubai's indictment of the men who perpetuated the practice was distinctive. Her point was overwhelmed, however, by multiple and overlapping efforts to criminalize the practice.

The practice of *murali* dedication was strongest near Jejuri and in southern Maharashtra, where it was associated with a distinctive inheritance practice among the Mahar and Talwar communities. In 1906, the collector of Bijapur argued that "the prevalence of the practice of dedicating girls to prostitution among the Mahars is partly attributed to the fact that the male issue of prostitute daughters are allowed to succeed to a Mahar watan" when a man dies without male offspring.¹¹⁶ Bomanji argued that even if the practice was customary, "this recognition of illegitimate children should be stopped."¹¹⁷ What Bomanji failed to mention, however, was that the decision to allow a *murali*'s male heirs to inherit their mother's property had been reached *after a decision to disinherit muralis from directly owning ancestral property*. On February 27, 1857,

the collector of Dharwad had “brought to notice the law of inheritance prevailing among Mahars and other low castes that a man dying without male offspring could leave property to a daughter only if she was a ‘professional prostitute.’”¹¹⁸ The collector noted that though it was practiced among “groups comparatively unimportant in numbers and social position,” the “loathsome custom” encouraged women to lead a life of “privileged profligacy.” The then Revenue Commissioner for Alienations, Sir Barrow Ellis, noted that “though prostitution was not expressly a condition for tenure, it was customary to retain one unmarried daughter to hand down watan to illegitimate offspring.”¹¹⁹ Government Resolution no. 6788, passed on January 22, 1858 barred ownership through illegitimates. Locally, however, the practice was clearly condoned. A complex case from 1873, involving a Talwarki *watan* in the name of “Vianki Talwar,” brought up questions of whether a prostitute’s adopted son, or her prostitute sister’s biological son should inherit her estate. In this case, as with all other cases originating in the Dharwar district, it was decided that inheritance should skip the prostitute and go directly to her male illegitimate offspring.¹²⁰ Thus the depiction of the practice of ritual dedication as a form of sexual servitude (and social scandal) was only partially true: *murali* reform gathered steam after female inheritance was stigmatized and Mahar and Talwar men had become beneficiaries of governing paradigms that privileged patrilineal inheritance.¹²¹

By the 1890s, various missionary groups had taken up the issue and suggested punishing parents and priests who enforced the tradition and recommended the transfer of dedicated women to orphanages. N. G. Chandavarkar, a social reformer, famous justice of the Bombay High Court and a member of the Society for the Protection of Children, made similar recommendations.¹²² By the time the noted Indologist R. G. Bhandarkar sent up a memorial from prominent Indian and European citizens of Poona in August 1906, it was found that an extensive discussion of the *devadasi* issue had already taken place in Madras in 1903.¹²³ The figures for dedication in southern Maharashtra for the period 1905–9, when the *murali* controversy reached its height, was as follows: 836 in Belgaum, 911 in Bijapur, and 876 in Dharwar district.¹²⁴ The Bombay government’s inquiry into the practice encompassed more than four hundred pages of testimony by district magistrates in Bombay, extensive debate on whether *murali* dedication could be criminalized, as well as far-reaching transformations of Hindu law to prevent illegitimates from inheriting—whether male offspring of *muralis* or *dasiputras* customar-

ily entitled to a half share from a Shudra father's estate.¹²⁵ The opinion of Dalit male reformers was not solicited, let alone the *muralis*.

Though sidelined by the government, Dalit reformers like Kamble applauded the effort and lobbied for community support. More significant, if rarely noted, is the fact that public attention to the practice of *muralis*' dedication shifted power within the community toward the viewpoint of male Dalit reformers and publicists. The degradation of Dalit women became a powerful issue around which they mobilized to demand gendered respectability through the abolition of customary practice. As much as intervention into *murali* practice was a means to reform the Dalit family, it was also the lever to move power away from figures such as the *panch* and male heads of household and toward Dalit publicists who wielded a normative conception of sexual vulnerability. Debates over ritual dedication—now recast as prostitution—became crucial to the reconstitution of Dalit masculinity even as it secured the social power of publicists, pedagogues, and community spokesmen.¹²⁶

Shivubai's letter launched a furious debate in and beyond the *Somavanshiya Mitra*.¹²⁷ Efforts were made in Jejuri to educate families against dedicating their daughters.¹²⁸ Shivram Janba Kamble held a meeting in Jejuri where he made a speech against the practice.¹²⁹ *Muralis* like Shivubai held fathers responsible for pushing their daughters into the practice and criticized male customers for creating a market for *muralis*' sexual labor. But men castigated *muralis* for seducing them and breaking up families, thereby assuming *muralis*' "consent" to their dedication. This was tricky given the normal age of dedication and its representation as customary practice. And yet, *muralis* (and their families) were blamed for perpetuating a practice that stigmatized the entire community.

