

Religions and Development Research Programme

Religions, Democracy and Governance: Spaces for the Marginalized in Contemporary India

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Religions and Development

Research Programme

The Religions and Development Research Programme Consortium is an international research partnership that is exploring the relationships between several major world religions, development in low-income countries and poverty reduction. The programme is comprised of a series of comparative research projects that are addressing the following questions:

- How do religious values and beliefs drive the actions and interactions of individuals and faith-based organisations?
- How do religious values and beliefs and religious organisations influence the relationships between states and societies?
- In what ways do faith communities interact with development actors and what are the outcomes with respect to the achievement of development goals?

The research aims to provide knowledge and tools to enable dialogue between development partners and contribute to the achievement of development goals. We believe that our role as researchers is not to make judgements about the truth or desirability of particular values or beliefs, nor is it to urge a greater or lesser role for religion in achieving development objectives. Instead, our aim is to produce systematic and reliable knowledge and better understanding of the social world.

The research focuses on four countries (India, Pakistan, Nigeria and Tanzania), enabling the research team to study most of the major world religions: Christianity, Islam, Hinduism, Sikhism, Buddhism and African traditional belief systems. The research projects will compare two or more of the focus countries, regions within the countries, different religious traditions and selected development activities and policies.

The consortium consists of six research partner organisations, each of which is working with other researchers in the four focus countries:

- University of Birmingham, UK: International Development Department, Department of Theology and Religion, Centre for West African Studies, Centre for the Study of Global Ethics.
- University of Bath, UK: Centre for Development Studies.
- Indian Institute of Dalit Studies, New Delhi.
- Nigerian Institute of Social and Economic Research, Ibadan.
- University of Dar es Salaam, Tanzania.
- Lahore University of Management Sciences, Pakistan.

In addition to the research partners, links have been forged with non-academic and non-government bodies, including Islamic Relief.

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Summary

The constitutional framework that structures the relationships between religion and politics in India reveals how the democratic and liberal concern for equal treatment and liberty for all has been pursued, along with a deep commitment to recognizing and protecting religious and cultural diversity. The paper emphasizes the distinctiveness of the Indian conception of secularism. Experience of the working of Indian democracy over the last six decades reveals that competitive electoral politics compels parties to woo people from different communities. Even when a religious community has an organized religious political party that claims to speak on its behalf, not all sections of the community align themselves with that party. Other axes of identity, such as caste, divide religious communities. The spaces opened by democratic politics and the dynamics it creates need, therefore, to be factored into any discussion of religion and politics.

Relationships between religion, politics and governance are further examined through case studies from the states of Punjab and Maharashtra of political mobilizations by marginalized groups within three religious communities: Hindus, Muslims and Sikhs. Each of these mobilizations involves a cluster of castes and occupational groups in a region. They highlight the different ways in which religion and caste intersect and are implicated in the political process.

Religious identity remains the bedrock of social life and individual experience, yet democratic politics brings out new configurations and alignments in which neat boundaries of religious difference are occasionally blurred or overwritten by other identities, which surface time and time again as a basis for articulating demands for access to opportunities and development possibilities. By attending to these group articulations, understanding of both the existing fissures within communities and the complex ways in which religion gains centrality or is sidestepped in the pursuit of better life conditions can be improved. Indian experience also reveals that religion has both moral and social dimensions and that the two do not always coincide. Religious groups are internally heterogeneous in their ideological and spiritual moorings, as well as their social and political outlook. They are continuously being constructed in response to both the external environment and internal pressures. Even more importantly, while religious identity may be important to individuals, other identities also structure individual lives and social interactions.

Glossary

Aatma: The inner voice

Ajlafs: Term used for north Indian Muslims with origins in relatively low-status occupations and caste communities

Ashrafs: Term used for those north-Indian Muslims with origins in the relatively privileged class of immigrants from the Middle East.

Badhais: A caste group, carpenters

Baghbaan: Literally 'a gardener'

Bahujan: Majority population of non-twice-born Hindus

Balmiki: New and preferred name of the scavenging caste

Bhantheji Mahathero: Buddhist Guru

Biradari: A kinship group, a social unit in Punjab

Bundh: A mode of protest involving closure (sometimes forcible closure) of all businesses, trade and work places

Chuhrah: A scavenging Dalit caste of Punjab

DMK: Dravida Munnetra Kazhagam, A Leading Political Party in a southern state of India, Tamil Nadu.

Dalits: Formerly referred to as untouchable castes.

Dargah: Place of prayer for Sufis

Dera: A Punjabi word for the home of a religious leader

Devnagari: The script used for writing Hindi

Dhamma: Moral order

Dhuniyas: A caste group of weavers listed among the Other Backward Classes

Ganesh Puja: A festival of Hindus dedicated to the worship of the deity Ganesha

Gangajal: Water of the holy river Ganga

Gherao: A mode of protest where the protestors literally surround a person/public official, not allowing the person to leave until demands are met

Gowansh Hatya Virodhi Vidheyak: Bill against cow slaughter

Gurudwara: The religious place of worship of the Sikh community

Gurumukhi: The script used for writing Punjabi

Hindutva: Right-wing Hindu identity and politics

Jai Bheem: A popular slogan and form of greeting used by Ambedkarite Dalits, literally meaning victory to Bheem (Bheem was the first name of B.R. Ambedkar, the famous Dalit leader who led the conversion of Mahar Dalits in Maharashtra to Buddhism).

Jalsas: A political assembly

Jati: An endogamous unit of caste

Jayanti: Birthday, a term used for celebrated people

Jat: The dominant agriculturalist caste in Punjab

Kala: The colour black

Kamandal: A small vessel for carrying water that is held in the hand

Kammi: A Punjabi word for the labouring class or an agricultural labourer

Khas: Used here to designate persons belonging to the aristocracy or landowning classes

Kirpan: A Punjabi word for sword. Sikhism requires a ritually devout Sikh (Amritdhari) to wear it at all times

Lok Sabha: Lower house of the Indian Parliament

Madarsa: A traditional Islamic educational centre for young children

Mahant: Title used by Hindus and Sikhs in north India for a religious leader.

Malis: A caste name, traditionally identified with the occupation of gardeners

Mandal: A group of villages; a unit for local political organization and administration

Mangalsutras: A necklace worn by married Hindu women
Mantralaya: 'Ministry' or department of government
Manuvad: Casteist ideology as propounded by Manu, a Hindu saint
Marathi: Official language of Maharashtra, a western Indian province
Maulanas: A Muslim title
Mazhbi: Name of a Dalit caste among the Sikhs
Naddafs / Nazzafs: A caste group of Muslims weavers listed among the Other Backward Classes
Namaaz: Muslim prayer
Panchayat: Village-level representative and governing council, legitimized by Indian law
Pandal: A Punjabi word for a temporary auditorium
Panth: A Punjabi word for a religious community or a sect
Paramatma: The Supreme Being, God
Rath Yatra: A procession in which an honourable person or the statuette of a god is carried on a chariot-like structure
Samaj: A Hindi word literally meaning 'society', normally used for an association
Samskar: Traditionally pious way of leading life
Sangathan: An organization
Sangh: Association or organization
Saree: A dress worn by Indian women
Sarpanch: The head of the local governing body in an Indian village
Savarna: The so-called Hindu upper-castes
Sepi: A traditional system of bonded labour popular in the Punjab countryside
Shivir: A camp or a gathering place for religious or political training.
Shramner Shivir: A Buddhist teaching camp
Suba: A Punjabi word for province or state
Sufi: A devotional sect of Islam
Taluk: A group of villages; a unit for local political organization and administration
Vandana: Prayer
Vidhan Sabha: State Legislative Assembly
Vidyarthi: Student
Yadavs: A north Indian caste group

Acronyms

AAP:	Abrahmani Atrhniti Panchayat (a non-Brahmin economic policy association)
ABMMSP:	Akhil Bhartiya Muslim Marathi Sahitya Parishad (an association of Muslim Writers of Marathi literature)
AICC:	All India Congress Committee
AIMABCO:	All India Muslim All Backward Class Organisation
AIMOBCO:	All India Muslim OBC Organisation
BANAE:	Baba Saheb Ambedkar National Association for Engineers
BJP:	Bhartiya Janta Party
BSP:	Bahaujan Samaj Party
BIS:	Buddhist International Society
BPS:	Bauddhajan Panchayat Samiti
BSI:	Buddhist Society of India
CBI:	Criminal Bureau of Investigation
CID:	Criminal Investigation Department
CPI:	Communist Party of India
CPM:	Communist Party of India (Marxist)
CSDS:	Centre for the Study of Developing Society
DMK:	Dravida Munnetra Kazhagam
GR:	Government Resolution
INC:	Indian National Congress
NCP:	Nationalist Congress Party
OBCs:	Other Backward Classes (an official list of 'socially and educationally backward communities' for affirmative action)
RJD:	Rashtriya Janata Dal or Nationalist People's Party
RBI:	Reserve Bank of India
RPI:	Republican Party of India
RSS:	Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh
SAD:	Siromani Akali Dal, also referred to as Akali
SAD(B):	Siromani Akali Dal (Badal)
SAD (M):	Siromani Akali Dal (Simranjeet Singh Mann)
SCs:	Scheduled Castes (an official list mostly (but not exclusively) of ex-untouchable communities entitled to receive the benefits of reservations)
SEZs:	(Special Economic Zones being created by the government to encourage modern industry, often on the farm lands. Some of these have become quite contentious because of the opposition by the local people who stand to loose their lands)
SGPC:	Shiromani Gurudwara Prabandhak Committee
SHS:	Shiv Sena
SMS:	Samayukta Maharashtra Samiti
STs:	Scheduled Tribes
TBMSG:	Trailokya Bauddha Mahasangha Sahayak Gana
UNHCR:	UN High Commissioner for Refugees
UPA:	United Progressive Alliance

1 Introduction

This paper has been produced as part of a research programme on Religions and Development led by the University of Birmingham. It is part of a comparative international study of the relationships between religion and politics in India, Pakistan, Nigeria and Tanzania. It seeks to analyse contemporary relationships between religion and politics in India and their implications for the discourse on development and governance.

The case of India is particularly interesting and important for two reasons. First, India is among the few countries that do not have a recognized official religion. Unlike many other nations in South Asia, India is a democratic and secular republic. Yet while proclaiming itself to be a secular polity, religion has a presence in the country's public and political life. Religion, in other words, is not conceived as a private matter that can be eclipsed in the public arena. Rather, religious groups and communities are recognized by the constitution. Religious diversity is acknowledged and protected through a framework of enabling provisions.

Second, the experience of India reveals the limitations of the existing conceptual and theoretical vocabulary. It shows that religion has both moral and social dimensions and that the two do not always overlap. Religious groups are internally heterogeneous in their ideological and spiritual moorings, as well as their social and political outlook. They are continuously being constructed in response to both the external environment and internal pressures. Even more importantly, while religious identity may be important to individuals, other identities also structure individual lives and social interactions. In the case of India, caste is another significant axis of identity. It is only when these two identities are placed alongside each other that the contemporary Indian reality can be understood, particularly when considering questions of development in terms of social exclusion and marginalization.

In recent times, the return of religion in the public sphere has been linked to the inability of states to meet the aspirations of marginalized communities, which usually fail to gain from 'development'. In India, by comparison, development concerns fragment, or at least internally differentiate, religious communities. Political parties address development needs by identifying groups within religious communities and then devising group-specific policies for them. A similar process can be seen within religious communities. Here too, marginalized groups within a community come together to raise their collective concerns. Religion is not always the rallying point, but it would be naïve to assume that it is removed from the public arena. It remains in the background, always available for mobilizing a

population. Moreover, the religious metaphor is used not only by political parties vying for electoral support but also by marginalized groups themselves to bring people together, and at times even to give themselves a new identity.

The paper is divided into eight parts. It begins by exploring the constitutional framework that structures the relationships between religion and politics in India. This reveals how the democratic and liberal concern for equal treatment and liberty for all has been pursued, along with a deep commitment to recognizing and protecting religious and cultural diversity. If the former foregrounds the individual, the latter brings in the community, including religious communities. The first section outlines the normative concerns that have informed the relationships between religion and politics. It also emphasizes the distinctiveness of the Indian conception of secularism, in order to understand how religion enters into the public arena and how space is provided for religion and religious communities in Indian democracy.

The second section points to the existence of different kinds of identities in the political arena and shows that democratic politics offers many channels for the articulation and pursuit of community interests. Some minorities are associated with separate political parties and some are not, but this does not mean that the latter remain unrepresented. Competitive electoral politics compels parties to woo people from different communities. At the same time, even when a community has an organized religious political party that claims to speak on its behalf, sections within the community do not align themselves with that party. The spaces opened by democratic politics and the dynamics it creates need, therefore, to be factored into the discussion of religion and politics.

The third section examines the relationships between religion, politics and governance by focusing on two States of federal India – Punjab and Maharashtra, where a field study was conducted during 2006-07. These are among the more developed Indian states yet, defying early theorizing on modernization, it is these States that have witnessed the emergence and consolidation of religion-based political parties. The so-called secular parties have, over the past many decades, been pitted against these religious parties. Religious mobilization and symbols mark public and political life here. The presence of religious political parties gives us a glimpse of the manner in which religion and politics mingle in the Indian context. We also see how religious communities respond to religious political parties, in

particular whether these parties represent and voice communities' development concerns. In these States, like most in India, other faith-based organizations are engaged in developmental activities, such as providing health care, education, free food or emergency help. Since these activities are the subject of separate studies, the work of these faith-based organizations has not been analysed here. Instead the focus of this paper is on religious political parties, religious communities, politics and the concerns of development and good governance.

Recognizing that religious communities are not homogeneous entities, the next three sections take up three case studies in Punjab and Maharashtra. These focus on the mobilization of marginalized groups within three religious communities – Hindus, Muslims and Sikhs. Each raises development issues and points to the deprivation faced by particular groups within the larger religious communities. Each of the chosen mobilizations involves a cluster of castes and occupational groups in a region. They highlight the different ways in which religion and caste intersect and are implicated in the political process.

Religious identity remains the bedrock of social life and individual experience, yet democratic politics brings out new configurations and alignments where neat boundaries of religious difference are occasionally blurred or overwritten by other identities. Other identities surface time and time again to articulate their demands for access to opportunities and development possibilities. By attending to these group articulations one can understand both the existing fissures within communities and the complex ways in which religion gains centrality or is sidestepped in the pursuit of better life conditions.

2 Religion, politics and secularism

2.1 Introduction

India is in many respects quite distinct from other post-colonial societies. Unlike many of her neighbours in South Asia, with whom she shares a history and culture, independent India self-consciously pursued the ideals of liberal democracy. India's constitution endorsed not just the principles of formal and legal equality, universal adult franchise and an elected representative form of government, but also the ideal of secularism. The term secularism was not initially used in the constitution, but was added subsequently to its Preamble by the 42nd Amendment. Nevertheless the principle of secularism was embedded in the constitution's design. Indeed, the Supreme Court declared secularism an integral part of the constitution's 'basic structure' (*Keshavananda vs. State of Kerala*, 1973).

How has the principle of secularism operated in a society where religion plays an important role in social life? How did the constitution-makers envisage the relationship between religion and politics? Has religion shaped and determined politics? What have been the implications of recognizing religion and religious diversity? These are questions that have, not surprisingly, dominated studies on religion and politics in India. Different frameworks for understanding the relationship between religion and politics have been presented through the Indian debate on the concept of secularism and the relevance of that ideal. It is, therefore, necessary to begin a study of religion, politics and governance by revisiting that debate.

2.2 The constitutional framework

When India gained independence, different religious communities were active players in the public and political arena. Some political parties, like the Muslim League, associated themselves with specific religious communities and even claimed to represent their interests. The idea that religious communities formed discrete groups, each with a separate and distinct identity, was recognized by British colonial rule, which gave separate political representation to identified groups and communities¹. Consequently, when the deliberations began for the framing of the constitution of independent India, special care was taken to ensure that members from different religious communities were included, particularly in discussion of the rights of citizens. As a result, although the notion of secularism was incorporated into the constitution, it received a different and unique interpretation.

Secularism surfaced as a commitment to the ideal of religious non-discrimination – the belief that no one should be discriminated against on account of their religious identity. The constitution actualized this principle in two ways: 1) through an implicit agreement that the state will not establish any religion as the official religion; and 2) by granting equal religious and political liberty to all religious communities (Mahajan, 1998, 2008). The former was similar to the non-establishment clause that defines the American notion of secularism and the French concept of *Laïcité*.² In other words, it complied with the dominant western conception of secularism. The latter gave the notion of secularism in India a distinct content. Unlike many other western secular democracies, non-establishment did not translate into the eclipse of religion in the public arena. Instead of restricting religion to the private domain, the constitution recognized the presence of many different religious communities, with their own distinct moral and social codes and ways of life. It protected the religious liberty of all communities and created a framework that was conducive to the promotion of religious diversity.

The constitution gave each individual, and by extension each community, the right to “profess, propagate and practice” their religion (Article 25). While most liberal societies give citizens freedom of conscience and the right to religious *worship*, in India they have the right to perform and observe religious *practices*. As many of these practices are collective in nature and are performed outdoors, they place religion in the public arena. Communities can, for instance, organize processions through the streets of a city, or assemble by the banks of a river to perform a ritual, and the state is, at least implicitly, expected to make the necessary arrangements to ensure that these practices can be performed without interference.

While guaranteeing the right to religious practice, the framers of the constitution were aware that some existing community practices disadvantaged sections of their own group. Women were subordinated in almost all the religious communities and the lower castes (later designated as the Scheduled Castes - SC) in the Hindu community were systematically excluded and discriminated against. Hence, while protecting religious practices and diversity, the constitution allowed the state to intervene and legislate to promote equal and fair treatment for the vulnerable sections of society (Bajpai, 2000; Jha, 2002).

Limited intervention by the state in the affairs of religious communities was prompted by the desire to reconcile the concerns of diversity with those of equality. It did not detract from the commitment to recognize and protect religious diversity. The constitutional structure operated with the belief that religion is a constitutive element of individual identity. Even as it tried to eliminate organized structures of inequality, therefore, it recognized religious differences and diversity. Religion, it was believed, should not sanction inequalities and people with strong religious commitments should not be disadvantaged in public and political life - they must be treated like all other groups in society and given an opportunity to mobilize and express themselves in the political domain. It was with this understanding that the constitution accommodated diversity and accorded special consideration to minority religious communities.