Increasingly, Dalit reformers—like missionaries—suggested criminalizing *murali* dedication. A 1909 reformers' petition demanded the registration of *muralis* and the prosecution of parents who performed new dedications.¹³⁰ This produced a climate among Mahars that was responsive to criminalization of the practice. By then, the Bombay government had reached a consensus that criminalizing the practice was the most direct means of curtailing it. No new legislation was passed,¹³¹ but a proclamation banning the practice and reiterating the punishment for dedication was issued.¹³² Subsequently, the *Somavanshiya Mitra* carried news of two men, Kisan Sadhu Mahar of Jejuri and Mahalu Mahar of Bombay, prosecuted for dedicating their daughter and sister, aged eleven and thirteen, respectively.¹³³

Although some *muralis* supported criminalizing the practice of dedication, their primary focus was on redefining their position within the Dalit community. In addition to prosecuting *muralis*, Dalit reformers like Kamble also promoted *murali* marriage and sexual monogamy as the route to gendered respectability.¹³⁴ Shivubai argued that marrying *muralis* acknowledged men's responsibility for the practice, even as it enhanced *muralis*' self-respect and community standing. In fact, on April 18, 1909, the *Somavanshiya Mitra* noted that Shivubai had married the social reformer, Ganpatrao Hanumantrao Gaikwad.¹³⁵ Marriage offered protection in a context where men were actively involved in acquiring, dedicating, and frequenting *muralis*. For the women who chose to remain *muralis*, however, emphasis on marriage further stigmatized the practice and pushed it into a zone of shameful secrecy. *Murali* remarriage continued to have great public support.¹³⁶ At a meeting of men and women from the *devadasi* and *jogini* communities in Bombay in 1936, Ambedkar addressed women from Kamathipura, the red-light district of Bombay:

The Mahar women of Kamathipura are a shame to the community. Unless you are prepared to change your ways we shall have nothing to do with you, and we shall have no use for you. There are only two ways open to you: either you remain where you are and continue to be despised and shunned or you give up your disgusting professions and come with us. . . . You will ask me how you are to make your living. There are hundreds of ways of doing it. But I insist you must give up this degrading life. You must marry and settle down to normal domestic life as women of other classes do and not live under conditions that inevitably drag you into prostitution.¹³⁷

As the reform of the traditional practice of *murali* dedication came to be allied with the reform of the Dalit intimate, sexual monogamy and the production of family became appealing alternatives for Dalit men and women to whom this held out a recognizable model of respectability. Sexual respectability was achieved, however, through the stigmatization of "custom" and ritual servitude or dedication, categories of colonial legality whose paradoxical deployment and unforeseen consequences I explore in greater detail in chapter 2.

The fraught position of female subjectivity "between community and state" is an enduring binarism in South Asian historiography. An adroit colonial move allied women with caste and religious communities and simultaneously castigated communities for reproducing female backwardness and preventing female emancipation. As the relationship between women and community deepened, first in reaction to colonial in-

tervention and later as a form of nationalist glorification, the possibility of gender equality was also precluded. By the turn of the century, upper-caste nationalists had recuperated women as symbols of a modernized “tradition” and relegated them to the inner recesses of community life, arguing that women would be enfranchised from within community rather than through colonial state intervention. An issue taken up largely by Christian missionaries and later by Dalit reformers, *murali* reform was distinct from this colonial-nationalist association of women with tradition. Here, the issue was the overdetermined association of Dalit female sexuality with sexual availability and degraded female value. The ill treatment of the upper-caste Hindu widow by scriptural injunctions is an apt comparison, although Dalit reformists differed in their efforts to create a set of secular associations between femininity and domesticity.

As the work of regulating Dalit women continued in more dispersed forms, the degraded status of women was seen to be closely related to the emasculation of Dalit men. Fifteen years after the *murali* issue died down, an editorial by the Dalit activist and thinker B. R. Ambedkar asked why Brahmin and upper-caste women enjoyed an exalted status as mothers when Dalit women’s children were subjected to humiliation and denied basic recognition, negating all the desires that a mother might have for her child’s well-being.¹³⁸ He went on to say, “You have given birth to [us] men, and when we are treated worse than animals, it hurts you.” Thus linked to women’s degradation, Dalit masculinity was simultaneously positioned as wounded and vulnerable. Importantly, however, the onus was on Dalit women to reform themselves and play a central role in modernizing the community. They had to resignify the gendered habitus: “You should wear your sari in the way that upper-caste women wear their saris. You incur no expense by doing so. Similarly, the many necklaces around your neck, and the silver and tin bangles you wear from wrist to elbow is a mark of identification [*olakhnyachi khun*]. . . . If you must wear jewelry, then get gold jewelry made. If you cannot, then don’t wear jewelry. Pay attention to cleanliness!”¹³⁹

What did these exhortations mean for women from a stigmatized community? On one hand, like upper-caste ideologies, they symbolically associated women’s status with community status. On the other hand, they emphasized the significance of clothing, jewelry, and the right to ceremonial display as aspects of self-fashioning vigorously policed by upper castes. The right to a new habitus,¹⁴⁰ to good clothing, footwear, jewelry, and bodily comportment—standing erect while speaking, refusing to contort the body in an obsequious fashion—was critical to Dalit

self-fashioning. Though discourses of sexuality and of female enfranchisement were caste-specific, the focus on the feminized body—how it was experienced and represented—was central to a range of political processes.¹⁴¹ Women, marriage, and family remained irreplaceable sites for reproducing caste ideas and practices. Thus emergent forms of a caste-specific female subjectivity were directly implicated in the production of a social field where transformations of the non-Brahmin and Dalit habitus could occur, and they deeply affected emergent forms of caste masculinity. The politics of *caste and gender* complicated modes of political participation and of subject-formation associated with masculinization and community modernization. In a very real sense, however, the stage was set for a Dalit public sphere rendered male.

SEPARATE BUT EQUAL: SCHOOL, TEMPLE, AND THE DALIT SELF

We all drink water from the same tap, in hotels and Irani stores we sit
at the same table and drink tea and eat bread and biscuits. On trains
and steam boats we sit with our thighs and shoulders touching.

DB, April 20, 1907

As a distinctive identity for Mahar Dalits was clarified in the late nineteenth century, so too were the emerging tensions of village life intensified—conflicts between Dalit and Maratha groups over provision of services, the exploitation of caste labor, and friction between claims to Brahmin proportional representation and anti-casteism increased. The situation made escape from the village highly desirable for Dalits. Indeed, the liberatory potential of machine and metropolis exerted a profound hold on the Dalit imagination and the Dalit modernity that developed in concert with the urbanization of Dalit communities.

Mahar Dalits migrated to cities like Bombay and Nagpur in disproportionate numbers.¹⁴² According to the Indian census, between 1872 and 1881 the number of Mahars in Bombay rose 66 percent. By 1938, almost 92 percent of untouchable workers in the city were Mahars. Mahars performed unskilled labor under difficult and exploitative working conditions—40 percent of them were considered to be performing “coolie” labor, and they constituted more than 45 percent of the total workforce.¹⁴³ They were concentrated in particular industries: more than 60 percent worked in the railways or textile mills—the railways were the first and most significant mode of Mahar employment and drew a ma-

and others to counter what they considered to be a Brahmin-dominated, exclusivist Sarvajanic Sabha. Valangkar drew on a set of gendered associations between social stigma and public intercourse to challenge Dalits' civic exclusion. Like a woman naturally "shy of her husband and public gatherings" when she was menstruating, Dalits also experienced "shame" and self-revulsion. One was never to see a Mang or a Mahar in public. Valangkar's *abhang* challenged the Dalit's internalization of pollution and proposed that without equality between Brahmin and Mahar, between the excessively fortunate and the excessively stigmatized, there could be no true "public." For Valangkar, the organization of the world through the phenomenology of touch and smell also enabled an extension of stigma from biological bodies to the metaphorical collective of the body politic. In the interplay between literal touch and the imaginative democratization of the body he saw possibilities for self-fashioning and political transformation. Going further, Valangkar also suggested that only with a *caste mind* cleaned of impurities could the Sarvajanic Sabha (a regional precursor to the Indian National Congress) accept the Dalit castes.

Ironically, then, the institutional spaces and amenities of colonial urbanity exacerbated the experience of the caste body by highlighting the irrationality of caste segregation. As Dalit publicists—Valangkar, Kamble, and others—denaturalized the caste order, they also motivated caste Hindus to justify caste distinction in new ways that utilized the regulatory power of colonial institutions to produce new instruments of caste hegemony. Both dimensions, Dalit emancipation and new forms of subjection, were played out in schools and temples.