Recognition of religion and religious difference was extended in several different ways. At the most immediate level, religious symbols and markers of religious identity were accepted. The Sikhs, for instance, are permitted to carry a *Kirpan* (a small knife) and different communities can wear their specific headgear or other elements of their dress code in all public places – the workplace, civilian and military, private and public³. Religious practices were also permitted. These include the rendering of *Namaaz* or other kinds of collective prayers in public areas, street processions, and the use of public property and land for religious functions. Even more importantly, the state recognized the presence of plural and diverse personal laws, as well as the religious institutions involved in the enunciation and the interpretation of these codes.

This recognition was based on an understanding that religion is an important marker of personal identity and inevitably enters the public arena as people belonging to different communities bring this identity and the concerns of their specific communities with them into the public domain. Since individuals, including those engaged in public life, are unlikely to mute their religious identity, and should not be expected to do so, neutrality implied that all give equal respect and liberty to others i.e. to persons of a different religion. Nevertheless, it was recognized that individuals, despite being members of different religions, may have shared concerns and interests. The constitution therefore gave them liberty to organize themselves, campaign with existing political parties, or form their own political parties to pursue their demands and concerns. Religious political parties are permitted to co-exist with 'secular' parties that are not bound to the interests of any one religious community, and can

voice the demands of any religious community as long as they do not encourage inter-community hatred or refer to a candidate's religion in order to seek votes for themselves.

Perhaps the most significant aspect of religious liberty was that communities are permitted to set up their own educational institutions. Article 30⁴ gave all minorities, religious and linguistic, the right to “establish and administer educational institutions of their choice”. While state-run educational institutions were explicitly prohibited from imparting religious education, educational institutions established and managed by linguistic and religious minorities are permitted to impart religious education. They are also eligible to receive financial and other support from the state. The idea was that parents who wish to impart a particular religious education to their children can do so without being disadvantaged. Indeed, the state was expected “*not* to discriminate against them” on the grounds that they were under the management of a minority (Article 30 (2) emphasis added). The only provisos were that institutions receiving state funding have to leave a certain proportion of places open to children from other communities and any religious education can only be given on voluntary basis, with the consent of a child's parents. Article 30 was primarily intended as an assurance to minority communities that their identity and distinctiveness would be protected and that they would not be compelled to assimilate into the dominant culture. Even if the culture of the majority dominated state-run educational institutions, minorities have been able to impart their religious, linguistic and cultural legacy to their children in minority institutions, administered by specific communities.

Over a period of time, the scope of these provisions has been significantly increased, as the Supreme Court has maintained that such institutions do not need to be restricted to the study and teaching of religious texts or language training. Instead, they can impart education in different fields of knowledge, including professional and technical education. As a result, there is today a network of minority-run institutions throughout the country that provide education at various levels – from primary education to specialized programmes of study.

In addition, Article 26⁵ gave all religious communities the right to “establish and maintain institutions for religious and charitable purposes”. There are a range of such institutions, including trusts engaged in the maintenance of religious places of worship and the upkeep of related property, and others engaged in social and welfare activities. Several sects, such as Arya Samaj, the Rama Krishna Mission and the Society of Jesus, and trusts like the Shiromini Gurudwara Prabandhak Committee (SGPC) that are administered by recognized religious bodies, provide education, health care and other social facilities.

2.3 Understanding secularism in India

As noted above, secularism provides the larger structure within which issues of religion and religious communities have been framed. Although India has no official religion, the understanding of secularism that is embodied in the constitution does not represent the 'separation' of religion from the state. This has led several scholars to argue that the framework of secularism has been imposed upon the social fabric of society but that, because Indian society is deeply religious, it does not fit well (Smith, 1963; Sinha, 1968; Luthera, 1964). A few claim that the political structure of secularism is irrelevant and out of place in societies like India where religions are 'totalizing' in nature (Madan, 1987; Nandy, 1990; Shafee, 1998). In part, this view associates secularism with the doctrine of a 'rigid separation' between religion and politics. It is, therefore, not surprising that it considers secularism to be a 'gift of Christianity' – an idea that emerged during the Reformation in response to the problems of societies in which religion had a formal institutional structure. In countries like India, where religions are 'totalizing' in character, claiming all of a follower's life and not just some aspects of it, subordination of religion to politics or its relegation to the private sphere is considered to be inconceivable (Madan, 1987, p. 747-59).

This point of view, which gained considerable prominence in the late 1980s and 1990s, acknowledges that the Indian constitutional framework advocates neither complete separation of religion from politics nor the banishment of religion to the private sphere of life. In our view, its error lies in assuming that secularism entails complete separation - it overlooks the fact that many secular democracies in Europe, like England, Italy, Germany, Sweden, do not observe complete separation of religion from politics (Jacobsohn, 2003; Mahajan, 2002, 2003); some even have a state religion, while pursuing the ideal of religious non-discrimination in more complex ways. This is ignored by those who maintain that secularism is an alien concept that is out of place in India. It is in response to such critics that some scholars argue that India follows a policy of 'principled distance' (Bhargava, 1998)⁶.

The notion of principled distance is used to suggest that the Indian constitution separates state and religion but in certain circumstances, particularly when questions of justice and equality are involved, the state can intervene in religious matters. The state is, for instance, allowed to initiate social reform and to legislate to protect the interests and welfare of weaker sections of the population. It can also make laws to ensure that Hindu temples are open to all classes and sections of Hindus (Article 25

clause 2 b⁷). Interventions of this kind, as well as financial support to educational institutions run by religious groups, was, it is argued, permitted in the interest of ensuring equality and justice for different sections of the population. These were regarded as special circumstances that sanction deviation from the norm of separation.

Nevertheless, the primary attribute of secularism, that the state must have no religion of its own and must not support any one religion or religious community, remains and was adhered to. This is what makes the state neutral towards, or at least equidistant from, all communities and their conceptions of a good life. This, it is argued, is what makes the Indian state secular: it shares the liberal imagination, even though the ideals cherished by liberals are realized somewhat differently in the Indian context. The strength of such an analysis is that it appreciates the centrality of the concept of secularism to the Indian constitution, and recognizes that the distinctive form this concept takes does not undermine its secular content. However, in our view, the analysis is constrained by a conception of secularism that has come from America. Ignoring the many different paths that western liberal societies have taken to become secular, it is based on the American understanding that secularism involves the separation of religion from politics. The fact that England has a recognized official church, that individuals can contribute a 'religious tax' to their respective churches that is collected by the state in Germany, or that representatives of religious groups continued to be part of government commissions on social and family matters in Germany and other western democracies, are aspects that are ignored in this analysis.

Thus it is clear that secularism, or a commitment to non-discrimination on religious grounds, can be pursued in many different ways. Democracies have become secular not just by separating and disestablishing religion but by expanding the scope of individual liberty and removing the legal basis for religion-based discrimination. The particularity of the Indian conception of secularism can only be understood fully when we begin with this understanding of the historical evolution of the concept and practice of secularism.

The framers of the Indian constitution were, therefore, concerned that people of all religious communities must be treated equally; they must enjoy equal religious and other liberties. Minorities were to have safeguards to ensure that their distinct identities would be acknowledged and protected

and that they would not be compelled to assimilate within the perceived majority community. The twin concerns of equal liberty and diversity informed the constitutional provisions. The constitution specifically permitted interventions for the sake of pursuing equality for women and lower castes. But it also permitted state interventions in some aspects of religious activities, even when these do not impact on concerns about equality. For instance, while permitting religious groups and communities to establish their own educational institutions, charitable trusts and political groups, the state is permitted to regulate 'secular' aspects of religious institutions and places of worship, like management of property and donations (Article 25[2]). This thinking was based on a belief that the state must be even-handed in its dealings with different communities.

This was the distinctive framework governing the relationship between religion and politics in India. Hence, even though India proclaimed herself to be a secular polity, Indian secularism had a distinct flavour – one which cannot be captured by the concept of the separation of religion and the state.

3 Religion in the political domain

3.1 Identity politics and religious communities in post-independence India

In India, religion is not just an aspect of individual life; it has a pronounced presence in the social and political life of the polity. While there are a few political parties that claim to be the voice of a particular community, many more claim to represent the demands and interests of particular religious communities. While religion and the concerns of religious communities are common in political discourse, it would be erroneous to assume that all political parties are merely identity-based parties. For the first two decades after independence, the Congress party acted as an 'umbrella party', bringing under it people from different castes, religions and classes (Kothari, 1970). Gradually many of these groups established separate parties of their own, but today there are still parties at the regional and national levels that do not present themselves as representing a specific group of citizens. In fact, competitive politics has compelled all parties, even those strongly aligned with a religious community or certain caste conglomerates, to woo other groups and communities in order to get a simple majority in the legislative bodies. This was sharply visible in the last Uttar Pradesh Assembly Elections (2007) when the BSP (Bahujan Samaj Party), which emerged as a party of the Dalits (lower castes and previously excluded groups), wooed the Brahmins (the upper castes), the group that has historically been their oppressor. In the last general election the BJP (Bhartiya Janata Party), which has in the past attempted to forge a common Hindu religious identity and advocated that the cultural identity of the nation-state be rooted in the culture of the majority religious community (Hindutva), made an effort, though with little success, to win support from other religious communities (For detailed discussion on Hindutva, see Hansen, 1999; Jaffrelot, 1996; Kanungo, 2002; Ludden, 1996; Sarkar, 1999; Zavos, 2000).

The concerns of religious communities are thus taken up and articulated by both secular and identity-based political parties⁸. It would be a mistake to assume that religious political parties are the only authentic voice of a religious community or its sole representatives; or that only religious communities with separate political parties (Hindus and Sikhs) are represented in the political process. For example, in the case of Punjab, one of the states/regions chosen as a case study (see below), even though the Shiromani Akali Dal (which claims to represent the Sikh religious community) is closely associated with the Gurudwara Reform Movement and the Punjabi Suba (a homeland for Punjabis where the Sikhs would be a majority community), it is unable to secure the majority of Sikh votes. More examples of this kind can be identified.

There are, therefore, many channels through which the interests and demands of religious communities and their members have been represented in the political process and many parties have over the years supported the religious and cultural demands of specific communities. What distinguishes the so-called secular parties and the religious political parties is that the former consciously seek to forge a coalition of interests. They appeal to a wide social base that cuts across communities of caste, religion and language. Identity-based parties appeal to and privilege the concerns of the group they seek to represent. While democratic politics compels them to reach out to other communities, their core social base, which they try to nurture, is narrower. However, the presence of religious parties compels the 'secular' parties to take a position on religious issues. The result is that seemingly secular parties try to edge out a religious party by raising religious issues and at times supporting more extreme or radical religious agendas in the region concerned⁹. Moreover, on occasion they concentrate on divisions within a community, attempting to win the support of sections within it by taking up the concerns of more marginalized groups. Both of these processes are visible in Punjab and Maharashtra, as the studies reported below will reveal.

It might be pertinent here to remember that in India there are plural identities that crosscut, and at times reinforce, each other. While there are moments when religious identity gains centre-stage, other identities, particularly those of caste, language and region, constitute alternative axes of community formation. This means that religious communities are internally divided and attempts to construct a homogeneous identity are always challenged, at both the regional and national levels, by mobilizations along other identity lines. For instance, at the national level, in 1990 the V. P. Singh government announced its decision to reserve 27 per cent of seats in all central government services and public institutions for OBCs (Other Backward Classes)¹⁰. This immediately created new caste-based solidarities and polarizations. In a situation in which society seemed to be divided along caste lines and a new group alliance was emerging between communities designated as the OBCs, the BJP (Bhartiya Janata Party) used religion to foment a new kind of schism. In response, castes that were pitted against each other by the reservation proposals came together against a new enemy defined in religious terms. The presence of multiple identities, which can all be mobilized independently and which give rise to different solidarities in society, has created a complex situation. The space for identity politics is enormous and yet no one kind of identity politics can gain a hegemonic position. As a result, even though religion occupies a central place in individual and social life and there is space for religious parties, that space is by no means secure.

Moreover, not all recognized religious minorities in India have separate political parties that compete for power. While the Sikhs (a religious minority) and the Hindus (the supposed religious majority) have political parties that claim to represent their interests, other religious minorities, like the Christians, Muslims and Parsis, do not have separate political parties at the national level. This is not to say that these communities are voiceless, because they have formed other kinds of organization. The Muslims, for instance, have formed organizations like the Jamiat-Ulama-I-Hind and the Uttar Pradesh Falah-e-aam society. In Kerala, the Muslim League is an important player in the political process and has been a part of government on several occasions. Christians also have a political presence in specific regions, for example some states in the northeast. In addition to these organizations, there are political parties that project themselves as voicing and defending the interests of a particular religious community, which also sees them in that way. The Samajwadi Party in Uttar Pradesh occupies such a position and for some time even the RJD (Rashtriya Janata Dal or Nationalist People's Party) projected itself as an alliance of the Yadavs and Muslims.

Political parties that aim to represent a religious constituency try to construct a homogeneous community of support, most often by articulating shared religious and cultural concerns. While any attempt to homogenize the majority religious community brings with it the dangers of cultural and political majoritarianism, the homogenization and consolidation of a minority community does not pose the same threat, due to their size and location. Political parties that are linked to particular religious minorities do not have a pan-India presence; they are much more localized. While they create an environment in which religious issues and differences are sharply articulated and their presence prompts all other parties in the region concerned to pursue the same agendas, the democratic process has curtailed their assimilative and homogenizing tendencies.

India is a multi-religious and multi-cultural society. The Hindus constitute about 82 per cent of the total population, Muslims approximately 13 per cent and all other religions form a small fraction of the whole, with Sikhs constituting roughly 1.5 per cent. When the country gained independence and Pakistan was created, large scale migration of communities resulted in communal violence in which more than a million people lost their lives and many more were displaced. The framers of the Indian constitution seriously considered separate group-based representation in the Parliament, but this did not happen¹¹. Nor did the constitution prohibit the formation of religious political parties. Moreover, what is striking is that, although religion was not relegated to the private sphere, on the whole assertive and

distinct religious identities did not give rise to religion-based political parties and religious majoritarian ideologies have not been able to garner support from the majority of citizens. Even in regions like Punjab, which were acutely affected by the partition and post-partition riots, the religious parties of the Hindus and the Sikhs did not win the votes of the people in the region. While a few groups and parties emerged at the regional level, by and large the concerns of religious communities were represented through secular political channels. Congress's claim to represent the interests of all the religious communities might have been a legacy of the national movement for independence, but gradually it became the norm, and most parties, as noted earlier, have to appeal to a cross-section of the population in order to occupy political office. Furthermore, the presence of religion in the public arena has not, in most cases, translated into the pursuit of exclusionary religious agendas.

Nevertheless, the recognition of religious diversity, formation of religious political parties and presence of a range of other organizations has not been able to provide security to all communities and sections of the population. Independent India has been sporadically rocked by intense inter-community conflict. The most visible and virulent form of such conflict is communal violence, in which members of a religious community are systematically targeted and killed. Today, the intensity of such communal violence has increased, even as the number of violent episodes has significantly decreased (Wilkinson, 2005).

How then do we assess the presence of religion in politics, and in particular, the implications of the formation of religious political parties? Has their presence produced communal conflict? Have they addressed the development concerns of their communities? How have they dealt with the weaker sections within their communities? These questions will be analysed in greater detail in Section 4 through a study of Punjab and Maharashtra. At this point, it is sufficient to note that in India religious parties have raised development-related as well as purely religious and cultural concerns¹² and, as was noted earlier, secular parties have supplemented their development agendas with people's religious and cultural concerns. Thus all parties in practice have needed to make some concessions, symbolic and real, to groups in society other than the one they claim to represent.

3.2 Development and issues of governance

Has religion impeded or facilitated development and good governance? The dominant academic and political discourse has answered this question in the negative. Religion, they maintain, is, or at least has been, used as a divisive force in society. It is the means by which communities have been mobilized and engaged in fierce inter-community conflict, which has resulted in loss of life, property and the stable environment necessary for development. Religion has undoubtedly been used to create mistrust and schisms in society and superstition and dogma have been sanctioned in the name of religion. But this is only one aspect.

We have on the other side a different picture of religion: one in which religion is a source of personal identity and membership of a religious community is valued and desired. In everyday life, religious differences in society are manifest in many different ways: dress codes, food habits, religious festivals and different places of worship. There are also, in spite of the episodic communal violence, shared spaces and practices: the cultural practices of communities like the Meos and Mers cross religious boundaries, defying their classification as Muslims or Hindus (Mayaram, 1999); while members of different religious communities visit and pray at Sufi Dargahs (places of prayer), and at times participate in the same festivals and processions (Hasan and Roy, 2005). In other words, if inter-religious violence is one side of the coin, then syncretism and cross-cultural exchange is the other. Religion has thus yielded a mixed legacy: it has been used to generate inter-community hatred but in lived practices it has also been a source of inter-religious harmony and peaceful co-existence. This is the duality that is visible in India. There is another kind of duality and contradiction that must also be mentioned here. The constitution of India gave all individuals the right to profess and practice their religion. Protection granted to religious practices was a matter of deep concern, particularly for the women representatives in the Constituent Assembly. They feared that the protection granted for religious practices might be used to continue practices that discriminate against women. Although many representatives shared this concern, religious differences were protected and prevailing gender inequalities remain. Equal treatment for women was endorsed simply as a policy prescription that found a place in the chapter on Directive Principles of State Policy – a section that was not binding in a court of law.

Since structures of gender inequality were embedded in the personal law of different communities, throughout the 1960s and 1970s, the women's movement raised the issue of formulating a uniform civil code. In the late 1950s, the state legislated to change the Hindu Personal Law, and this improved the condition of women within that community. No change was made in the personal law of any other community. However, in the 1990s many women's groups and intellectuals reconsidered their demand for a uniform civil code, instead demanding gender-just community personal law. The shift occurred in a context in which the demand for a uniform civil code was taken over by the Hindu Right. Changes were in any case being debated within all the minority communities. Indeed, the Parsee and the Christian communities took the initiative to significantly alter their personal law to ensure a greater degree of gender equality. Similar changes have not however been made in Muslim personal law, although even in the face of this resistance, several women activists have argued that, in the context of religious majoritarian sentiment in society, it would be better to ensure gender justice through reforms within the Muslim community. In their view, state initiatives to formulate a *uniform* civil code should be avoided. What we have today, therefore, is a legal framework in which family matters continue to be governed by personal law specific to each religious community, but individuals have the option of marrying under the 'Special Marriage Act' which offers greater gender equality.