Access to education was a long-standing demand of Dalit publicists, as it had been for Satyashodak activists. Education was central to self-fashioning because it demystified the Brahmin trickery at the heart of the continued dehumanization of Dalits and non-Brahmins. There was also the material fact of Brahmin preponderance in colonial administration.¹⁴⁸ Conflicts over access to colonial schooling emphasized the built-in contradictions of colonial education. In 1882, the Hunter Commission asserted the government of India's commitment to untouchable education, reaffirming Wood's Dispatch of 1854, which opened government-funded schools to all castes in response to missionary pressure. The record of government-funded education for untouchables was poor, however. For instance, the first public schools in Poona's Purandhar district opened in 1836, but by 1839 only 17 of 759 pupils came from the untouchable communities. The numbers did not rise significantly in following years.¹⁴⁹

The most famous case is of the Christian Mahar convert from Dharwar who petitioned the government in June 1856 after being denied admission into the government school. The Bombay government refused to compromise the education of the majority of caste Hindu students at a government school for the sake of “a single individual” by making caste Hindus associate with a Mahar student. Caste Hindus’ right to exclusive education was thus reinterpreted as the colonial administration’s respect for the religious sentiments of the majority.¹⁵⁰

The Free Church of Scotland and the American Marathi Mission had supported Phule’s Society for the Promotion of Mahars and Mangs, which established schools in Pune between 1848 and 1852. The extensive involvement of missionaries in the field of untouchable education was viewed as blurring the line between proseletyzation and social service, compromising the colonial state’s explicit commitment to religious non-interference after the 1857 Mutiny. Colonial officials held missionaries responsible for politicizing untouchables who showed “independence and self-sufficiency,”¹⁵¹ by inciting them to “claim a right” even when untouchables themselves chose not to exercise it,¹⁵² thus exacerbating conflict between the majority of caste Hindu students and a few untouchable students.

Conflicts over equal education in the 1880s and 1890s confirmed government fears of unrest. Such an incident had taken place in Rajangaon, in Sirur *taluka*, Pune, in October 1886, when the village *patel* and *kulkarni* twice closed down a school run by the American Marathi Mission, using violence and intimidation to prevent the seven Mahar (and two Maratha) children from attending the school run by Indian teachers.¹⁵³ A similar report from Satara noted that Mahar boys were not allowed to sit in the school rooms with other boys, and that often a “few miserable Mahar boys are seen seated in the blazing sun outside scribbling on their slates and apparently entirely neglected.”¹⁵⁴ Or else, as happened in Manmad, Nasik district, in 1884–85, caste Hindus financed an English class through private funds rather than sending their children to the Anglo vernacular school run by the Church Mission Society, which also admitted untouchable students. Often, the government’s anxiety to maintain (and enhance) the population of students attending publicly funded English schools undercut the commitment to education for untouchables.¹⁵⁵ Increasingly, the colonial government faced a spate of petitions as untouchable students—who faced informal boycott by caste Hindus or the active enforcement of segregated education by colonial officials—petitioned for civic inclusion, while the parents of caste Hindu

students wished to exclude untouchables from classrooms. The Bombay Education Department had considerable leeway in deciding issues on a case-by-case basis in this contentious atmosphere.¹⁵⁶ As government's general commitment to native education confronted its specific commitment to untouchables' education, a novel resolution arose: Dalit students were placed on the school's verandah at a distance from both caste Hindu classmates and the classroom, to fulfill the colonial mission of educational access.

Sitting on the verandah obstructed the untouchable students' vision and hearing and left them vulnerable to the adversities of climate. In 1916, Communist activist R. B. More attended classes on the first floor of a school in Tale, in the Mangaon district, sitting on a scaffold erected by school authorities.¹⁵⁷ Like the scaffold, the school verandah preserved the illusion of equal education even as it emphasized the liminal status of those Dalit students who had managed to secure a right to government education. Reinterpreting the caste Hindu position as the majority sentiment, colonial officials made the verandah a new technology of segregation that reproduced caste exclusion.

Dapoli, the hub of early Dalit activism, was also a significant site of struggles for equal education. After the Society for the Propagation of the Gospel closed down its primary school, military pensioners petitioned the government on July 1, 1892, to enroll fourteen of their children in the municipality's primary school.¹⁵⁸ After asserting that admitting Dalit children would cause caste Hindu students to leave the school, the Dapoli municipality agreed to open a separate class with a separate teacher if the Mahar and Chambhar pensioners could collect enough boys.¹⁵⁹ B. R. Ambedkar, who attended that school between 1894 and 1896, described how all the Dalit students sat in one room, placing their slates on the ground so teachers could examine them. The children were barred from the common water supply.¹⁶⁰ The right to education, when combined with new practices of segregation, paradoxically *intensified* untouchable students' experience of stigma.