State initiative has thus provided options for its citizens, but community personal laws exist and they are not entirely gender just. Muslim personal laws have not been reformed and even those personal laws that have been changed need further reforms in the interests of gender justice. Can religious communities be relied upon to effect changes in their personal laws? Does the state have a role, or an obligation, to ensure that these community codes are changed? Should the existing framework of options be altered? Instead of giving individuals the option of marrying under the Special Marriage Act rather than their specific community personal law, should the state use the more equitable state-formulated code as the norm? Should religious personal laws apply only to individuals who choose to marry under those laws? These are issues that remain a matter of concern (for a detailed discussion, see Agnes, 1999; Chhachhi *et.al.*, 1998; Mahajan, 2005).

In a situation in which inter-community conflicts have been a central issue, it is not surprising that identity-related issues have been a primary concern of religious groups and political parties as they have wooed religious communities. Raising development concerns was seen as a way of moving

away from identity-based concerns and has been linked with more 'secular' campaigning. However, the question arises of whether religious communities have distinct development needs. Does the state need to address the concerns of distinct communities differently, through varied policies of recognition and redistribution? These are questions that have not surfaced prominently, either in academic writing or in the discourse of political parties. Some analysts maintain that the constitution gave centrality to the religious and cultural dimensions of religious communities, a view which is shared by community leaders, many of whom are male religious clerics. As a result, it is not surprising that the state has attended primarily to the identity concerns of these communities (Amir Ali, 2000). Nevertheless, the nationalist political leadership recognized that religious communities were not homogeneous and that the material and development needs of groups within them differed. Because of the class differences and internal patterns of stratification within communities, they believed that religious communities should not be considered as units of analysis for anything other than shared religious and cultural needs.

As a result, there are currently few community-specific policies: while a policy may impact on different communities differently, by and large states have not developed group-differentiated policies, except in the case of identified 'backward classes', Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes. How well has this policy of 'benign neglect' served the interests of different communities? Today, drawing upon the Report of the Sachar Commission, several scholars argue in favour of specific policies.¹³ They feel that the absence of community-specific policies has led to Muslims lagging behind on several indicators of development. Compared to other social and religious groups they are less educated and underrepresented in important government services.

The findings of the Sachar Committee have initiated a new debate. Even as its findings are being understood, debated and challenged, they have shown that a range of different factors, ranging from discrimination to past history and the choices made by individuals, can yield situations of inequality and disadvantage. These are questions that are currently being debated. Irrespective of the policies that may eventually be initiated in response, there is no doubt that religion is poised to enter the public domain and policy debates in a new way. Religious identities may become more than a mark of personal identity. They may become relevant in social policy. Will such forms of group differentiation divide society and allow inter-community conflict to simmer? Will they make India a community-based

society? Will space for individuals shrink even further? History alone will provide answers, but we can be sure that those answers will significantly shape the direction that humankind takes in this new millennium.

The present study does not dwell on either the issue of development differentials or gender equality. Instead it examines the relationships between religion, politics and governance by focusing on some marginalized groups, essentially caste-based groups, within particular religious communities. Although the dominant discourse on religion assumes the presence of discrete but fairly homogeneous communities, in India we find caste distinctions within each religious community. These distinctions are not always explicitly noted, however. In some cases, where the religious ideology is explicitly egalitarian in nature, decrying distinctions between human beings, the presence of caste distinctions within a community is challenged by the religious leadership. This is the case with Islam in India. Yet, when we look at the emerging demands for development-related goods, caste-based distinctions emerge and become points of congregation and collective action. Hence, when considering issues of development and governance, it is not enough to speak of discrete religious communities; it is also necessary to focus attention on the relatively marginalized groups present in all the communities. It is with this understanding that the present study analyses the marginalized groups in specific religious communities – Hindus, Muslims and Sikhs – in two regions of India, Punjab and Maharashtra.

Punjab and Maharashtra are among the more developed states of India, with strong identity-based political parties. Both States have populations from diverse religious backgrounds. They have witnessed not just religious mobilization but also inter-community conflict, although this conflict has taken different forms in each State (see Appendix 2). It is not surprising that two of the most prosperous states of India have strong regional parties, but what does demand explanation is the fact that these regional parties are identity-based parties and that religion has been an important source of mobilization and interest articulation. For this reason, Punjab and Maharashtra provide a good context for understanding both the nature of religious-political interaction in contemporary India, and how identity-based parties negotiate with the development concerns of their own and other communities in the region.

In Punjab, the Akali Dal (and its many factions) has been a powerful political party that has periodically won elections in the region. The party is closely associated with the Sikh community and over the last two decades it has also dominated that community's elected religious body, the Shiromani Gurudwara Prabandhak Committee (SGPC). Maharashtra has also witnessed strong identity-based mobilization. The Shiv Sena is today closely associated with the Hindu majority party (BJP) and the agenda of revitalizing Hindu cultural identity at regional and national levels. It is one of the main contenders for political power in the region, although its rhetoric is exclusionary and often anti-Muslim.

4 Regions and religions in Indian politics

4.1 Religion and politics in contemporary Punjab: an overview

Punjab has been one of the most prosperous states of independent India. The success of the Green Revolution during the 1960s and 1970s brought prosperity to the people of Punjab, but what is equally important is that it helped enormously in solving the problem of food scarcity in India. Although Punjab occupies merely 1.6 per cent of the total land area, it began to produce nearly a quarter of the total food grains in India and contributed approximately two-thirds of the entire central pool of food grains. In 1980-81, for example, the share of Punjab in the central pool of wheat was 73 per cent and in that of rice was 45 per cent.¹⁴ As an offshoot of its success in the agricultural sector, Punjab also emerged as one of the most thriving states of the country, with the highest per capita income. The State also had the distinction of having one of the lowest proportions of its population living below the poverty line.¹⁵ Punjab was indeed a success story, a model to be emulated by other states.

4.1.1 *Three moments of identity assertion*

Contrary to the expectations of the modernization theorists, economic wellbeing did not bring with it an eclipse of religious and cultural identities. On the contrary, identity-based mobilizations have grown and gained strong roots. These mobilizations existed even in pre-independence days and over the decades they have taken new forms. In the case of the Sikh community there have been three distinct moments of identity assertion in the region of Punjab: a) the emergence of autonomous Sikh political institutions, the SGPC and Akali Dal; b) the demand for a Punjabi Suba (literally a state of the Punjabi linguistic community, though it was simultaneously to be a state where the Sikhs would constitute a majority); and c) a militant movement for autonomy that eventually demanded secession.

Since the days of colonial rule, religion has been an important axis of politics in Punjab. The newly emergent middle classes of all three major religious communities – the Muslims, the Hindus and the Sikhs – actively mobilized and politicized religious sentiment during the colonial period. Living in an administrative structure that saw the populace in terms of their religious community identity, the middle classes expressed themselves in communitarian terms. Hence, even as they imbibed western influence, they turned to reform and redefinition of their community identity. The Arya Samaj spearheaded the Hindu religious revivalism and reformist movement in the region, and the Sikh reformers responded to this influence.

The Hindu reformers in Punjab had always insisted that Sikhism was not a separate religion and that the Sikhs were a part of Hindu society. The Sikh reformers reacted rather sharply to such claims. Perhaps the most important statement asserting the distinctiveness of their faith was the publication of the famous booklet *Hum Hindu Nahin Hain* (We Are Not Hindus) by Bhai Kahan Singh during the closing years of the nineteenth century. He argued in this booklet that Sikhism had always been a distinct faith. As the title suggests, the book addressed the Arya Samajis and other Hindu reformers, who had been claiming that Sikhism was a mere 'sect' of the Hindu religion. The booklet, in fact, was published first in the Hindi language and only later translated into Punjabi. The Sikh reformers under the leadership of the Singh Sabhas also initiated various other activities, including the setting up of educational institutions. As a historian of the region puts it:

The Singh reformers sought to redefine the Sikh faith and gave primacy to Singh or Khalsa identity. They advocated the adoption of Sikhs rites of passage, revived the doctrine of *Guru Panth*, took active interest in Sikh education, popularized their own understanding of Sikh religious literature, showed great concern for Punjabi in the Gurumukhi script, sought to underline the importance of the Sikh past, and evinced interest in numbers (Grewal, 1989, p. 197).

Harjot Oberoi, another historian, goes to the extent of saying that through these mobilizations, the new Sikh elite rewrote the social grammar of Sikhism. It was an epistemic shift – from an open and pluralistic Sanatana episteme to the homogenizing episteme of modern Sikhism. As he writes:

By founding a string of publishing houses, cultural bodies, schools, colleges, orphanages and clubs, the Tat Khalsa endeavoured to insert definition of religion and community into the day to day life of Sikhs. Through this process it became possible not only for a mass of people to experience themselves as Sikhs in the fashion desired by the Tat Khalsa, but also for non-Sikhs to visualize Sikhs as a distinct group (Oberoi, 1994, p. 416).

It is difficult to agree with Oberoi's thesis entirely, as he tends to give too much significance to a few individuals, who in his view could manipulate the mind of the community (Deol, 2000; Jodhka, 1997). However, this is not to undermine the fact that the late nineteenth century was indeed the beginning of a new trend in the life and self-identities of all the communities of the region.

By the second decade of the twentieth century, the Singh Sabha reformers had mobilized the Sikh community to such an extent that they could launch a popular movement for the liberation of gurudwaras from the *mahants*. The *mahants*, who had become professional managers of many of the

historic Sikh gurudwaras, had come to be seen by the Sikh masses as both corrupt and practitioners of Brahmanical Hinduism in the Sikh shrines. Unlike the Singh Sabhas, which represented the urban and elite Sikhs, the 1920s movement for the liberation of gurudwaras was a popular movement that invoked participation of the Sikh masses. It was during this movement that the SGPC and the Akali Dal, the two most important Sikh religio-political institutions, came into existence. It was also during this movement that the Sikhs turned against the colonial rulers.

Though the Akali Movement of the 1920s and the manner in which the colonial rulers dealt with it brought the Sikhs closer to the Indian nationalist movement, it also helped in further consolidating their identity. The movement eventually succeeded in achieving its objectives. After a long struggle, the colonial government conceded to the Sikh demand. Under the newly enacted Gurudwara Act of 1925, the SGPC was recognized as a representative body of the Sikhs and was given control over the major historic gurudwaras.

The SGPC was perhaps the first institution of its kind in the subcontinent, with a democratic structure of its own based on a universal adult franchise. All adult Sikhs were eligible to participate in its activity through a system of electing representatives. This movement gave the community two very important political institutions with both an enduring explicit political orientation and popular appeal. However, despite the growing self-awareness of Sikh identity, until 1930 there was hardly any talk about territorial autonomy for the Sikhs. It was only when partition of the subcontinent began to be talked about as a possibility that the Sikh leadership began to wonder about the fate of their community, which was spread all over the province without any specific area of concentration.

Though the Sikhs had always been small in numbers, they had never been a marginalized people nor did they see themselves as a minority community. Not only had they been the rulers in pre-colonial Punjab, the colonial government also gave Sikhs a special status by defining them as a martial community and recruiting them into the colonial army in large numbers. The Sikh aristocracy had also been duly accommodated in the new power structure (see Jodhka, 2006).

Partition and the institutionalization of modern nation states in the region, however, completely transformed the political geography of the subcontinent. Though the Sikhs were against partition, they could not have remained aloof from its consequences. Not only were they comparatively small in

number, the Sikhs were also dispersed over almost the whole of Punjab. Given that the partition was to be on a communal basis, a section of the Sikh political elite began to worry about the territorial rights of their community. However, they were not given any concrete choice in this regard, either by the British or by the new elite who were to acquire power from the colonial rulers. Their fate had virtually been tied with that of India. When the communal violence broke out, almost all of those living in western Punjab had to abandon their homes and move across to the Indian side of the partitioned Punjab. A large number of people were killed while crossing the border.

The politics of religious communities in Punjab also had far-reaching implications for the politics of the subcontinent. Only Bengal and Punjab were partitioned and it was in Punjab that much of the partition-related bloodshed and the mass movement of populations occurred (for literature on partition see Hasan, 1994; Mahajan, 1999; Nanda, 2003; Pandey, 2001; Prasad, 1999; Talbot, 2006).

The political geography of post-partition Indian Punjab is very different from that of colonial Punjab. Not only is it less than half the size, but the balance between the religious communities has also changed quite radically because of the mass migration that followed the partition. Muslims, who were the majority community in pre-colonial united Punjab, were reduced to a small minority of less than two per cent in Indian Punjab. Although numerically Hindus benefited the most, Sikhs also gained. The demographic advantage for the Sikhs was, in a way, more than that for the Hindus. For the first time in their history, they were in the majority in the districts of what was earlier known as central Punjab.

There are today three main communities in Punjab: the Sikhs (who constitute nearly 60 per cent of the total population), the Hindus (who constitute about 37 per cent of the population) and the Muslims. Although other communities are numerically quite large, contemporary politics in the region revolves almost entirely around the Sikhs. In fact the politics of the region is invariably seen as overlapping completely with the religious politics of the Sikhs. Although almost all the major national parties – Congress, Jan Sangh/BJP and the Communist Parties – are present in Punjab, the Siromani Akali Dal (SAD) has been an important political presence.¹⁶

The introduction of a democratic system of governance and adult franchise made demographic numbers more critical than before. While independent India was to be governed by secular principles and individuals were to be the bearers of rights, 'communities' of different kinds continued to be important agents in the new regime. Democratization of India required a certain degree of federalism

and regional autonomy. Linguistic reorganization of the provinces was to take care of some of the cultural differences and political aspirations of regional communities.

Thus, independence from colonial rule and introduction of a democratic system of governance offered a set of opportunities to India's cultural regions and communities. Linguistic reorganization was also seen as a way of accommodating the regional elite in the emerging power structure of the new nation-state. It is against this background that the Sikh leadership began to visualize the possibility of a province where they could feel a sense of autonomy.

The SAD spearheaded the movement for Punjabi Suba. In the initial period, under the leadership of Master Tara Singh, Punjabi Suba was conceptualized as a homeland for the Sikh community. The demand was presented by the SAD as the demand of a religious community. It is interesting to note that in this form, the demand did not find much support from the people of the State. It received even less consideration from the central government. However, it was soon transformed into a call for a separate State for the Punjabi-speaking community.

Other linguistic communities were also demanding separate states. Even so, the demand was not easily granted. It was only when Sant Fateh Singh went on an indefinite fast and the Sikh community mobilized around him that Punjab was created in 1966. The Sikh Akali leadership had recognized the possibilities offered by such reorganization. They knew that the creation of a Sikh-majority State would yield new sets of opportunities for the local elite. Punjabi Suba was conceived as a State for all Punjabi speaking persons, and this would ideally have included people of different religions. However, this demand created new divisions in society. These divisions had begun to surface earlier. Starting with the social reform movements during the late nineteenth century, differences between the three major communities of the region had already become quite sharp. The process of boundary construction required that communities represented themselves as being culturally distinct. Long before the independent Indian state accepted language as a legitimate source of cultural identity, the three communities of the region had already chosen to identify with three different languages: Urdu, Hindi and Punjabi. The Muslim elite chose to identify with Urdu and the upper caste Hindu elite of Punjab chose Hindi. These two languages were also to become the dominant languages of the two new nations, Pakistan and India. While they continued to use Punjabi in everyday life, the Muslim and Hindu

political elite did not present it as a source of their cultural identity and aspirations, perhaps as a way of showing their allegiance to the new nations over the region. Sikhs were the only community that claimed ownership of Punjabi as a source of their identity. Interestingly, a section of the Punjabi Hindu elite was willing to identify with Punjabi, but only if it was treated as a dialect of Hindi and written in the *devanagari* script. The Sikhs, on the other hand, insisted that Punjabi was a fully developed language and had its own script, *gurmukhi*.

The question of language and regional/religious identities was linked to the question of culture and power. When the newly independent nation recognized language as a legitimate marker of cultural difference, it became a source of political mobilization. In the case of Punjab, the Sikhs had already won the game. By deciding to mobilize their community against Punjabi and making claims that the 'national language' of Hindi was their mother tongue, the Punjabi Hindus had, perhaps quite unwittingly, conceded to the Sikhs' claim over the Punjab region (Jodhka, 2006). The movement launched by the Akalis during the 1960s for a Punjabi-speaking, Sikh-majority State, the Punjabi Suba, was perhaps only a culmination of the process that began in the late nineteenth century.

The creation of Punjabi Suba provided a firm base for the political career of Akali Dal. Although the party was born in the movement for freeing gurudwaras from the control of the *mahants* in pre-independent India, and since then had claimed to represent the interests and aspirations of the Sikhs, the re-organization of Punjab along linguistic lines gave it a strong political platform from which it could now compete against the Congress Party.

The third moment of strong identity-based mobilization came in the 1980s. In 1972, the Akali Dal lost the Assembly elections, during which its campaign revolved around the slogan of the 'Sikh Panth in danger'. Its attempt to mobilize the community along religious lines received little support, as the masses wanted the government to focus on development concerns such as industrialization and better irrigation facilities. In 1977, the Akali Dal placed the religious agenda in the background, and raised other economic and political concerns. It focused on greater autonomy for the region within the federal system of India and advocated changes in centre-State relations. The new agenda not only won the party popular support in the elections, it also received support from other non-Congress governments, like the DMK (Dravida Munnetra Kazhagam) and the Left Front, each of whom were seeking changes in the centre-state relationship.

What began with the Anandpur Sahib Resolution (1977) for greater regional autonomy within the federation eventually gave way to a sectarian movement, with some groups advocating secession. Leaving aside the politics of the 'secular' Congress Party, which was accused of supporting the more extremist elements within the religious community, it is sufficient to note here that the 1980s was a period of intense inter-community conflict, during which a militant Sikh religious and political leadership emerged. All through the 1950s and 1960s, Punjab had voted against such a politics of religious homogenization. What then changed in the 1980s?

The rise of a powerful secessionist movement in Punjab during the 1980s was unprecedented in post-independence India. Never before had the independent Indian state experienced such a serious crisis of political legitimacy as it encountered when dealing with the Sikh militants. Although a border State, Punjab had been a well-integrated part of the country. There had never been any doubts over the nationalist credentials of the Sikhs. Punjab had also done quite well economically during the post-independence period and the green revolution had brought greater material prosperity. Punjab was however rocked by a militant movement, sections of which did not hesitate to advocate a separate independent homeland for the Sikh community.¹⁷

At first, the emergence of an assertive and militant religious movement was viewed as a transitional phenomenon, something that was a consequence of elite manipulation, a typical feature of young democracies like India. Subsequently, however, it was related to the success of Punjab's development paradigm. While some scholars related militancy in Punjab to the breakdown of the traditional 'village community' (Shiva, 1991), the anxieties generated by the process of modernisation, a crisis of identity¹⁸ and a fear of assimilation (Narang, 1983; Singh and Nayar, 1984; Bombwall, 1985), others argued that the 1980s crisis was a consequence of the economic inequalities generated by the Green Revolution in the Punjab countryside.