The Dapoli petitioners protested on September 8, 1892, requesting that the students be included in the other classrooms. When their petition was rejected by the Dapoli municipality, the petitioners approached colonial officials, who asked the municipality whether the children could be accommodated on the verandah.¹⁶¹ The municipality replied that the verandah was not large enough for all the children, but that the Dalit petitioners could pay Rs. 50 to enlarge it.¹⁶² Stalled, the pensioners continued up the bureaucratic line until J. Nugent, commissioner of the

Southern Division, told Vishnudas Hari Barve, the chairman of the municipality, that he was required to open the school to the Dalit children.¹⁶³ The municipality responded that equal education should occur gradually in order not to offend orthodox sensibility, and by November 1894 the municipal engineer had not yet approved verandah extension.¹⁶⁴ After threatening repeal of the school's grant, Director of Public Instruction K. M. Chatfield instructed the Dalit children to maintain a safe distance from other Hindu children in the classroom.¹⁶⁵ A visit to the municipal school at the end of 1894 found "the Officers' children sitting in the same class rooms along with the other boys at the distance of three or four feet and receiving instruction with the class regularly." The Dapoli pensioners were said to be satisfied, because "they never wished that their children should mix with the other boys but they wanted that they should receive instruction along with them, separately in the same class rooms, and this is now done."¹⁶⁶ Though the collector of Ratnagiri decided to monitor the progress of untouchable education through quarterly reports, access to schools was a vexing one. Almost a decade later, in 1901, the president of the ADPM sent another petition to the Bombay government, claiming that Dalit students continued to be excluded from the school.¹⁶⁷

As Dalit students tried to enter schools at the turn of the twentieth century, equal right to education was converted into the right to segregated education for untouchable students: caste restrictions were respected due to fear of boycott by caste Hindu students. The school verandah was a new mechanism of exclusion that encompassed overlapping structures of exclusion. One was based on Brahminical norms that replicated caste hierarchies. The other, grounded in liberal language, acquiesced to caste Hindus' refusal of mixed-caste schools as a matter of respect for the opinions of the majority community. Levels of education among untouchable students continued to be abysmally low: less than 0.48 percent were literate in 1911; by 1931, that number rose to 2.9 percent.¹⁶⁸ In response to segregated schooling, Mahar Dalits in Nagpur, Bombay, Poona, and Ahmednagar established separate schools and hostels for Dalit students in the first two decades of the twentieth century, complementing earlier work in Vidarbha and the Central Provinces.¹⁶⁹ Shivram Janba Kamble defended separate schools and argued that because Brahmin schoolmasters perpetuated caste distinctions, schools had to hire Muslim teachers.¹⁷⁰ By 1908, Vithal Ramji Shinde's DCM ran fifteen day schools, six Sunday schools, and four industrial schools in Bombay, Poona, and Ahmednagar.¹⁷¹ By 1909, the DCM had even reached into Dapoli.¹⁷² In 1916, of 1,600 Depressed Class students, 500 were en-

rolled in Shinde's schools. Though they were spurred by the failure of government schools to include Dalit students, separate schooling defined a powerful strategy for refashioning the Dalit self.

The Mahar community's growing refusal to countenance socioritual stigmatization produced new sites of contestation. Like separate educational facilities, efforts to build separate temples reflect an arc of Dalit critique. The economic enfranchisement of an important group of Mahar elites in the Vidarbha region enabled the institutionalization of a separate religious authority for Mahars. The 1877 opening of Empress Mills in Nagpur had provided a new source of livelihood for Mahar Dalits. In addition, a Mahar petty bourgeoisie of *malguzars* (landlords) financed the move into an industrializing cotton economy. This educated elite maintained links with rural areas, endowing schools and hostels and playing a role in shaping early Dalit politicization.

Born in 1864, Vithoba Raoji Moon Pande typified the new Mahar "small scale capitalist" first mentioned in an 1899 settlement report for the Nagpur district.¹⁷³ Educated in a mission school and influenced by critiques of caste hierarchy and Hindu superstition, he took advantage of his frequent travel as a cotton trader to act as a *pracharak* (preacher) for the Gorakshan Sabha (Organization for Cow Protection) which had links with the Arya Samaj.¹⁷⁴ In 1906, Moon Pande established the Antyaj Samaj (Society for the Outcastes), renamed the Loyal Mahar Sabha in 1912 and presided over by his close associate, the Reverend G. D. Philips. Before he died in 1924, Moon Pande had requested nomination to the Central Provinces Legislative Council. Like Valangkar, Moon Pande's life coincided with the emergence of the Dalit public and publicists in the crucible of colonial modernity.¹⁷⁵ Unlike Valangkar, however, Moon Pande's challenge to caste discrimination instituted an alternative source of religious hierarchy.