According to Harjot Oberoi, the 'egalitarian' impulse in the Sikh religion did not fit well with the rising tide of inequalities in the Punjab countryside. Inequalities were growing elsewhere in the country but they did not yield similar results. In Punjab, the dominant ethos of Sikh religious tradition demanded a just, moral economy based on an equitable distribution of wealth and resources. It made "the voice of redistributive justice more compelling in Punjab" (Oberoi, 1994, p. 322). This thesis was in part

supported by subsequent empirical studies. In a well-documented study, Roger Jeffery pointed out that a large majority of Sikh militants were young and came from all the Sikh castes. Most had been to school, even if only for a few years. Jeffery explains that “Their families were often peasants who managed to live adequately but who were far from being ‘green revolution’ capitalist farmers... [and that] If they were from urban families, their fathers were likely to be in petty commerce or government service” (1994, p. 179). However, according to his analysis, “what all seemed to share... was a vision of Sikh history that fitted poorly with their own demoralised present” (ibid.).

This understanding of the Sikh militancy was not endorsed by all scholars. Some, following a Marxist perspective, argued that the class contradictions engendered by the Green Revolution were responsible for the crisis in Punjab (see Dang, 1988; Gill and Singhal, 1985; Purewal, 2000).¹⁹ A study carried out by Puri, Judge and Shekhon (1999) confirmed the view that the Sikh militants were neither the Kulak-farmers themselves, nor did they have the support or sympathies of the class of rich farmers. They were typically from families of marginalized Jat cultivators. More than 80 per cent of the terrorists that Puri, Judge and Shekhon identified in their study villages in the two border districts of Punjab came from Jat Sikh families. In terms of land ownership, only ten per cent of them came from families having ten or more acres of land. Only two per cent of them had graduation degrees. A large majority were either school dropouts or illiterate. More than half were either working on their family’s land or were ‘not doing anything’ specific – were unemployed.²⁰

Explanations of the Punjab crisis in the 1980s vary, but there is no disputing the fact that the movement used the metaphor of religion. Even if it was not inspired by the religious-cultural ethos of Sikhism, it appealed to that ethos to criticize existing political and social arrangements. Religion may have been used instrumentally, but it had an evocative appeal that could not be ignored. This became clearly evident when the central government launched ‘Operation Bluestar’ (1984) to flush out ‘terrorists’ who were said to be hiding in the holy precincts of the Harmandir Sahib (Golden Temple) in Amritsar. The march of the military columns into the temple and the exchange of fire that took place met with severe criticism from all sections of the Sikh community, even those who had previously opposed the militant movement for autonomy.

What is relevant for this study is the fact that in the 1980s religion surfaced as a central concern and set Punjab's political and cultural agenda. However, while some groups made a deliberate effort to construct a relatively homogeneous identity, other voices used the language of religion to preach Hindu-Sikh unity. Thus if religion was a source of inter-community division, it also had the potential to challenge such rivalries. Punjab, at this time, epitomized the duality of religion in modern societies. It is also necessary to recognize that even during the period of militancy, there were a range of other religious organizations that survived and flourished in Punjab. These included the Arya Samaj (a product of the social reform movement within Hinduism) and the Deras (representing different and sometimes even dissenting sects within the Sikh tradition).

By the mid-1990s the axis of Punjab politics began to move away from religion towards questions of development, regional autonomy and, in some cases, caste (see Jodhka, 2002, 2004). In the 1980s the Congress, a party which has also been an important player in Punjab's political life, attempted to counter the Akali Dal by playing the religious card. Now it was strengthening its base by advocating the interests of the weaker sections, the Dalits, in the region and in the Sikh community. Hence, even though militancy declined, religion did not entirely recede from politics. Religion remained the main language and basis for mobilization. As Singh (2006) notes, "From Dalits to institutionalized religious systems (e.g. SGPC), religious visions even today are the main idioms of mobilization among large sections of Punjabis". However, using a religious vision as a form of political appeal is different from the pursuit of a religious agenda.

4.1.2 *Emerging patterns and trends*

Religious mobilization and agendas have shaped the politics of Punjab in different ways over the past six decades, but what is significant is that:

- The preponderance of religion-based mobilization, as well as assertion of and contestation between religious identities, has not translated into fixed support for religious parties. Nor has it eclipsed the space for more 'secular' parties.
- The Akali Dal may have raised religious and cultural issues that were a shared concern of the Sikhs, but this does not mean that the entire community has stood behind the Akali Dal. Communities have not, and do not, vote merely as a collective body. Common religious concerns do not always determine competitive politics.
- The results for the Punjab Assembly Elections show that in almost all Congress has won a greater

share of the vote. Even during the period of militancy (the 1980s) the Congress managed to secure a sizeable chunk of the vote. The BJP consolidated its position in 1992, when it was emerging as a strong contender for political power all over the country. It is clear that the Akali Dal has not, at any time, secured the votes of the entire Sikh community (see Table 1).

- This conclusion is further reinforced when we look at the pattern of voting among communities.
- All parties, including religious parties, address development concerns in addition to cultural and religious issues. The election manifestoes of the major parties in the last Assembly Election raised fairly similar issues.
- The electoral success of a party depends upon its ability to win the support of different groups and communities. While every party may have a small committed base, which forms its core, that alone is never sufficient to gain power. Consequently parties have to take up issues and concerns that are shared by different communities - most often such concerns relate to issues of development. It is, therefore, not surprising that religion-based parties have to raise common development concerns and even give them centrality in their manifestoes.
- Community-specific disaggregated data is not available for all elections. However, instances where this information is available reaffirm the view that, even though the Akali Dal presents itself as the spokesperson of the Sikh community, it does not receive the entire community's support (see Tables 2 and 3).
- No community is internally homogeneous. All are internally differentiated along lines of class, caste and gender. This is also evident in the case of Punjab.
- While Akali Dal, and its use of the religious idiom, alludes to a shared religious identity, within the community and the society as a whole there are deep caste distinctions. The Constitution of India had identified the Scheduled Castes as a special category, because they had been the victims of past discrimination. Untouchability (the practice which was the source of segregation and exclusion of these communities) was part of the Hindu community alone and the Scheduled Castes included identified lower castes among the Hindus. However, the Sikh leadership accepted that similar discrimination existed within their religion. They asked the government of India to include identified sections of the Sikh community in the list of the Scheduled Castes, so that they could receive the benefits of reservations and other preferential policies. This demand was accepted and some Sikh communities were placed on the list in 1956.
- Caste distinctions, and the disadvantages flowing from them, had been recognized at the time of independence. However, they received scant attention in the official discourse of the Akali Dal. In fact, the leadership structure, the issues raised by the party and the policies that received priority when it formed the government related overwhelmingly to the concerns of the Jat Sikhs.

Table 1: Outcomes of the Punjab Assembly Elections 1951-2007

Year of election	Congress		SAD		BJP		CPM	
	No. of seats won	% of votes	No. of seats won	% of votes	No. of seats won	% of votes	No. of seats won	% of votes
1951	96	36.69	13	12.44	0	3.89	4	3.89
1957	120	47.51	5	5.40	9	8.61	CPI-6	13.56
1962	90	43.72	19	11.87	8	9.72	9	7.10
1967	48	37.45	24 ²¹	20.48	9*	9.84	3	3.26
1969	38	39.18	43	29.36	8*	9.01	2	3.07
1972	66	42.84	24	27.65	0*	4.97	1	3.26
1977	17	33.59	58	31.41	25#	14.99	8	3.50
1980	63	45.19	37	26.92	1	6.48	5	4.06
1985	32	37.86	73	38.01	6	4.99	0	1.92
1992	87	43.83	3	5.20	6	16.48	1	2.40
1997	14	26.59	75	37.64	18	8.33	1	1.79
2002	62	35.81	41	31.08 ²²	3	5.67	0	0.36
2007	44	40.90	48	37.09 ²³	19	8.28	0	0.28

Source: Statistical Reports on the Assembly elections, www.eci.gov.in

*Bharitya Jan Sangh. # Janata Party

SAD: Siromani Akali Dal

BJP: Bhartiya Janta Party

CPM: Communist Party of India (Marxist)

It is against this backdrop that the current study analyses the development concerns of the weaker sections within the community. It asks whether the presence of religious political parties (in this case, the Akali Dal) facilitates the empowerment of weaker sections. Does the party highlight the concerns of the Dalits? If it reflects the interests of the dominant castes, has this adversely affected the weaker sections? For example, have they become further marginalized?

Table 2: Punjab Assembly Election 2002: voting by religion

	INC-CPI	SAD-BJP	BSP	Others
Hindu	52%	20%	12%	13%
Muslim	40%	-	20%	40%
Sikh	30%	46%	1%	23%
Christian	62%	16%	16%	6%

Source: CSDS data unit, Punjab Election Study 2002, (all figures in percentages)

INC-CPI: Indian National Congress–Communist Party of India

SAD-BJP: Siromani Akali Dal-Bhartiya Janta Party

BSP: Bahujan Samajwadi Party

Table 3: Punjab Assembly Election 1997: votes for Akali (SAD(B)) and BJP by caste and religion

	SAD (B)	BJP
Sikh	38%	10%
Dalit Sikh	23%	45%
Hindu	27%	11%
Dalit Hindu	12%	34%

Source: Kumar, 1999, p. 294.

SAD (B): Siromani Akali Dal (Badal)

4.2 Religion and politics in Maharashtra: an overview

Maharashtra is the third largest State of India and is second only to Uttar Pradesh in terms of its total population. As per the **2001** census, Maharashtra had a population of 96.7 million. The presence of cities like Mumbai and Pune have made Maharashtra among the most urbanized regions of India. Against the national average of around 27 per cent, 42.4 per cent of its population lived in urban centres in 2001.²⁴ Its religious demography is somewhat different from Punjab and looks more like the national demography. Maharashtra has an overwhelming Hindu majority (80.2 per cent), with Muslims (10.6 per cent) and Buddhists (6 per cent) its prominent minority populations. Christians too have a presence in the State, being around 1 per cent of the total population. Though small in proportional terms, Maharashtra is also home to the largest number of Jains, **Zoroastrians** and Jews in India.

Notwithstanding the differences, the State of Maharashtra has some interesting similarities with Punjab. As the people of Indian Punjab proudly look back to the period of Maharaja Ranjit Singh's rule as the time of their regional consolidation, the people of Maharashtra look back to the establishment of the Maratha kingdom under Shivaji with great pride (Palshikar and Deshpande, 1999; Palshikar, 2004). The symbol of Shivaji has remained politically important. It has been used by different kinds of social movements and has been deployed in diverse ways in articulations of regional identity (Vartak, 1999). However, unlike Punjab, the regionalist consciousness in Maharashtra has not been articulated or seen by others as being against the Indian 'nation' (Deshpande, 2006). On the contrary, the regionalist movements in Maharashtra have invariably fed into pan-Indian right-wing Hindu nationalism. During the colonial period, Maharashtra emerged as an important centre of western educational and social reforms. Names of early reformers like G. K. Gokhale, M.G. Ranade and Jyoti Ba Phule are quite well known to students of Indian history. It was in Maharashtra that Bal Ganga Dhar Tilak successfully

transformed the Hindu religious festival of Ganesh Puja into a political event and a source of mobilization for the nationalist struggle against British colonial rule. Tilak also eulogised Shivaji as “the only hero to be found in Indian history” (Gupta, 1982, p. 42).

Interestingly, while nationalist leaders from the region saw themselves as fighting for the independence of India, they simultaneously nurtured a regionalist consciousness. They invariably talked about the creation of a separate State of Maharashtra. These appeals were made on grounds of culture, history, tradition and language. However, when the State Reorganization Commission submitted its report to the government of India in 1955, it proposed a State of Maharashtra that omitted Bombay (presently known as Mumbai), because Marathi speakers were not the overall majority in the city, even though their number exceeded any other language group. It also excluded some other Marathi-speaking areas. This recommendation was rejected by virtually all sections of Marathi political opinion. Under the leadership of Samayukta Maharashtra Samiti (SMS), they started a movement to demand a united Maharashtra that would include the city of Bombay and other Marathi-speaking areas. While SMS represented almost all political formations including the communists, the Congress Party held a conflicting position. The Bombay unit of the party opposed the demand that the city be included in the new State of Maharashtra, while the section of the Congress outside Bombay actively participated in the SMS movement (see Gupta, 1982; Palshikar, 1999). The SMS movement finally succeeded and the contemporary State of Maharashtra came into existence on the first of April 1960, with Bombay as its capital.²⁵

4.2.1 Caste and politics in contemporary Maharashtra

While the dominant idiom or axis of politics in Punjab in contemporary times has almost always been religious community and regionalism, mainstream politics in post-1960 Maharashtra has revolved overwhelmingly around caste. Religion entered into political and public life a little later. Although Maharashtra has had identity-based parties – Shiv Sena was formed in 1960s and the Jana Sangh/BJP has been active in the region since the colonial period – it was only in the 1990s that they were able to gain power. The Congress Party and its various factions ruled Maharashtra until 1995. Political scientists also point to the fact that the dominance of the Congress Party has meant the dominance of a particular caste cluster, the Maratha-Kunbis (Lele, 1990; Palshikar and Deshpande, 1999; Palshikar, 2004; Vora, 2003).

Broadly speaking, there are four different caste clusters in Maharashtra. The traditional upper castes, the Brahmins, constitute around three to four per cent of the total population. The middle level land-owning caste groups, the Maratha-Kunbis, comprise nearly 31 per cent. These two caste clusters dominated State politics through their influence in the local Congress Party and its factions. One study of electoral politics since the formation of Maharashtra in 1960 shows that the number of Legislative Assembly members from the Maratha-Kunbis caste cluster elected to the State Vidhan Sabha (Legislative Assembly) has been in the range of 125 to 140, with an average of 132, roughly 45 per cent of the total number of seats (288) (Vora, 2003, p. 3-4). Though the main reason for Maratha dominance in State politics has been their control over the Congress Party, they have been flexible enough to enter other political formations as well. They have been well represented in the BJP and Shiv Sena, albeit only when the Congress lost power to these parties in 1995 (ibid).

Where does their power come from? As is the case with other agrarian regions, the main source of their power is their control over land and consequently local level politics. According to a study of three districts of Maharashtra carried out in the late 1960s, the proportion of Marathas among the elite at the local level varied from 66 per cent to above 88 per cent (Sirsikar, 1970, p. 39). More recently, however, this dominance is increasingly threatened by the changing political economy, declining agriculture, rapid urbanization and growing assertiveness among other caste groups.

Representation of the 'Other Backward Classes' (OBCs) has been much lower in the State Assembly. Although they constitute nearly 27 per cent of the total population of Maharashtra, they have been able to elect only around 18 per cent of members of the Assembly. This is partly because of their marginal position in the local society and economy and partly because of the fragmented nature of this category of caste communities. The fourth caste cluster (Scheduled Castes, along with Scheduled Tribes) has a reserved quota of 40 seats in the State Legislative Assembly. More recently, some Dalits have also been able to get elected from non-reserved constituencies. Four such candidates were elected during the 1999 Assembly elections. They continue to be a marginalized category, but there has been a long history of mobilization and assertion among them, a point discussed in greater detail below. Perhaps the most marginalized groups in Maharashtra have been the minorities, particularly the Muslims. Their position has become even more vulnerable with the rise of Shiv Sena and right-wing Hindutva politics in the State.

4.2.2 *Shiv Sena and the rise of right-wing Hindutva politics*

As mentioned above, right-wing Hindu organizations like the RSS (Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh), Jana Sangh and the BJP were present in Maharashtra from the time of their inception. In fact the head office of the RSS is located in Nagpur, a town in Maharashtra. The assassin of Mahatma Gandhi in 1948 was a member of the RSS from Maharashtra. Gandhi's murder by an RSS man provoked a popular backlash and attacks on RSS offices in different parts of the State. Though outfits of the Sangh Parivar continued to be strong, the BJP failed to gain much ground in the State until the middle of 1990s. In fact, it was with the rise of Shiv Sena that right-wing Hindu politics took root in Maharashtra and changed the course of its politics. In 1980 the Hindu right-wing BJP won seats in the state assembly for the first time, gaining 14 out of the 287 seats. However, it was only in 1990 that their presence actually began to be felt, when the BJP and Shiv Sena together won 94 seats in the house (Viczianny, 2002, p. 43).

Shiv Sena was founded on 19 June 1966 in Bombay by Bal Thackeray, who has since been its patriarch. Bal Thackeray was a professional cartoonist in the English daily, the *Free Press Journal*, which he left in the late 1950s to start his own weekly magazine in Marathi, *Mamrik* (literally 'essence'). Through this magazine he tried to propagate his idea of nativism and Marathi interests. Maharashtra, he argued, despite becoming a separate State, was still dominated by outsiders. In his view, this was particularly so in the city of Bombay, where outsiders, particularly those from the south, took all the jobs, leaving the local Marathis unemployed.

Apart from raising the issue of local Marathis, the sons of the soil, versus outsiders, Bal Thackeray also attacked communists and Muslims. The communists, he argued, obstructed the development of industry by politicizing labour and thus hindered the growth of new jobs. They were, therefore, anti-national. He also attacked Muslims, arguing that only Hindus could be true nationalists in India. Muslims, he said, were loyal only to Pakistan. Shivaji, the main symbolic source for the Sena, is projected as someone who fought against Muslim rulers all his life (Gupta, 1982).

Bal Thackeray drew inspiration from the ideology of Maharashtrian nationalist leaders like Tilak and the later SMS movement to successfully consolidate a regionalist consciousness among the Marathi-speaking Hindu residents of Bombay (Gupta, 1982). Shiv Sena grew quite fast in its early years and

attracted young Marathis, often from relatively less privileged/OBC caste groups. Thackeray's rhetoric appealed particularly to the lower middle classes in Bombay, as they were worst affected by urban unemployment (Palshikar, 1999). During the initial years, its activities were confined to urban centres, particularly Bombay and its periphery. In 1967 Sena emerged as the largest group in the Thane municipal election and captured the seat of Mayor for the first time. However, with the rise of Indira Gandhi during the early 1970s, Sena lost much of its appeal among the urban poor and the lower middle classes (Lele, 1995, p. 1523).

Shiv Sena re-emerged on the Maharashtra political scene during the 1980s in a different avatar. It quietly buried its nativist identity and took the form of a Hindu communalist organization with a rabid anti-Muslim stance. Using a communal rhetoric, it again tried to appeal to the lower middle classes from an upper and middle caste Hindu background. Articulating a typically Shiv Sena rhetoric, one of its spokespersons said:

Being a Hindu is not a crime: being a savarna (upper caste Hindu) is not a sin, being a Dalit is not a merit. Muslims and Christians should not retain a sense of being separate as a minority (Palshikar, 1999, p. 11).

This new rhetoric helped the Sena to go beyond Bombay and the urban centres to the rural areas. It combined communal rhetoric with the issue of lack of development in the rural areas of Maharashtra and through this combination successfully exploited local contradictions to its advantage. It produced a new kind of "vernacularised Hindutva" (Hansen, 1996). It entered into an electoral alliance with the BJP in 1989 and eventually formed a government in alliance with the BJP in 1995. Apart from participating in electoral politics, Sena has been working as a kind of parallel state in the cities and some of its members work as local toughs, helping people to resolve disputes over property for a fee. Shiv Sena has also been responsible for several anti-Muslim riots in Bombay over the last 20 years. The rise of Shiv Sena has further marginalized Muslims in the State.

Identity politics has thus been an important component of Maharashtra political life. Although religious mobilization has been more evident in the last two decades, it has been present for a long time.

- The religious Shiv Sena party sharply polarizes society, particularly when it pursues and acts on behalf of the majority religious community. While consolidating the Hindu vote, it makes minorities more vulnerable. It is not therefore surprising that its Hindu majoritarian rhetoric eventually alienates Muslims.

As a minority they vote overwhelmingly against it, and in favour of the different factions of the Congress Party.

- The impact of majoritarian politics is that it brings the minorities together as they have a shared interest in defeating that agenda. The majority remains internally differentiated, however. The disaggregated data that is available, both for the regional Assembly elections and the central Parliament elections shows that different castes within the Hindu fold vote differently.
- The dominant Hindu castes shift their vote depending on their assessment of their interests. They were known to be with the Congress, but post-1990 have voted at times with the Shiv Sena-BJP (see Tables 4-9)
- The Shiv Sena-BJP combination is able to wean away the middle castes from the Congress to a much greater degree. While the upper caste vote fluctuates, a core of the middle castes remains with the Shiv Sena (see Tables 4-9).
- The support of the middle castes indicates that along with its Hindu majoritarian rhetoric, the Shiv Sena raises and supports issues at the local level that concern the 'Other Backward Classes'. As some Muslim groups are included in the OBC category, this in effect means that some of their concerns are also attended to by the Shiv Sena. This will become clearer in the following section, but needs to be noted here because the available data (including the tables) consider OBCs and Muslims as separate and discrete categories, which fosters a different impression.

Table 4: Maharashtra Assembly Election 1999: caste and community voting patterns

Party voted for during the 1999 Assembly election				
	INC	BJP	SHS	NCP
Upper caste	22	22	27	16
Maratha	25	7	19	32
Kunbi	20	25	20	10
OBC	27	17	19	18
SC	45	13	6	25
ST	25	5	13	27
Muslims	33	0	1	41

BJP: Bhartiya Janata Party
 SHS: Shiv Sena
 NCP: Nationalist Congress Party

Table 5: Maharashtra Assembly Election 2004: caste and community voting patterns

Party voted for during the 2004 Assembly election				
	INC	BJP	SHS	NCP
Upper caste	15	29	25	6
Maratha	11	9	28	27
Kunbi	8	29	19	13
OBC	16	27	23	14
SC	25	11	15	11
ST	29	4	14	28
Muslims	46	4	5	16

Source: CSDS (Centre for the Study of Developing Society) data unit, National Election Study 2004, (all figures in percentages).

INC: Indian National Congress

BJP: Bhartiya Janata Party

SHS: Shiv Sena

NCP: Nationalist Congress Party

Table 6: Maharashtra Lok Sabha Election 1996: caste and community voting patterns

Party voted for during the 1996 Parliamentary election				
	INC	BJP	SHS	RPI
Upper caste	35.5	25.3	24	0
OBC	31.8	27.4	64	2.5
SC	20.3	10.1	4	34.2
ST	34.8	32.6	1	0
Muslims	54.8	1.1	1.1	11.1

Source: CSDS (Centre for the Study of Developing Society) data unit, National Election Study 1996, (all figures in percentages)

INC: Indian National Congress

BJP: Bhartiya Janata Party

SHS: Shiv Sena

RPI: Republican Party of India

Table 7: Maharashtra Lok Sabha Election 1998: caste and community voting patterns

Party voted for during the 1998 Parliamentary election				
	INC	BJP	SHS	RPI
Upper caste	38.2	48.7	11.8	1.3
Maratha	59.9	18.4	17.1	0.7
OBC	29.0	29.0	19.6	7.6
SC	44.4	19.4	8.3	13.9
ST	48.6	24.3	0	0
Muslims	77.9	5.9	1.5	2.9

Source: CSDS (Center for the Study of Developing Society) data unit, National Election Study 1998, (all figures in percentages)

INC: Indian National Congress

BJP: Bhartiya Janata Party

SHS: Shiv Sena

RPI: Republican Party of India

Table 8: Maharashtra Lok Sabha Election 1999: caste and community voting patterns

Party voted for during the 1999 Parliamentary election				
	INC	BJP	SHS	RPI
Upper caste	30.3	38.5	13.8	0
Maratha	25.2	17.3	22.4	0
Kunbi	17.1	23.1	26.5	1.7
OBC	23.2	25.2	20.9	3.5
SC	60.0	5.7	7.1	2.9
ST	30.9	14.7	4.4	0
Muslims	57.6	0	1.5	0

Source: CSDS (Centre for the Study of Developing Society) data unit, National Election Study 1998, (all figures in percentages)

INC: Indian National Congress

BJP: Bhartiya Janata Party

SHS: Shiv Sena

RPI: Republican Party of India

As noted in the case of Punjab, parties based on religious identity do not always win the support of the entire community that they seek to represent. But unlike Punjab, identity-based parties like Shiv Sena in Maharashtra rely heavily on the rhetoric of exclusion. The Shiv Sena consolidated its support by targeting the South Indian Tamils working in Bombay, and constructing Marathi identity as 'sons of the

Table 9: Maharashtra Lok Sabha Election 2004: caste and community voting patterns

Party voted for during the 2004 Parliamentary election				
	INC	BJP	SHS	NCP
Upper caste	11	46	21	14
Maratha Kunbi	7	17	40	26
Middle caste	22	42	17	10
Peasant OBC	12	28	40	14
Other OBC	18	26	19	21
Mahar	36	2	7	19
Other Dalit	38	14	11	29
ST	38	23	9	23
Muslim	44	2	8	28

Source: CSDS (Centre for the Study of Developing Society) data unit, National Election Study 1998, (all figures in percentages)

INC: Indian National Congress

BJP: Bhartiya Janata Party

SHS: Shiv Sena

NCP: Nationalist Congress Party

soil'. Subsequently, it targeted Muslims and constructed a Hindu national identity by excluding the Muslim community or representing it negatively. In this process, the Shiv Sena began to view itself as the custodian of Hindu culture, often acting as a moral police force challenging actions that were not, in its view, part of Hindu culture. In this new Hindu rhetoric, Muslims became the enemy; they were designated outsiders or anti-national elements. This religious and cultural divide was part of the official discourse of the party, and it is this that made the entire Muslim religious community a disadvantaged victim.

Most studies of contemporary Maharashtra highlight this dimension of the religion-politics nexus. Even as they challenge the constructed homogeneity of Hindutva (Hindu cultural/religious identity), they treat the victims as a homogeneous group. This has been a limitation of most work on religion and politics. As in the case of Punjab, in our study of Maharashtra we self-consciously distance ourselves from such representations of religion. Once again, our point of departure is the recognition that religious communities are heterogeneous and that each community has within it distinctions based on caste, occupation and gender. Most often the development needs and concerns of these groups are different, and they are not always adequately addressed in the discourse of religion and religious parties.

5 Three case studies

The empirical studies undertaken within the framework discussed above begin with the understanding that members of religious communities have both religious and cultural needs, as well as other social and development needs. While the former may be important for personal identity, they do not encapsulate the totality of the self. The discourse of religion in identity terms is therefore inadequate; it does not help us to understand the actions of community members or changes that are occurring in the political arena. If India has survived as a secular democracy despite the overwhelming presence of religion in the political and public arena, it is because religious groups are not the homogeneous communities that they are made out to be - there are elite and marginalized groups in each community. Moreover, as long as the concerns of the marginalized are not articulated and attended to, issues of development and good governance remain.

5.1 Framing the issue

In India, as discussed above, caste is a major source of internal difference, and even though the caste system is gradually breaking down, occupational differences and past histories of caste remain a constraint. They can, in some cases, curtail mobility and access to opportunities. It is not surprising that caste, like religion, has been an axis around which political parties have mobilized support in different regions and in the nation as a whole, in particular, Dalits, who are identified in official state discourse as the Scheduled Castes, and the more recently constructed category of Other Backward Classes (OBCs), who have been the subject of political mobilization. Specific preferential treatment policies have been adopted in their favour. How did these affirmative action policies arise? Have religious parties and religious communities contributed to this process? How have different identity-based parties responded to these policies, which are expected to work for the betterment of marginalized sections of the community? These are some of the questions that the present study addresses. It does so by analysing three specific cases:

- a) a specific category of Dalits among the Hindus and Sikhs in Punjab;
- b) the emerging mobilizations of OBC Muslims in Maharashtra, with reference to their awareness of being part of a larger 'backward' population; and
- c) an 'ex-Hindu' community of Dalits who have converted to Buddhism – neo-Buddhists in Maharashtra.

The study thus focuses on marginalized groups within three communities – Sikhs, Muslims and Hindus, as well as the newly emergent religious community of the Neo-Buddhists. As noted above,

Hindus are the religious majority, while Sikhs and Muslims are minorities at the national level. The Sikhs however constitute the majority in the region of Punjab, while the Muslims are a minority in both Punjab and Maharashtra. The case of the Neo-Buddhists does not easily fit into the minority-majority framework. While many still see them as a caste community of the Hindus, the Neo-Buddhists see themselves as a distinct group. They view their conversion to Buddhism as part of their struggle against caste hierarchy and as a way of embarking on a life of equal dignity and respect necessary for the development and wellbeing of their community.

A comparative framework is used to see if being part of the dominant community makes a difference, for example by enhancing a group's capacity to access resources. It is also used to examine if marginalized groups within a minority community (particularly a community that is a minority in the nation and the region) are worse off than other marginalized groups in religious communities that enjoy majority status at some level. It assesses whether political parties have taken up the issues that concern these doubly marginalized groups. Since there is a party in Punjab that is closely associated with the Sikhs and one in Maharashtra that is linked with the Hindu religious identity, it also assesses whether marginalized groups from these communities are better represented than others.

5.2 Framework of enquiry

Fieldwork for the study was conducted over a period of seven months, between December 2006 and June 2007. During the first phase we visited the two States and interviewed some key informants using broad exploratory questions. These interviews helped us identify the relevant case studies. The objective of this exploratory exercise was to avoid re-visiting the 'big' and obvious questions that have been already researched and commented upon in the media. These issues can anyway be covered through a review of existing literature.

Having identified our focus, we studied the three cases using qualitative methods. We invariably began by interviewing some known contacts and seeking new contacts from them. This method worked very well. Where available, we also collected relevant data from officials and other sources. In Maharashtra the field interviews were mostly conducted in Pune and Mumbai, In Punjab we visited Chandigarh, Jalandhar, Ludhiana, and Patiala (see Appendix 4). Some interviews for the three case studies were also carried out in Delhi.

6 The Punjab story

Of all the Indian states, Punjab has the highest proportion of Scheduled Castes. The population of Scheduled Castes in Punjab has also been growing at a rate much higher than that of the rest of the population. In 1971 Scheduled Castes made up 24.7 per cent of the State population. This increased to 26.9 per cent in 1981 and to 28.3 per cent in 1991. However, in the following decade it grew at a slower rate, reaching 28.85 per cent in 2001. The Punjab State legislature also has a much larger proportion of seats reserved for the Scheduled Castes (25 per cent as against 15 per cent at the national level).

The Scheduled Castes are the most marginalized sections of society, yet, like most other caste clusters they too are internally differentiated. Within the category there are different communities with distinct social identities and experiences of economic development. The official list of Scheduled Castes in Punjab enumerates 37 different communities. Political sociologists have tended to group them into two or three broad clusters. The first cluster, comprising the Mazhbi Sikhs and the Balmikis/Bhangis, constitutes a total of 41.9 per cent (30.75 and 11.15 per cent respectively) of the total Scheduled Caste population. The second caste cluster is made up of the Ad Dharmis (15.74 per cent) and the Chamars/Ravidasis/Ramdasi Sikhs (25.85 per cent), who together constitute 41.59 per cent. The remaining 33 caste groups constitute only 16.51 per cent of the total Scheduled Caste population of Punjab²⁶.

For various historical reasons, those from the second cluster of Punjabi Scheduled Castes have been much more mobile and politically active than the rest (see Jodhka, 2002; Judge, 2004; Juergensmeyer, 1988; Puri, 2004; Ram, 2004). It was among the Chamars of the Doaba sub-region that the famous Ad Dharam movement appeared during the 1920s. Not only did the movement give visibility to the community, it also emphasized the need to educate children and encouraged entrepreneurship among its followers, who were almost entirely made up of the local Chamars (Juergensmeyer, 1988). The Ravidasis and Ramdasis, who are originally from the same community, have also done much better than the Balmikis and Mazhbi Sikhs in the field of education and have been more successful in securing quality jobs under the existing quotas of reserved posts for the Scheduled Castes. Notwithstanding the growing appeal of the term Dalit for self-description across caste communities and the continued use of the Scheduled Castes by state agencies and popular media, the internal differences among different communities continue to be as important as ever.

6.1 Quotas and the Valmiki-Mazhabi identity

The differences within the Scheduled Castes in Punjab can be better understood in relation to the history of active Dalit politics in Punjab. This dates back to the early years of the 20th century. It was in the 1920s that the Ad Dharam movement was initiated in Punjab by Mangoo Ram among the Chamars of the Doaba sub-region. The Ad Dharam movement of Punjab has been one of the most successful of the Dalit mobilizations in the entire subcontinent. Not only did it succeed in mobilizing a large number of local Dalits against the caste system and for a separate religious identity (see, for example, Juergensmeyer, 1988), it also succeeded in spreading the message of education among them. Today the Ad Dharmis are perhaps the most progressive community among the Scheduled Castes of Punjab. The other sections of Chamars have also been politically active. The well known Dalit leader Kanshi Ram, for example, came from a Sikh Ramdasi family of the Ropar district.

In contrast, the Chuhrah cluster of the Dalit castes (Balmikis and Mazhabi Sikhs) has been far less mobile. Members of this cluster are concentrated in the Malwa sub-region of Punjab, where the hold of the big landowners has remained strong and job opportunities outside agriculture are far fewer than in the more urbanized Doaba region, where a large majority of Dalits are Ad Dharmis or Chamars. Although in this rural setting, the Mazhabi Sikhs have been closely associated with agriculture, they rarely owned any agricultural land and only a few cultivated land as tenants. Most worked as wage labourers or tied servants of the big landlords. The official data shows that fewer than five per cent of all the Dalits are cultivators and an even smaller proportion of Mazhabi Sikhs are likely to be cultivators.

Though some of the mobile Mazhabi Sikhs have moved to urban centres, where they are employed in the public sector or have become a part of the urban working class, a large majority of urban Chuhras are known as Balmikis. In terms of occupation they are mostly involved in the traditional calling of their caste, scavenging. Chuhrah migration to urban areas was invariably a response to the growing demand for scavengers in municipal and middle class localities. While employment was easily available, urbanization did not necessarily bring social mobility, even for those who gained regular salaries and pensions. In fact, the proportion of Balmikis engaged in scavenging work increased after migration from the villages, where only a small proportion worked as scavengers and where their local identities were *kammi* or *sepi*, meaning regular farm workers, known for their secular occupation,

even though their status was invariably determined by their position in the caste hierarchy. Writing on the history of the community in the region, Prasad makes a similar point about the migration of Punjabi Chuhras to Delhi during the colonial period. He writes:

Tied to an occupation, the Chuhras found it hard to get jobs in other spheres of life, least of all things that paid more than the glorified skills of refuse removal. While the British hired certain oppressed castes into the railways and into the construction trade, the Chuhras and allied Dalits had to perform work in the municipality in refuse removal. ...Over time, the link between the caste and its occupation became far more pervasive than it ever was in the past (Prasad, 2000, p 45).

Given these historical limitations on the social mobility of urban Balmikis and Mazahbi Sikhs, the incentive to gain an education has also been limited. The assurance of employment as scavengers discouraged Balmiki families from educating their children. As a leader of the Balmiki community in Ludhiana told us in an interview:

Surprisingly those who get jobs in the government sector at a relatively senior level from our community invariably come from rural areas. Among the urban Balmikis there has traditionally been no aptitude for education²⁷.

This point was further corroborated by Ram Rattan Ravan, another important leader of the Balmiki community:

The Municipal Act has worked against our community. It blocked our development and kept us attached to the traditional occupation of scavenging. Our people started getting secure jobs without any education and therefore they did not feel the need of making any effort to get themselves or their children educated. In the city of Ludhiana where we have several colleges and a university and all possible facilities for education, only two students from the Balmiki community could qualify to be doctor in more than 30 years. This mentality of depending on the Municipality service was rampant in our community and therefore was the biggest challenge for us. Our struggle is not only against the other communities but also against our own traditions²⁸.

In contrast, the Chamars had an inherent advantage over the Chuhras because their involvement with leather work gave them a certain degree of autonomy. This fact is repeatedly emphasized by Balmikis. Mr. R. L. Sabberwal, a retired officer of the Punjab government and an ideologue of the Balmiki movement, told us in an interview that:

The Chamars have had an advantage over us. Their involvement with leather work and shoe-making naturally made them entrepreneurs and traders. They were quick to exploit the new opportunities that came with urbanization and reservations. We have had no such tradition. Our occupation kept us backward²⁹.