When Mahars were denied use of the Ambal tank at Nagpur's Ramtek temple in 1903,¹⁷⁶ Moon Pande mobilized a large group of Mahars who belonged to *bhajan mandalis* (groups that performed religious music). They went to the home of the temple owner, Raoji Raghuji Bhosle,¹⁷⁷ who gave Mahars permission to bathe at the Ambal tank on the condition that they stop eating beef and, more generally, desist from unhygienic practices.¹⁷⁸ Bhosle's response typified the upper-caste reformism that rationalized Dalits' degradation as resulting from their stigmatizing practices. Moon Pande appears to have supported this reform because he held meetings in villages near Nagpur to persuade Mahars to stop eat-

ing beef, even demanding that they take a public oath to that effect.¹⁷⁹ Although they did so, it was clear that relations with temple authorities had reached an impasse. The Ramtek Temple Committee asked Mahars to channel a portion of the fees paid to the *pande* (Brahmin priest) at the *ghats*—for services like shaving or making offerings of *pindadaan* to the ancestors—to the Gorakshan Sabha to fund separate Mahar bathing *ghats* at the temple tank. No Mahar *ghats* were built, however.

Moon Pande responded to the Brahmins' exploitation of Mahars at the Ramtek temple by establishing a separate Mahar priesthood to minister to the community's religious needs. To counter the Gorakshan Sabha's failure to build separate Mahar *ghats*, Moon Pande asked—and received—permission from the Ramtek Temple Committee to build a separate temple for Mahars on January 24, 1905. In March 1906, he acquired land for the purpose at a high price.¹⁸⁰ That same year the Antyaj Samaj committee took over management of the new Mahar *ghats*, established an independent Mahar priesthood, and gave Moon Pande *pan-deship*, the right to perform rites and receive *dakshina* (charities) from Mahar pilgrims at the *ghats*.¹⁸¹

By 1907–08, this parallel structure of religious authority protected Mahar pilgrims from paying extravagant sums for *shraddha* (funeral) rites.¹⁸² Moon Pande's use of Mahars' growing economic strength to assert a positive Hindu identity went further. Along with the Reverend G. D. Philips, he collected funds for a separate temple, a Shivalaya, near the Mahar *ghats*. Construction began on October 27, 1920, and was completed in 1924, shortly before Moon Pande's death.¹⁸³

Separate institutions signaled failed efforts at civic and religious equality. They also indexed the changed discursive and political contexts of Dalit self-fashioning. Unlike the establishment of separate schools, Moon Pande's temple and Mahar priesthood reproduced religious hierarchy by legitimizing the priest's role. Instead of criticizing Hinduism in toto and envisioning a complete excision from Hindu religiosity, Moon Pande's critique of religious exclusion produced a mimetic structure of religious authority, a Mahar priesthood. At the same time, his work underscored the growing economic strength of an emerging Mahar elite whose power as reformers within the community allowed them to challenge the Hindu hierarchy. Moon Pande's actions were radical and reformist, and indicated the ambivalences of Mahar religiosity and the limits to Hindu inclusion.

Perhaps more pointed and problematic is the matter of thirteen Mahars who entered a temple dedicated to the god Meghnath, an incarnation of

जाहीर पत्र



खाली सही करणारा कडून सर्व महार मित्रास जाहीर खबर कळवीण्यांत येत की रामटेक देवस्थान श्री अंबाळातलाबायें स्नान माहार लोकास मुखीच नसण्यामुळे माझे पीळाने खाली दिलेल्या कमेटीचा हुकुम आणून सर्वांस स्नानाची मोकळी करून दिली.

नंतर त्यांचेच हुकुमावरून तेथे आपला घाट बांधणे सुरू केलें असतां त्या तळ्याचे पश्चास लागलेली १०६ नंबर पाह्याळी जागा ती, खालील कमेटीचे अधिकारीत नसण्यामुळे, राजेश्री गोपाळ गणेश फर्नवोस माळगुजार रामटेक यांचे कडून माझे पीळाने खास खरीद करून घेतली आणि स्वपुजेची शीव पिंडी तेथे स्थापित करून घाटाचे काम पुरे केलें.