However, over the years things have begun to change for the Balmikis as well. Secure employment as scavengers in the urban areas is increasingly becoming a thing of past. The newly emerging scavenging contractors pay very low wages. With no education or specialized skills, Balmiki youth do not have many options. Even those who receive an education are invariably the first generation to be educated in their families. It is not easy for them to compete with the more mobile Chamars and Ad Dharmis for government jobs in the reserved quotas.

6.2 Political parties and marginalized communities: state-sponsored change

In post-independence India, as noted earlier, the Congress Party continued to command the allegiance of many Sikhs. Even after the Akali Dal entered into political contestation, Congress continued to receive the allegiance of the Sikh community, particularly from among the non-dominant caste groups, the urban traders and the 'backward' and 'Dalit' groups. It was to consolidate this vote bank within the Dalit communities that the State government of Punjab under the leadership of Chief Minister Giani Zail Singh, who himself came from a 'backward' caste group, decided in 1975 to introduce a sub-classification among the Scheduled Castes of Punjab for the Mazhabi Sikhs and Balmikis. This was to enable them to apply for jobs that were reserved for Scheduled Castes under the quota system. This sub-division within the category of the Scheduled Castes was introduced on the initiative of the Congress Party, even though there was no strong call for it on the ground. What seems to have happened is that the Congress felt it could challenge the politics of the Akali Dal, which spoke for the Sikh community, by wooing marginalized groups.

The Mazhabi Sikhs, with nearly 31 per cent of the Scheduled Caste population of Punjab, were the single largest group of Dalits in the State. Moreover, compared to the Dalit caste groups of the Chamar cluster, the Mazhabis were far more enthusiastic about the Sikh religion and Akali politics, giving the Akalis an advantage over the Congress Party. As a senior bureaucrat from the social welfare department of the Punjab government told us in a personal interview:

[N]early all the Chamars and Ad Dharmis voted for the Congress Party and similarly the Mazhabis voted for the Akalis. Mazhabi Sikhs are generally proud Sikhs, which made them a natural ally of the Akalis. Giani Zail Singh wanted to break this alliance and that was perhaps the political reason why the quota classification was introduced³⁰.

Similarly, the Balmikis, with a substantial presence in urban Punjab, could go along with the 'Hindu' politics of the Jan Sangh. It is in this context that the Congress Party introduced sub-quotas within the seats reserved for the Scheduled Castes by the Constitution of India. It is hardly surprising that even today the Balmikis and the Mazhabis look back at Giani Zail Singh as a messiah. One of Adi Dharam Samaj's recent leaflets applauds him as an exceptional human being:

As the Chief Minister of Punjab he tried to understand and feel the pains and aspirations of the Balmiki-Mazhabi Samaj from the depth of his heart. Unlike other political leaders he did not just deliver speeches and seek applause from the audience; he did something positive by allocating 50 per cent of the SC quota for us in 1975 (from a leaflet of Adi Dharam Samaj, 2006).

As a political strategy, the classification of these communities as a means of entitling them to the quota would have been unpopular with the other major clusters of Dalits in Punjab. However, the proportion of Sikhs among the latter was relatively small and so the danger of them allying with the communitarian politics of Akalis was limited. Hence, the policy of sub-quotas appeared to be a viable strategy for the Congress.

Thus it was to garner support in electoral politics and to win sections of the marginalized Sikhs away from the Akali Dal that the Congress government, on May the fifth 1975, sent a letter to the offices of its departments directing them to offer "50 per cent of all the vacancies of the quota reserved for Scheduled Castes [i.e. 25 per cent of jobs]... to Balmikis and Mazhibi Sikhs, if available, as a first preference from amongst the Scheduled Caste candidates".³¹ In a subsequent official directive, it was further clarified that the proposed classification of quotas applied "in direct recruitments only and not in promotion cases".³²

Learning from the Punjab experience, the State government of Haryana also decided in 1995 to divide its Scheduled Caste population into two blocks, A and B, limiting the Chamars to 50 per cent of the seats (block B) and offering 50 per cent to non-Chamars (block A) on a preferential basis.

This arrangement worked well until 2005 when the Punjab and Haryana High Court, responding to a writ petition by a Chamar called Gaje Singh, decreed that the action of the two State governments was illegal and in violation of the provisions of the Constitution. The petitioner cited the Supreme Court judgment disallowing the sub-classification of Scheduled Castes in the case of Andhra Pradesh; the High Court took note of this decision and terminated the sub-classification within the reserved quota of seats.

When the termination of the classification of quotas was ordered on July 25th by the Punjab and Haryana High Court there was anger and agitation among the Balmikis and Mazhabis of Punjab. They quickly formed a group called the 'Balmiki and Mazbhi Sikh Reservation Bachao Morcha' and organized a meeting on July 30th 2006 in Jalandhar. The Morcha gave a call of Punjab bandh for the 4th of August 2006 against the ruling of the High Court and demanded restoration of the sub-quota of 12.5 per cent for the Balmiki and Mazbhi Sikhs in government jobs, in accordance with the 1975 notification. They also emphasized the need for extending these quotas to provide a similar share of admissions to educational institutions. In fact, they insisted that as access to higher education was difficult for their children, without a separate quota in educational institutions job reservations made no sense. According to the English daily of the region, *The Tribune*, the bandh was quite successful and life in the major cities of Punjab was completely paralysed for the day. On August 5 2006 the newspaper reported that:

Members of the Valmiki community, led by their leaders, held demonstrations in different localities in protest against the decision of the Punjab and Haryana High Court to cancel 12.5 per cent reservations for Valmikis and Mazhbi Sikhs in government jobs. They blamed the government for not adroitly presenting the case due to which the reservations were cancelled. They demanded the restoration of 12.5 per cent reservations not only in government jobs for them but also in educational institutions.

The bandh was followed by a gherao of the Members of the Legislative Assembly on the 18th of August. In order to consolidate and mobilize the 'community' the Morcha also started a march from the town of Sangrur on the tenth of September 2006 which was to reach Amritsar in nine days after covering much of Punjab.

As elections to the State Assembly were imminent, the Balmiki-Mazhabi movement clearly obviously made the Congress government nervous. They quickly framed legislation to convert the '1975 directive' into an 'Act' and presented it in the State Assembly on the last day of its session on the 17th of September 2006. The bill was unanimously passed and became an Act on the fifth of October 2006, after being approved by the Governor.

Though this Act could for the time being circumvent the High Court judgment on the quota classification, it failed to satisfy the Balmiki and Mazhabi Sikhs because it did not extend the quota to admissions to educational institutions. Leaders of the Morcha attributed this to the continued domination of Chamars in Congress politics and the State bureaucracy. Mr Ravan pointed out that, "Of the 105 or so IAS (Indian Administrative Service) officers from the Scheduled Caste category in the State of Punjab, only three belong to the Balmiki-Mazhabi community". He also mentioned that, at the time of the framing of the Act, even the Social Welfare Minister was from the Chamar/Ravidasi community, and complained that, "Though the then Chief Minister Amrinder Singh promised on 10th October in Patiala that he will soon issue an ordinance and extend the quotas to seats in educational institutions, he did not do anything".

Meanwhile, on October 10, 2006, the legal validity of the 2006 Act was itself challenged in the Punjab and Haryana High Court by Hardip Singh. Even though the Court did not give a 'stay order' on the Act, it accepted the appeal for a hearing and also issued notices to various departments of the Punjab government about the disputed status of all the new appointments made under the Act, leaving the Balmiki-Mazhabi struggle for a quota in educational institutions in limbo. The struggle for special 'quotas within quotas' continues, and it remains to be seen whether a separate sub-quota in educational institutions and public jobs will become policy.

6.3 Dilemmas of group-differentiated policies

Punjab has had the distinction of having the largest proportion of Scheduled Castes (SCs) in its population (nearly 29 per cent in 2001). The SCs of Punjab have also been quite mobile. The Ad Dharam movement initiated by Mangoo Ram during the 1920s acquired a religious flavour and has had a lasting influence on the Chamars of Doaba region (Juergensmeyer, 1988). Elsewhere also, Dalits have broken away from traditional ties of jajmani relations and the associated dependency.

According to Jodhka (2002), the Dalits of Punjab have been trying to move forward using strategies of dissociation, distancing and autonomy, although these have led to cases of intense conflict (Jodhka and Louis, 2003). Nevertheless, a large proportion of Dalits in the State continue to live in conditions of deprivation. For various historical reasons, the Dalits of Punjab are landless, mostly working as day labourers in agriculture or in the informal economy of towns in Punjab. As noted above, only a very small number of them (less than five per cent) are directly involved with the cultivation of land as farmers or have substantial incomes.

There is thus no doubt that the Dalits within the Sikh community are relatively marginalized. Although they have been beneficiaries of the affirmative action programmes mandated by the Constitution, it is primarily the socially mobilized groups that have received the benefits. Their position has improved, but there are other groups within the marginalized sections of the Dalit community that are much more disadvantaged. When development is used as the criterion to examine the capacity of a group of people to access available resources, group cohesiveness breaks down. While in religious terms the Sikhs are a minority, within that community there is a specific section that is more disadvantaged than others with respect to all the development indicators. Within this marginalized section there are also significant internal disparities, which can offer alternate axes of mobilization and policy formulation.

Few Indian political parties focus exclusively on the plight of the marginalized, but even so, competitive electoral politics has created a peculiar situation whereby the interests of these marginalized groups become important political concerns that parties take up. The story of Punjab shows that consolidation on religious grounds has been challenged by initiating policies that benefit some marginalized sections within that religious community: since the Akali Dal was dominated by the Jat Sikhs, the Congress initiated policies to benefit the many marginalized Mazbhi Sikhs.

What is equally interesting is that in Punjab these policies have been initiated from the top, by the political party in power, in the hope of consolidating its vote before an election. Although groups subsequently mobilized in favour of the policies, particularly when they were withdrawn by the Court, in the initial stages these benefits were introduced despite the absence of significant mobilization on the ground among the marginalized sections of the Scheduled Castes. The contest for votes prompted the Congress to initiate policies that are not envisaged in the Constitution and that are specific to this

region. It is, therefore, not surprising that when other states began to initiate similar measures by offering sub-quotas, the matter has been taken up to the Supreme Court and the validity of the policies challenged. This is the peculiar paradox of what have come to be called 'populist' measures in Indian democracy.

7 Minority religious communities: Muslims in Maharashtra

Muslims are the largest religious minority in the State of Maharashtra, constituting more than 10 per cent of its total population. In the city of Mumbai (previously Bombay) their presence is even larger (17 per cent). However, politically they have been quite peripheral and their marginalization seems to have grown over the years. As is the case with most religious communities in India, the Muslims of Maharashtra are internally heterogeneous and differentiated. The older communities like the Bohras, Khojas and Memons have been wealthy traders who have extensive family networks within and outside the country. Some Muslims also migrated to cities like Mumbai and Pune from the north of India. However, a large proportion is local Marathi-speaking groups, mostly from relatively poor backgrounds and traditional occupations, who identify with the local 'backward' caste communities. In other words, the Muslims of Maharashtra can be divided into two categories, the *ajlafs* (upper castes, *khas*) and the *ashrafs* (lower/'backward' castes).

Although communal riots affect all Muslims negatively, their impact is certainly felt differently across the two categories. The poor, living in urban slums, are always more vulnerable. Notwithstanding these differences, however, communal riots and violence strengthens traditional communitarian politics and identities among the minority groups.³³ Since the early 1990s, the 'backward' Muslims of Maharashtra and elsewhere have used different strategies to deal with their growing marginalization. In an interesting study of Bombay city, Hansen found two different modes of Muslim response to their marginalization:

One was a largely conservative quest for internal purification and unity of the Muslim community and return to the basics of the Koran and a withdrawal from political, legal and economic dependence on the larger society. The other was a more pragmatic strategy of 'plebeian assertion' that evolved from the entrepreneurial spirit and milieus of small industry and informal businesses (Hansen, 2000, p. 261).

Both these trends are present among the Muslims of Bombay city. However, the second trend is new. The *ajlaf* Muslims have moved away from the traditional Muslim organizations and no longer identify with communitarian formations, which are controlled by the conservative Mullahs. Furthermore, they no longer send their children to Urdu medium schools. Instead they prefer English medium private schools. They have realized that they are socially and educationally backward in the larger framework of development. As one of his respondents told Hansen:

We have to look at ourselves, see who we really are. We are no longer rajas or big people, we are as poor as the backwards [i.e. lower-caste Hindus], and even worse (Hansen, 2000, p. 268).

This realization and shift have given rise to a new set of mobilizations. One of the most important, which is the subject of this case study, is the movement that seeks recognition, along with the Hindu Other Backward Classes, for disadvantaged Muslim groups as 'OBCs'. This emphasis arises from the particular characteristics of Indian government attempts to address inequality and disadvantage. Recognition of certain Muslim groups as OBCs would entitle them to apply for reserved quotas in jobs and higher education, and to receive other such benefits from the state.

7.1 Development concerns among Muslims: The OBC movement in Maharashtra

The OBC Muslim movement emerged shortly after the submission of the Mandal Commission Report in 1980. This report marked a turning point, because it did not link religion with social and economic backwardness. The Constitution had specified reservations for the Scheduled Castes, those that constituted the lower sections of the Hindu religious community. Weaker sections of the Muslims or Christians were not included in the list of Scheduled Castes. The Mandal Commission however erased the religion bar. As noted above, the Scheduled Castes were communities that had suffered from the practice of untouchability. However as this had only been a practice of the Hindu community and had no sanction in other religions, only sections of the Hindu community were eligible for SC designation. Thus when the Mandal Commission took up the task of identifying socially and economically 'backward' communities, it did not consider religion to be a critical variable. In its report, the Commission included groups from different religious communities, including Muslims, as part of the Other Backward Classes.

This was something new and took much of the community by surprise. As Mohd. Iqbal Ansari, President of the new All India Muslim OBC Organization explained:

After the Mandal Commission report was submitted and it created so much of fury, we were forced to think about it. There we came to know that the report had actually observed religion as no bar for the OBC status. And then we started to work to create awareness about this privilege among our community....

We were very clear from day one that we will create awareness in the public on this issue. Our view was that a religious leader or community organization has never staged any *dharna* or demonstration on issues of economic and social development of the Muslim community. They have never taken up the issue of education/jobs/loans/roads/electricity etc. What they have touched upon are always emotional issues of religion, such as, Muslim personal law, triple Talaq, Babri Masjid, etc. Therefore in all our meetings we used to say that if you have to think of your development, you have to come out of the old ways of thinking. We openly raised such issues. Religious organizations had no answer to this question as they are not even aware of the OBC system or even the EBC (economic backward class) status. We used to go and find out just who were the people that needed our support in getting education and jobs. Once we were successful in building a few such examples, people and even the *maulvis* and *ulemas* could not resist coming to us for help³⁴.

7.2 Organizational networks, agendas and challenges

The Mandal framework sparked a new kind of mobilization within the Muslim community. Academic scholarship had for some time spoken of stratification within the community and the presence of caste within it. This dimension became the main focus of attention. In the words of Hasan Kamal (a well known non-OBC leader of the OBC Muslims), this distinction existed earlier but had been accentuated by the policies of the British in India:

Independence came with partition and the Muslims who migrated to the newly created nation were from the upper and middle strata of society. Those left were the marginalized and the disadvantaged. The few left from the *khas* completely detached themselves from the masses. This also deprived Muslims of leadership and thus the socio-economic condition of the Muslims never improved much in free India³⁵.

A similar sentiment was expressed by Asghar Ali Engineer. He explained that in India economic development was a result of:

[c]ommerce on the one hand and industry on the other. Both are monopolized by certain upper castes among Hindus. Among Muslims there are only three communities – Khojas, Bohras and Memons, all from Gujarat – that are engaged in trade and business. While some have gone to industry, they are mostly mercantile. There is one community in Delhi of Punjabi Muslims called Karkhandars. Other Muslims, who constitute the overwhelming proportion of the community, are nowhere since pre-independence days. They are all resource-less and inexperienced, most of them are artisans. So, we do not see any major economic development among Muslims in India. These four communities are very few in number. About eighty five per cent of the community is either OBC or Dalits. There is no question of their taking to trade or industry³⁶.

Other individuals stated that the religious ideology of Islam may not recognize inequalities of caste, but there is a difference between belief and lived practice. The visible differences may be a peculiarity of Indian Islam, but they are there. In part the internal differentiation goes back to the gap that emerged between the 'immigrants', the so-called *ashrafs* or *khas*, and the native converts, the *ajlafs*, *atlafs* or *aams*. This gap was also visible in their lifestyles. While the former were an elite associated with the aristocracy, landownership and leadership, the *aams* were the landless masses, followers, and therefore could not claim any similarity with the *ashrafs*. These respondents argued that in India there are no fewer than 170 Muslim groups outside the elite circle and barely four groups within it (syed, sheikh, mughal and pathan) – a ratio of about 85:15.

Within the Muslim community in Maharashtra, small groups began to emerge that initially expressed the interests and concerns of a few individuals but later spoke for a larger shared interest.

One such group, which emerged in 1983, was the Ansari Welfare Society. Its founder and first President, Mohd. Parvez Iqbal, is still actively involved with the OBC Muslim movement and is known to everyone in his locality as the RTI man.³⁷ His organization has been renamed the Muslim OBC Council and since 2005 he has been the Vice President of the AIMOBC Organization.³⁸

Over the years the Ansari Welfare Society and now the Muslim OBC Council have organized *jalsas* (political assemblies). These aim to enhance awareness in the community about the need to obtain caste certificates, and the advantages that might accrue to them as OBCs. *Jalsas* of this kind have been organized in Mumbai, Poona, Bhiwandi, Malegaon and several other places. In Mumbai the group usually met at the Gareeb Nawaz Madarsa, located in the central part of the city. In this Parvez Iqbal was helped by his friend, Fateh Mohd. Ansari,³⁹ but later the Society arranged a small working team of seven to eleven people. They distributed pamphlets and visited several villages surrounding Mumbai⁴⁰.

Small organizations of this kind grew over time. In 1984, Shabbir Ahmed Ansari from Jalna established the Maharashtra Muslim OBC Organization and held a massive rally on February 5, 1984. As a result of these mobilizations, Parvez Iqbal reported, in 1986 the right to issue caste certificates in Mumbai was transferred from the Metropolitan Magistrate to the Collector or the Tehsildar. This was a small but significant gain, the benefits of which could be achieved only if people were persuaded to apply for caste certification. Once again the task was to raise awareness in the Muslim community.

Consequently, Shabbir Ahmed Ansari, along with Hasan Kamal, focused on mobilizing the Muslim castes and sub-castes. This was by no means an easy task. According to Hasan Kamal:

When we started visiting different places in Maharashtra, we found that Muslims too were divided along professional lines and like Hindus their caste was identified along their working pattern, e.g. Malis in Hindus were Baghbaan in Muslims, Dhuniyas were Naddafs, Badhais were Nazzafs etc. So when the Mandal Commission's report was accepted we thought that if Muslims too were included in its fold, it could be part of the solution to the problems that large sections of the community face⁴¹.

The OBC Muslim movement received fresh impetus with the formation of Akhil Bhartiya Muslim Marathi Sahitya Parishad in 1989. Vilas Sonaware (one of the most important leaders in the movement) told us in an interview that:

Language provided the initial impetus to this movement. In 1989 the Akhil Bhartiya Muslim Marathi Sahitya Parishad was formed and in the same year a conference was organized in Solhapur. Not less than 100 writers and poets attended the occasion. At the national level during that period two things were happening simultaneously: one, Gangajal Rath Yatra (kamandal), and the other, the Mandal Commission. I was the vice-president of OBC Sangathan (Hindu) and therefore, as a counter to the cultural politics of the right wing, we were planning to include the Muslim brethren in the Mandal fold. So the Muslim Marathi Sahitya Parishad was the only way. The most important task was to identify and create awareness among them for the certification of OBCs and to persuade them to join the bigger [OBC] movement⁴².

Shortly afterwards, in 1990, the V. P. Singh government announced its decision to implement the recommendations of the Mandal Commission, giving reservations to the OBCs. Those identified as Muslim OBCs were now eligible to receive the benefits of affirmative action policies, including reservations. This gave the OBC campaign among Muslims a significant boost.

However, in 1992-1993, Mumbai was rocked first by inter-community riots and then by bomb blasts. This was a setback, as little could be done in the atmosphere of hatred and betrayal. Nevertheless, efforts continued to raise awareness about the marginalization of Muslims.

On May 1, 1994, Shabbir Ahmad Ansari, Vilas Sonwane, Hasan Kamal, Faqrudin Bennur and many others launched the All India Muslim OBC Organization in Jalna. Shabbir Ahmad became its President and all the members of the Akhil Bhartiya Muslim Marathi Sahitya Parishad became members of the new organization. Hasan Kamal and Vilas Sonaware explained that:

The prime task before us was to create caste awareness and identify the various castes among Muslims. And for that we started visiting places all over the State and organizing small and big meetings. But this attempt was vehemently opposed by the established political and religious leadership all over Maharashtra. Criticism started pouring in from outside too. We were looked upon as conspirators against Islam⁴³.

Almost all of the leaders of the movement we met reiterated this experience. Mohd. Iqbal Ansari said:

We were vehemently opposed by the religious leaders. The Ulemas spoke and wrote against this move in all possible ways. Some wrote against it in various religious journals, while some went even to the extent of issuing fatwa against people working for the OBC issue. Our first target was therefore to convince the Ulemas. For example, a religious journal *Al-Bala*, which is published by Maulana Mukhtar Ali Nazvi, a very powerful leader of the Ahl-e-hadees sect, 90 per cent of whose members are weavers (a community in the OBC category), wrote against us. In a very professional way we tried to clear all his suspicions with the help of the same means. We wrote a letter to him in which we said that this arrangement of 'OBC' is not based on caste but occupation. And because occupation in India is misunderstood as caste, we are using the language of caste certificate. We also tried to make him understand that this was a way to break the occupation barrier that has kept the son of a *hajam* (barber) always a *hajam*, the son of a *mali* (gardener) always a *mali*. After a long and healthy debate Maulana Nazvi was convinced and so were his followers⁴⁴.

Different leaders used different strategies to overcome the opposition that came from within the community. Hasan Kamal explained that:

The strongest objections were raised by the Imams and Maulanas. Therefore we started visiting the Mosques in the villages and tried to convince them. Initially they did not listen to us but we tried our best to satisfy them in all their queries, both rationally and religiously. Later, when we told them that most of the Imams themselves are OBCs and therefore they too will benefit from this attempt, they had no reason to oppose this move. As a result today there are more than 250 mosques all over Maharashtra (20 in Mumbai alone) where every Friday in the sermon, after offering prayers, the Imams suggest to the community members to apply for their OBC certificate and get the benefits for the education and employment of their children⁴⁵.

Mohd. Iqbal Ansari said:

The other means that we used in those days were using public figures for our purpose. Veteran actor Dileep Kumar (an OBC) and later Kadar Khan (a non-OBC) and poet and lyricist Hasan Kamal (a non-OBC) became our voice.

But we knew that our argument would not sustain itself just on words without any substantial outcome. Therefore we started gathering data on the educational status of the Muslim community in the State. In 1994 we did an internal survey of the medical students all over Maharashtra. At that time there were a total of 5000 seats. We found that there were only 16 Muslim students and out of that only two to three had come in through reservation. The rest of them had gone through free competition and did not even know about the system of OBC reservation⁴⁶.

These efforts were carried forward when Shabbir Ahmad Ansari and Vilas Sonawane organized a conference in Jalna. This was not a great success, but a month later a second conference was held in Usmanabaad. In October 1994, a third conference was organized in Solhapur, which was attended by large numbers of Muslims - the leaders and members estimated numbers of around 10,000. At this large gathering, attention was once again focused on making people aware of their OBC status, and on asking them to get it certified. With this success, the leaders' resolve to go into the interior of the State to mobilize people through their occupations and professions, identify the OBCs, organize them and train them to apply for caste certificates, was intensified. Thousands of pamphlets and posters were distributed to make OBC Muslims aware of the benefits that they could receive from the government after getting their caste status certified. As Shabbir Ahmad Ansari told us:

Soon in 1996, the first national convention of the All India Muslim OBC Organization (AIMOBCO) was held in New Delhi. It started carrying out surveys and organizing the different occupational categories. Some of the categories were already organized while others were given assistance in this regard⁴⁷.

The All India Muslim OBC Organization (AIMOBCO) had now identified 118 categories, of which 54 are nomadic tribes, four are Dalits, one is tribal and the remainder are from OBCs. These developments were opposed or neglected for a long time by both the mainstream media and the media associated with Muslim organizations. For instance, *Shodhan* (a Marathi weekly journal of the Jamat-e-Islami) was initially opposed to the move. Because the new organization needed friends among the media, this made its task difficult. However, gradually, they received the support of the Editor of *Shodhan*, Syed Iftikar Ahmad⁴⁸, the Editor of the *Hindustan Daily* (Urdu), Sarfaraz Arzoo⁴⁹ and many others. This was a big achievement for the movement and played a critical role in spreading their message all over Maharashtra. The conferences and meetings of the AIMOBCO received coverage, and even more importantly, media support became a valuable weapon in exposing those officers whose attitude towards members of the Muslim community seeking OBC certificates was non-cooperative.

The work of the AIMOBCO was supplemented by the conferences organized by the Akhil Bhartiya Muslim Marathi Sahitya Parishad. To date, seven major conferences have been held in Solhapur, Nagpur, Ratnagiri, Pune, Mumbai, Nasik and Kolhapur. The organization also arranged several rallies in different parts of Maharashtra and sent delegations to meet relevant State government ministers. Support was received from the veteran film actor, Dilip Kumar, who became an important face of the movement. As a result of all these efforts the Maharashtra Government, under the Chief Ministership of Sharad Pawar, passed a Government Resolution (GR) on December 7 1994 that included 36 Muslim communities (out of 118 identified by the AIMOBCO) in the Mandal fold.

This was the second great success, but the task ahead was more challenging. The movement had won recognition from the government but they now faced a reluctant bureaucracy, the people who were supposed to issue OBC certificates. In the course of this study, Sarfaraz Arzoo (Editor of the Urdu *Hindustan Daily*) stated:

When the backward class, who had so far been ignored, realized that they too could be a part of the development cycle, they jumped into it. But when this rush of backward students started using its benefits, the established hierarchy of the bureaucracy started creating obstacles in the way of issuing caste certificates. Caste certificate was the ticket to prosperity. Therefore, they stopped helping at that stage and started eliminating at the bottom level itself. This is now the biggest problem that the OBC movement in Mumbai faces⁵⁰.

Explaining the difficulties and delays in the process of certification, Hasan Kamal said:

The problem with the Muslims is that they never mention their caste in any document at any point of time. Due to lack of any documentation and freedom of mobility they also change their surname from one to another. This has created a big problem for claiming their caste certificates. Therefore, we again met the concerned Ministry and shared some of these problems. As a result, the Maharashtra government in October 1995 passed another GR, which made the process of certification simpler. Now if a Muslim wishes to claim the benefits of being an OBC, s/he needs only the approval of the Sarpanch or the approval of the local school⁵¹.

Interestingly, this simplification of the process of caste certification was implemented by a Shiv Sena-BJP coalition government. Although the Shiv Sena-BJP coalition was known for 'muslim bashing' while in government, this procedural change gave great relief to the Muslim community and facilitated access to opportunities for the OBC Muslims. As Mohd. Iqbal Ansari told us:

When in 1995, we sat on a hunger strike in front of the office of the collector at Kolhapur, the CM [Chief Minister] of that time, Manohar Joshi, ordered a circular that “if a Muslim OBC is not able to produce his/her caste in the school certificate, then the tehsildar will make a home inquiry and provide him/her so”. The ministers took a personal interest in issuing certificates. Altogether eleven GRs were issued in the Shiv Sena regime, and it made the work very easy.⁵²

With the passage of time, members of the Muslim community have become more and more aware of the benefits arising from claiming OBC status and today many more are applying for the necessary caste certificates, facilitated by the movement, which has set up a committee in every district, advising individuals to first get their caste certified by the community itself. Today, different occupational groups eligible for OBC status within the Muslim community are organizing themselves and helping members to get the necessary caste certificates. In support of this effort, some of the better-off communities have published the names of the persons of their *biradari* (community). We saw, for instance, a directory prepared by the Tamboli community of Solhapur, listing all their members who are eligible to receive the certificates.

Maharashtra is not the only State to witness the OBC Muslim movement. It has gained momentum in Bihar, Uttar Pradesh, Gujarat, Madhya Pradesh, Andhra Pradesh, Karnataka, and Tamil Nadu. But unlike many other states, this movement has grown and has had a measure of success in Maharashtra.⁵³ As many of our respondents told us, this is partly because successive governments in Maharashtra have accommodated their demands. Some went so far as to say that the governments have never reacted adversely to their demands. Governments have, from time to time, adjusted and altered the rules by passing new GRs or modifying existing ones. We were told that 39 GRs had been passed with regard to OBC and Dalit Muslim issues.⁵⁴

7.2.1 From movement to politics

In this section, the links between the OBC Muslim organizations and between them and political organizations will be explored further. The willingness of all the State governments, whether controlled by the Congress or its factions or the Shiv-Sena, to respond positively to the demands of the OBC Muslims appeared puzzling at first, because identity-based parties, like the Shiv Sena and BJP, engage in anti-Muslim rhetoric. In spite of this, they have been supportive of the demands of the OBC Muslims. Indeed, as noted above, they played a critical role in simplifying the procedures involved in

getting caste certification. At one level, this reinforces our earlier observation that in electoral battles all the parties need to woo members of different communities and even religious parties need to address the development concerns of different communities. As also discussed above, different identities cut across each other. No religious tradition is homogeneous: caste distinctions exist with each and political parties, both religious and secular, use a range of strategies to win over different sections. If some, at particular moments, mobilize on religious grounds, others appeal to caste to win over a part of the targeted community.

There are, as noted earlier, a range of OBC organizations operating in Maharashtra. It is difficult to ascertain whether they are coordinating their activities at present. As is often seen in the course of movements, there are fissures and friction between elites. In 1999, at the time of the elections, the president of the AIMOBCO, Shabbir Ahmad Ansari, entered into an alliance with the Congress Party. This led to a split in the organization, with a new organization by the same name, the All India Muslim OBC Organization, being formed, with Iqbal Ansari as its President.⁵⁵ Both organizations appeared before the Sachar Committee and presented their views. The new organization is continuing with the old tasks, except that it has not been able to make inroads all over Maharashtra. Unhappy with this situation, many members left and set up a further organization, the All India Muslim All Backward Class Organisation (AIMABCO), under the leadership of Hasan Kamal. In the year prior to the study, this organization had arranged around twenty meetings. In addition to helping individuals to get caste certificates, it is also working with the Balkrishna Renke Commission, which has been appointed by the UPA⁵⁶ government to identify Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes.

Thus although mobilization of Muslims on the issue of OBC status has gained momentum, the movement is factionalized. Furthermore, while the movement may have arisen from the initiative of individuals, over time political parties have become directly or indirectly involved. On the one hand, leaders of the movement have entered into partnership with specific political parties. For example, in 1999 Shabbir Ahmed Ansari negotiated for five seats with the Indian National Congress (INC), and eventually won two seats. On the other hand, leaders of political parties have formed their own organizations for OBC Muslims. In Mumbai, the All India Mansoori Naddaf Pinjara Federation was headed by Ali Azizi,⁵⁷ an active member of the Congress Party. Ali Azizi was at one time the Secretary of the Minority wing of the AICC (All India Congress Committee) and since September 2005, he has

held the post of Director of the Bank of Maharashtra. In 2000 the organization came to be known as the All India Muslim OBC Federation. It has been working actively at the national level and has conducted nearly 400 meetings all over India. At present, using his links with the Reserve Bank of India (RBI), Ali Azizi is trying to make people aware of the facilities that the Bank provides for the weaker sections of the community.⁵⁸ He provided us with a copy of the recommendations made by RBI, which he has distributed in the community and also to local banks.

It is apparent that organizations with political backing are able to extend their work widely and reach out to many more people than those without. For example, of all the organizations located in Mumbai during the course of this study, only the All India Muslim OBC Federation had an office. All the others were operating from the homes of the leaders, had their centre outside Mumbai, or had no firm arrangement - they would assemble at an appropriate location when necessary.

7.2.2 Constructing difference in pursuit of development

Political support may bring with it the advantage of better infrastructure and perhaps greater financial resources for an organization's work, but being part of the larger political structure, such organizations tend to have a different approach to the OBC question. While most of the other groups and leaders interviewed disconnected the OBC issue from religion, the All India Muslim OBC Federation (or at least its leader) took a completely different position. For Ali Azizi, use of religious identity was another way of gaining benefits for the Muslim community. In contrast, leaders like Hasan Kamal were categorical in saying that the benefits given to OBC Muslims were a way of helping the needy. Sarfaraz Arzoo, the editor of the *Hindustan Daily*, told us that:

We are the supporters of reservation for everybody who is needy. So if one feels that the whole community deserves it, I don't have any problem. Our motive is not to classify Muslims into OBCs and non-OBCs⁵⁹.

The important point here is that the movement of OBC Muslims has grown through its association with the Hindu OBC movement. This link was forged by deliberately challenging those who posited the shared interest of a religious community. Thus, even as this partnership pursued the shared interests of certain castes and occupational groups, it tried to counter attempts by others to create religious division. For example, Vilas Sonwane of the Hindu OBC Sangathan said:

In 1997 the Shiv Sena-BJP government passed a Gowansh Hatya Virodhi Vidheyak (bill against cow slaughter). All other parties had opposed that bill but only on religious grounds. We researched it and found a way to oppose it on economic grounds. We found that the bill was primarily affecting many non-Muslim communities. Only one Muslim community (Khatik) was part of this circle for butchering the animals. Therefore, we arranged a demonstration of Muslims and non-Muslim together in nearly 200 districts all over Maharashtra and the intention of the policy (of creating communal tension) was defeated⁶⁰.

Just as the Hindu OBC Sangathan was consciously fighting against the politics of communalism, Muslim leaders also felt that it was more pragmatic to fight on the issue of caste. After all, the Constitution did not support religion-based reservations and the Supreme Court had turned down all such laws in other states. Under the circumstances, instead of creating further tensions and mistrust between communities, they too focused on the issue of shared occupations and the status of members of OBCs, whether Hindu or Muslim. Reflecting on likely future developments, Sarfaraz Arzoo commented:

As far as my vague ideas are concerned, I don't see reservation on the basis of religion taking shape. Every single effort that has been undertaken by governments of Andhra Pradesh and Madhya Pradesh has been challenged in the Court, and the Court has always taken an anti-Muslim stand. But, what has been already accepted by the Constitutional Bench of the Supreme Court and referred to by the Supreme Court in so many other cases are the principles on which the Mandal recommendations stand today; so there is no point in keeping oneself aloof from its benefits⁶¹.

7.3 Identity and development interconnections

There are marginalized groups in almost all the religious communities in India, including the minority communities. Within the majority community, the Hindus, caste-based distinctions are present and readily acknowledged. The framers of the Constitution had taken note of this and on the basis of caste, identified marginalized groups within the community who had been the victims of exclusion and segregation. For Muslims and even Christians, whose theology embodies notions of equality, it is far more difficult to recognize the existence of internal stratification. While sociologists have argued that castes, or at least caste-like structures, are present in all the Indian religious communities, marginalized groups do not wish to challenge the basic framework of their religious communities. Thus OBC Muslims have emphasized occupational groupings as the basis for distinguishing between

the needs of different groups within their community, trying to win support for their cause without challenging the egalitarian basis of their theology.

Recognition of internal stratification and concern for betterment has given the Muslim OBCs reason to move away from religious identity politics. Whether the OBC movements constitute another kind of identity politics is a moot point, but what is relevant here is that the emergence of an assertive OBC movement among Muslims has not erased their religious identity and affiliation. Religious identity remains and, as noted above, gains centre-stage during periods of communal violence.

Mobilizations around development and politics, however, yield a mixed legacy. We often think of civil and political society as discrete: civil society and citizen groups are distinct from political parties, which have the ambition of occupying seats of power and political office. However, in contemporary India, where the political system has been overwhelmed by issues of corruption and criminalization, civil society and non-governmental organizations are perceived as the mainstay of democratic life. In practice, the spheres of politics and civil society do not inhabit different zones. Successful movements produce leaders who are pursued by political parties, while political parties reset and redefine movements' agendas, sometimes strengthening the movements and at other times fragmenting and weakening them.