पुढे तेथे देवालय बांधने आहे अशा बंताचा १ जोता बांधून पुढे कामाची चाल करून ठेविली आहे—ता २३-४-२३ रोजी प्रती राजे श्रीमान व्हर्दिसराय सरकार प्रिल्युई नागपुर टीनहॉल येथें केहरवान रेव्हरेंड जी. डी. फ्रीलोप स्टाह्वे यांचे अध्यक्ष ते खाली सर्व माहार लोकांची जनरल सभा भरऊन इंग्रोपीयन वंगरे लोकांस टी पारटी प्रोती सम्मान देऊन, बरील सवें गोष्टीचा उल्लेख सर्वांकडून संजुर झाला त्यावर सवें पुढाऱ्यांचे ऐल. असून त्यामंजूर पत्रावर खाली दिलेल्या ऑफिसर हुजुरांची न्याय सही आहे, खाली सही करणारा त्यांचा आस्था धारक व पाळलेला असण्यामुळे मला त्यांचे स्मारक व पीळ्याचे ऊजराईपणे बरील कामाचे चाली प्रमाणे आपले पुजेस्थानी खास देवालय बांधणे आहे करीतां ता. २७-१०-२० रोजी आम्हा तर्फे काम करणारा हुसेना व मर्नाराम प्रधान व तुक्या महार म्हाळी याजला कांही रुपये देऊन बरील स्मारक देवालयाचे काम चालू केले आहे. बरील सवें प्रकणी रजिष्टर लेख असून नागपुर माहार समाजीक मंडळीद्वे जाहीर पत्र प्रसिद्ध केलें कीं रामटेक येथें माहार लोकांचा जो घाट आणि मुर्ती आहे त्या पुज्य स्थानी लोकवर्गणीवर शाबाखय बांधणे आहे असे छोहतात करीतां त्यांना किंवा इतर कोणामही लोकीक, स्वायें करणें असल्यास त्यांनी आमची खरीदकेली सरहद्दीची जागा खेरीज करून आपले इमारती वंगरेाची कामे कोठेही चालविण्यास आमची कांही हरकत नाहीं. असे न करीतां जाणून आपेलच तोंम याने वंद ऊभारून आमचे कामांत हरकत आणील. कांता ज्यास त्यास्थळावर अधिकारी बगोकरून पिंडदान वंगरे सवें पुज्या घेण्याचा हक्काधिकार नसल्या खेरीज बरील कामावर यात्रेकन्यास फसऊन पैसे काढील. त्याचोभय आम्हास थक्का पोहचेल तर त्यावर योग्य कारवाई केली जाईल. व त्यावद्दल मला त्या हुजुराकडेस लिहीणें किंवा खटपट करणें भाग पडेल—करीतां आपले माहार बंधून जाणून वाकडेवणा येऊनये करीतां हा जाहीर पत्र नामे मोठीस या निवेत्ती पत्र सभा जा. फ. ता. १०-११-२० ई.

देवस्थान कमेटी अधिकारी वर्ग

हुकुम नंबर २१४ हुकुम नंबर २१५

राजे बहादूर रघोजी राव भोसले

गंगाधर राव चीटनवीस,

पांडुरंग राव गुजर

रामचंद्र राव शिरके.

दापोधर पंत पंडे

हुजुर त्या माहार कमेटीचे मंजुर पत्रावर न्याय सही देणार,

आनंदवल सर, सी. ई. लो. साहेब बहादूर आय. सी. एस. पॅन्ड सी. आय. ई.

सेक्रेटरी, दू धी गवर्नमेंट आफ इंडिया,

आपला,

वामन विठोबा पुन संत पंडे नागपुर

स. नंबर २६ छ.

Figure 3. Public notice issued by Vaman Vithoba Moon Sant Pande, son of Vithoba Raoji Moon Pande, October 11, 1920. The notice outlines the exclusion of the Mahar community from bathing at the Ramtek *ghats*; Moon Pande's acquisition of a plot abutting the Ambala tank for the performance of funereal rites and plans to construct a Shiva shrine; and the support of British officials, including the viceroy at a meeting in 1913. It ends with a warning to "Mahar brothers" to beware of Mahars performing religious rites without proper authorization. Courtesy of the Vasant Moon Collection, Nagpur.

Shiva, in the village of Washer in Chanda district of the Central Provinces on September 22, 1922. They “slaughtered a goat there, sprinkled its blood upon the idol, put *shendur* [vermillion] on the image and adorned it with flowers.”¹⁸⁴ Though staged as religious worship, this incident blurred distinctions between the sacred and the profane because anointing a deity with goat’s blood could also be interpreted as an act of defilement. The ambivalence of the animal sacrifice arose from its signifying potential as worship and defilement. If upper-caste Hindus interpreted animal sacrifice as desecrating the temple, it is also true that temples to Shiva, a non-Brahmin god in Maharashtra, would have allowed the practice of animal sacrifice. Was it the sacrifice of the goat (as opposed to the more common buffalo), or the physical presence of Dalit worshippers in the temple that challenged its sacrality? Could the right to worship encompass the right to worship differently, as well as the right of Dalits to worship in a mixed-caste temple?

NEW DEPARTURES: THE EMERGENCE OF AUTONOMOUS DALIT POLITICS

By the late 1920s, conditions enabling Dalit activism were well in place. The distinctive ideological and institutional contexts in which Dalits’ lives were enmeshed from the later nineteenth century facilitated an incipient discourse of rights and emergent conceptions of the Dalit self as a historical actor and a political subject. Nonconformist Christianity and imaginative alliances with radical Euro-American traditions of free thought had influenced ideas of self-respect, equality, and social justice, while the radical anti-casteism of the Satyashodak Samaj associated the stigmatized existence of Dalits and non-Brahmins with the Brahmins’ ritual, economic, and social domination. Ironically, Dalits’ experiences with the institutional infrastructure of colonial modernity amplified the impact of stigmatization and exclusion. Indeed, Dalit activism developed through the enhanced contradiction between the experience of stigma and the possibility of emancipation through the institutions and ideologies of colonial modernity.

The Dalit public that coalesced in the first decades of the twentieth century reflected the changed experience of Dalitness: by the 1920s, disparate and localized challenges to the caste order had coalesced into an explicit demand for civic rights. When three thousand people gathered in the town of Mahad on March 19, 1927, for nonviolent public action, a *satyagraha* to take water from the Chavdar tank, they were testing a

resolution.¹⁸⁵ Three years earlier, the Mahad municipality had granted untouchables access to the town's public water sources. Apparently, civic inclusion threatened religious orthodoxy. The priest of the temple next to the tank ran through town announcing that the *satyagrahis* were not merely taking water from the tank, but were also attempting to enter the temple. Rumors of temple entry inflamed caste Hindu sentiments. A riot ensued. Caste Hindus attacked Dalits, many of whom were severely wounded and taken to the hospital, while others sought shelter in Muslim homes.¹⁸⁶ The Chavdar water tank was ritually purified soon thereafter to rid it of the polluting touch of Dalits.

One might have anticipated that such violent resistance to Dalits' claims would bring their struggle to a close. Instead, another *satyagraha* was started on December 25, 1927. A weekly letter from Mahad's district superintendent of police noted that "[h]andbills in connection with satyagraha of untouchables at Mahad are being distributed all over Mahad and Mangaon talukas [district subdivision]. The argument in the handbills is that . . . untouchables have a right to take water from the aforesaid tank. This right must now be established."¹⁸⁷

Ten thousand people gathered in Mahad this time. They took considerable risks in participating in the *satyagraha* and faced retaliatory violence. Despite support from important non-Brahmin activists, tensions between Dalits and non-Brahmins persisted, and Keshavrao Jedhe appears to have participated in a call to impose a boycott against Mahars, even making a speech in favor of a boycott.¹⁸⁸ As Dalits asserted the right to participate in the *satyagraha*, tensions between non-Brahmins and Dalits assumed an economic dimension in rural areas where Maratha or non-Brahmin landlords directly exploited Dalit labor: "We had never imagined that these issues would be publicized so quickly. But like the waving of a magic wand begging for *bhakar* [millet bread], and eating dead meat has stopped in Kolaba district. But in those villages where these new programs have begun . . . [untouchables] are not allowed to come and go in the village, in some places wastelands given to them have been taken away."¹⁸⁹

In a spectacular challenge to the orthodoxy of religious sanctions behind caste distinction, *satyagraha* organizers, who included caste Hindus and Dalits, agreed to burn the sacred text, the Manusmriti.¹⁹⁰ A long-time Brahmin associate of B. R. Ambedkar's, G. N. Sahasrabudhe, moved the resolution to burn the text at Mahad. Ambedkar, who had read portions of the Manusmriti with a pundit in the months before the conference, had with him a copy of those segments concerned with the

punishment and social exclusion of women and Shudras. Those portions were burned in public rejection of caste hierarchy and sanctioned violence. Ambedkar acknowledged the debt to the techniques and strategies of popular nationalism, comparing this rejection of the caste order with the burning of foreign cloth by Indian nationalists to challenge colonial exploitation. Both cases were examples of spectacular refusals of oppressive sociopolitical orders.

The events of 1927 marked a significant departure in Dalit politics and inaugurated urban-centered regional associational forms. The Bombay-based Bahishkrit Hitakarini Sabha (Association for the Amelioration of the Boycotted; BHS) was the organizational force behind the Mahad *satyagraha*.¹⁹¹ Also known as the Depressed Classes Institute, the BHS was formed on July 20, 1924, to promote education and social reform among Mahar Dalits. In Bombay, it established a free reading room, a Students' Conference, and a Mahar Hockey Club.¹⁹² The BHS also ran a free hostel in Sholapur; opened vocational schools, libraries, and community centers; and supported study circles and cultural activities. In its early phase, the BHS undertook joint programs with organizations such as the Social Service League dominated by caste Hindu reformers.¹⁹³ BHS activists intervened in village-level conflicts and held Bahishkrit Parishads (Depressed Class Conferences) across the Bombay-Konkan region.¹⁹⁴

Throughout the interwar years, new conceptions of public access and civic inclusion animated Dalit public action. As radicalized Dalits made bold public rights claims and launched an attack on the symbols of caste orthodoxy, they enlarged their repertoire of activism as well as their conceptual vocabulary of politics.