Organizations campaigning for OBC Muslim issues have concentrated on the reservations agenda. While there are a range of issues that confront the Muslim community in Maharashtra, such as communal violence and gender inequality, members and leaders did not readily express their views on these subjects. Mohd Iqbal Ansari told us that:

Muslims are a conservative society; therefore to bring out Muslim girls for education and jobs was very difficult. But we worked to create this awareness since the very beginning. Dr. Haseen Mahisare was appointed as the first ladies wing President of the movement. Another important leader is Ms. Naseem Mahat. In every meeting we used to convince the crowd about the benefits of educating the girl child. But the importance of our statements was realized only after we could create some successful cases. A girl from Guhaghar district became the first Muslim women Tehsildar by availing the OBC reservation. Similarly a girl from Poona qualified for two officer posts at a time. These became examples for us and then we were easily able to convince the crowd. For those who had still problems we requested them that if they don't like they should not send their daughters/sisters for jobs but education for everybody is must. As a result, today in a

small town like Poona we have thousands of Muslim girls working in BPOs in night shifts. Another important achievement for the movement has been in the area of educating women for being independent. We promoted the *bachat ghar* (savings house) concept for the household and working women both⁶².

The concern for the development of the members of the community has thus yielded some spin-offs, even for the women in the community, but there are relatively few instances where the movement has intervened on issues of gender equality. Perhaps the fear of internal fragmentation compels them to focus on building Hindu-Muslim solidarity on the OBC issue, and ensuring that OBC Muslims can access the policies that are intended to benefit them.

This is in contrast to many other Muslim organizations. We met, for instance, with representatives of the WISDOM Foundation (World Institute of Islamic Studies for Dialogue, Organization of Mediation and Gender Justice), WRAG (Women Research and Action Group), the MIF (Muslim Intellectual Forum) and Hokooke-Niswan. Although each has particular concerns, their activities are not confined to these, but also address issues of communal harmony. The Director of the WISDOM Foundation, Dr Jeenat Shaukat Ali, who is also head of the Department of Islamic Studies of Saint Xavier's College, organized an essay competition in which clerics from prominent mosques were asked to write on "Peace, Tolerance and Harmonious Co-existence in Islam". She commented:

The main idea behind this was to clear misconceptions about the religion. The myth that Islam is synonymous with violence has to be cleared. Over 100 Imams from prominent cities came and addressed the occasion. In future I am also planning to organize a game where religious gurus of all religions will play on one platform, wearing the same dress and mixed in one group⁶³.

So while the Muslim community as a whole faces many problems and disadvantages, not all of these concerns are addressed by a single body and many are tackled by organizations that are not part of the OBC movement and that cannot be adequately presented as religious in nature, even though they have emerged within a religious community.

8 A marginalized ‘Ex-Hindu’ community: Neo-Buddhists in Maharashtra

In Maharashtra there have been, on the one hand, movements within religious communities that have invoked caste identities and differences within the community rather than the idea of a shared religious identity, and on the other hand, sections of the Dalit community adopting a new religion and identifying themselves as Neo-Buddhists. Even though the Neo-Buddhist movement arose as a revolt of the most oppressed and humiliated groups within the Hindu community, it has donned a religious mantle to form a new community. While this new community continues to fight against exploitation and caste oppression in society, its newly adopted religious identity has taken on a meaning of its own. This became starkly apparent when we met and learnt about the different groups among the Neo-Buddhists and the work in which they were engaged.

8.1 Dalits in Maharashtra

The State of Maharashtra occupies a special place in contemporary discourse on Dalit politics in India. Maharashtra has “the longest continuous history of mobilizations and organization, and the capacity to inspire ideological offshoots in other regions” (Gokhale, 1990, p. 214-5). B.R. Ambedkar, the most important figure in contemporary Dalit identity, was born in the State. Long before it acquired currency elsewhere, the word Dalit had become a popular mode of self-description among the Scheduled Castes of Maharashtra.

However, interestingly, compared to some other states, the proportion of Scheduled Castes in Maharashtra is rather small. They make up only around 11 per cent of the total population, while in Punjab they constitute nearly 29 per cent of the State population. The Dalit population of Maharashtra is divided into three broad categories, Mahars, Matangs and Charmakars. Of the three communities, Mahars have been the most mobile. They were the first Dalits to take advantage of modern education and to enter secular occupations. Led by Ambedkar, they entered electoral politics and established their own party, the Republican Party of India (RPI). They have also moved out of their traditional caste identity and embraced Buddhism.

Nevertheless, even though the Mahars are the largest segment within the Scheduled Caste population of the State (around 35 per cent), they have rarely been able to win seats on their own. The other Dalit communities of Maharashtra have not been as mobile as the Mahars and their representation in electoral process has been even more limited. Even in reserved constituencies, the Congress Party

wins more seats than the RPI. Furthermore, the number of seats reserved for Scheduled Castes in the State is small, being reduced from 33 in 1962 to a mere 15 in 1967 (Vora, 2003). It is currently 18 (out of 288), which is much less than the proportion of their population in the State. Thus, even though the ideological presence of Dalits in Maharashtra politics and the public domain is noticeable, their position continues to be quite marginal in State politics and social life. Evidence of their peripheral status is the frequency with which caste atrocities are reported.

8.2 The Neo-Buddhist movement

The Neo-Buddhist movement has its origin in Maharashtra. It is a movement for the emancipation of the exploited Scheduled Castes from the oppressive dominant Hindu caste structure. Although there are special social and legal measures in the Constitution for the promotion of these communities, parts of the Dalit community feel that rejection of the caste order, and with it the religion which sanctions this system, is essential in the pursuit of their struggle for equality. This perspective is not new. It dates back to Dr Ambedkar's decision to reject Hinduism and convert to Buddhism. The movement gained momentum during the 1960s under the leadership of Baba Saheb Gayakwad, has established strong roots among the Mahar community in Maharashtra and continues to grow today.⁶⁴ Being a Buddhist not only helps Dalits in their socio-cultural life, it also generates a new identity. Each individual with this new identity feels confident and strong enough to fight against the exploitative and oppressive nature of the Brahminical social order.

The Neo-Buddhist movement is in many ways unique, but it is also a good illustration of a contemporary Indian phenomenon – the use of religion by the marginalized in the pursuit of equality. In Punjab too, religious idiom is used by the leadership to mobilize community members. In this process, religion is redefined and reconstructed. Not only are parallel places of Hindu worship emerging, with Dalit priests, but also new religious icons and symbols are being constructed. This is also evident in Maharashtra where the Mahars are converting to Buddhism, but a new order that has many distinct features when compared with other dominant sects within Buddhism.

The Neo-Buddhists have created a whole new set of institutional structures, which have well-defined religious, social, academic and political roles. Some organizations are devoted almost entirely to one task, such as a religious or political goal. Geographically, the institutions are not clustered in particular

areas: in Mumbai, for example, we found that they are scattered in different parts of the city. While each is working towards the emancipation of the Dalits, the means of pursuing this agenda are not always the same.

In Mumbai we visited four types of Neo-Buddhist organizations – religious, welfare-focused, academic and political. Groups that are primarily religious in nature include the TBMSG (Trailokya Bauddha Mahasangha Sahayak Gana), Sanghmitra Bauddha Vihar, the Buddhist Society of India and Bhikhu Sangh's United Buddhists Mission. Groups engaged in social work were the Bauddhjan Panchayat Samiti, *Mahanayak* (News Daily), Prabudha Rashtriya Sangh, Bahujan Vidyarthi Parishad and Sanchi Mahila Sangathan. Academic groups included the BIS (Buddhist International Society), BANAE (Baba Saheb Ambedkar National Association for Engineers), Karmweer Dada Saheb Gayakwad Saanskritik Kendra, Bahujan Vichar Manch and the Bhartiya Bauddh Samaj. The political organizations were political parties and groups like the Republican Party of India (RPI).

The functional distinctions drawn here are of course not rigid; the boundaries are dynamic and often the differences between the organizations are subtle. Ideologically, all of them are trying to translate the ideas of Buddhism, specifically Ambedkarism, into action. All of them maintain that within Hinduism the Dalits would never achieve equal status or receive just treatment. However, differences between the organizations are evident at the level of practice.

8.2.1 The centrality of religion in organizational life

Working with the functional distinctions outlined above, we found that the religious organizations were mainly devoted to the interpretation and exploration of the words of Buddha and Ambedkar. Out of the three organizations that we studied, two were closely associated with Buddhist organizations outside India. Only the BSI (Buddhist Society of India), headed by Miratai Ambedkar, the daughter-in-law of Dr Ambedkar, was working alone and had no ties with organizations abroad. Speaking on behalf of Miratai, Jagdish Gawai (whose Buddhist name is Jaisen Baudha), the National General Secretary of the BSI, said:

This organization was established in 1954 by Dr Baba Saheb Ambedkar himself and the objective of the organization is to teach Buddhism and help our people purify their life in the light of Buddhism and Ambedkar's philosophy....We purify the minds of the already converted Buddhists because after conversion people do not give up their Hindu rituals and beliefs and superstitions....and for that we organize 24 various types of shivirs....It

covers various aspects of human life....we also train people how to perform rites of birth, marriages, inauguration of new houses, and funeral rites in Buddhist way of life....The organization is run by 26 office bearers who come in the office every evening after completing their normal service hours. All work voluntarily....For the meeting we have networks at the village, taluk, and the district level⁶⁵.

The BSI publishes booklets of prayers, practices and teachings of Buddhism plus calendars and dairies.

The other important organization is the TBMSG (Trailokya Bauddha Mahasangha Sahayak Gana), which is located in a Dalit area called Siddharth Colony. This also publishes prayers and religious instruction pamphlets. It has worked as the Indian wing of an international organization called the Western Buddhist Order since 1979. It has centres in a number of cities in Maharashtra, such as Aurangabad, Nagpur, Mumbai, Ulhasnagar, Nanded and Kolhapur. The sole purpose of the organisation, according to Dhammamitra Santosh, a senior member of the TBMSG:

to preach Ambedkars's idea of Buddhism. It recruits people after training them in five or ten precepts of body, speech and mind. It believes that since Buddhism has not come to Dalits naturally, it is we who have chosen this, so, it has to be learned through a way of practising Buddhism through meditation and spiritual purity. Therefore, we regularly organize meditation and spiritual camps. Those who are trained in five precepts are known as Dhammamitras and those trained in ten precepts are Dhammacharies. We are open to new followers but only when we are sure that the person would keep following Dhamma....We keep organizing ceremonies at national and international level. In January 2006 we organized a Dhammakranti at the Deeksha ground in Nagpur, where Dr Baba Saheb Ambedkar had adopted Buddhism⁶⁶.

One big difference between the TBMSG and BSI was that the TBMSG did not consider itself to be a Dalit organization. It projected itself as a Buddhist organization in origin and concept.

In the Siddharth Colony we also discovered a place called Sanghmitra Bauddha Vihar, saanskritik kendra. It was in an area of fifty square metres. On one side it had a small room with a statue of Buddha in the middle and posters of Ambedkar on its wall. Its roof was covered with bamboo and plastic and the floor was brick. The place was deserted as the sun was shining right overhead. However we were able to find the executive chairman of the Kendra, Baban Babu Pawar, who informed us that the place:

is utilized for organizing only religious ceremonies like Buddha Jayanti, Ambedkar Jayanti, Buddhist marriages, Buddhist preaching by the Bauddha Bhikshus etc. I am a member of this organization since the day I adopted Buddhism in 1958⁶⁷.

When we asked him about the proceedings in detail, he said:

We start with *Buddha Vandana* (prayer). In this we use flowers, incense sticks and light candles and 'deep' (a small lamp). Then we do meditation. After that we do *Ambedkar pooja* (worship). Some 20-25 people together come to this place to perform this ritual daily. On the larger scale we invite one Bauddha Bhiksu every month to preach Buddhism and teach the people the right way of worshipping Buddha⁶⁸.

He further added:

We work with other organizations to spread Buddhism. We helped TBMSG send 19 girls from all over Maharashtra to Thailand [he also mentioned Taiwan] for their training in Buddhism. We kept them at this place before sending them abroad and arranged food and clothing for them.... We work with BSI and organize a "Shranmer Shivar" every year. On this occasion we march on foot and spread Buddhism. The Bhantheji Mahathero [Guru] teaches *samskar* (how to lead good quality of life) to children. Some 20 children, from seven to twenty years of age, are trained in Buddhist religious rituals⁶⁹.

Although adjacent to the Bauddha Vihar stood a Ganesh Pandal and a Saibaba Trust, according to Baban Babu Pawar, they did not have problems with each other. All lived together peacefully. What was problematic for him was the upper classes living beside the colony, who disturbed their religious ceremonies. This group, according to Pawar, was not made up solely of the upper caste, but included Mahars and Buddhists who in his view considered themselves the elite and disdained to attend their ceremonies.

The other organization in the religious category was the Bhikhu Sangh's United Buddhists Mission. Due to the busy schedule of the chairman of the sangh, Rahul Bodhi, who was engaged in organizing a conversion ceremony for people of the Dhargar community in Mumbai, our conversation with him was brief.⁷⁰ He said:

Buddhism is a way of life. It is not a religion in the religious sense. It deals with human minds. At the centre is man, not aatma, parmatma or extraordinary things. Therefore our purpose is to awaken people to understand the real cause of suffering, and help them live happily and harmoniously. To follow discrimination is an illegal thing, and therefore we try to educate people against all kinds of discriminations practised in society....We try to provide people with rational explanations for everything⁷¹.

Bhiku Sangh is an organization that creates Bauddha Bhikshus, who then explain the principles of Buddhism to the people, helping them to understand the five precepts, the ten virtues and how to celebrate Buddhist festivals. It tries to cultivate the minds of novices in the Buddhist way of life. It is often associated with defining Buddhist rituals and therefore it is also seen as an alternative to the BSI.

Both Bhiku Sangh and the BSI are associated with different factions of the Republican Party of India. All the religious organizations with whom we met except the TBMSG had linkages with political groups. The TBMSG alone confines itself to religious preaching and meditation, dealing more with the spiritual and philosophical aspects of teaching Buddhism. As part of its social concern, it also runs hostels and orphanages. Therefore, while the TBMSG had a relatively limited and specific agenda, the other organizations were not solely religious but were also engaged in organizing rallies and placing group demands before the government. Both the BSI and the Bhikhu Sangh had newspapers through which they could reach a larger number of people and appeal to the government. For example, Rahul Bodhi (of Bhiku Sangh) explained that:

the Bauddha Gaya Temple is presently run by a nine member committee, of which four are Hindus, four Buddhists and one the District Magistrate. The DM is the head of the committee. For the last fifteen years we have been demanding that the government should hand over the management of this temple to the Buddhists exclusivelyWe have met the CM of the state and also the Prime Minister...but to date there has been no response to our demand⁷².

8.2.2 Social organizations and networks

In addition to organizations that are performing religious tasks, as noted above, there are a number of organizations devoted to social welfare and development-related work. In the course of our field visit we met with the Bauddhajan Panchayat Samiti (BPS), an organization established in 1949 with the name of Mahar Jati Panchayat. It has a strong base in the Konkan region. There are almost 750 branches in Mumbai and the surrounding areas, each with between 100 and 500 members, who by election or consensus choose the branch office bearers. These office bearers then elect the managing body of 61 members, which in turn elects the 15-member executive body. The chairman and president are elected from this executive body. Meetings are held on area-wide issues in the branch offices. According to Srikant Talwadkar, the General Secretary of the organisation, who has been a member since childhood (he is now 53) and whose father was also an office bearer, the main aims of the organization are to: keep the community organized; create awareness among students

and parents about education; create financial support and other assistance for poor students; settle family disputes; eradicate blind faith and superstitions; and raise consciousness among community members to awaken society. He explained that:

The organization holds meetings in different areas. We discuss all relevant issues and try to solve the issue locally. If that is not effective we approach the administration and the police. Because this organization is a public trust, we cannot engage in processions and rallies but we do take necessary steps like sending delegations, submitting memorandums to the government as representatives of the community. We have also set up a sub-committee for the issues of women, which deals especially with the problem of violence on them⁷³.

The BPS, which has a larger presence in the cities than in the villages, has a direct link with the day-to-day affairs of the Buddhist community in the area and gives training to its social cadres.

The second organization in this category is a news daily, *Mahanayak*, which defines its role as a social organization. The editor, Anil Pawar, said:

The Mahars in Maharashtra are only second to Brahmins in terms of education and readership. The movement had both manpower and organization, but what it needed was its own media. Some of our brothers started similar enterprises earlier too, but in their commercial interest they took a stand similar to the mainstream media. The views and interests of our community were not adequately represented. Therefore, we started our newspaper in October 2005...We started our journey on the issue of SEZ (Special Economic Zones) and we are proud to say that we were the first to raise this issue in Maharashtra, on 22nd April 2006, and to discuss its impact on the life of the farmers of Raigarh. And we are happy that now this issue has become the agenda of all...our agenda is clear...our focus is to give importance to the interests of the community members and to build the confidence of our community people. But we are not confined within our caste boundaries, and we also write for the general causes. During the Khairlanjee episode it was our effort which kept the case live and the government on its toes⁷⁴.

This referred to a massacre, the details of which emerged from discussions with several groups. They were as follows: on 29 September 2006, four members of the Bhotmange family, Mahar Buddhists in the village of Khairlanjhi, were killed, in full view of the entire village. They were the mother Surekha, daughter Priyanka (19 years old), son Sudhir (17) working in a town nearby and blind son Roshan (18). The two women were dragged out of their house by some women from the peasant OBC

families of the village and taken to the centre of the village near the panchayat office. On the way they were beaten and their clothes torn. There they were tied to a bullock cart, stripped and beaten and their private parts injured with blunt weapons. The two sons rushed to their defence but they too were caught and thrashed. The women were gang-raped and the boys were told to rape their mother and sister in full view of the village. When they refused their private parts were crushed. In this gruesome, two-hour drama all four victims died. Their mutilated bodies were left more than two kilometres outside the village near a canal. The father, Bhaiyyalal Bhotmange, who was in the fields when the attack began, came back to the village and saw the entire horrifying event by hiding himself. He crawled away to the neighbouring village to inform people about the incident. Two other Dalit families in the village realized what was happening, but hid themselves in their houses out of fear. A beat constable, who visited the village in the evening of the same day, reported the situation to be normal and the Deputy Superintendent of Police did not take any further action. On September 30, when Bhaiyalal Bhootmange went to the Police Station, the police allegedly advised him to search for his family instead of recording his complaint⁷⁵.

According to Anil Pawar, editor of *Mahanayak*:

The government, especially the Home Minister, was determined to dump the case and declare the protestors as Maoists. We brought out the real castist face of the government. But, even after this, when the government did not take action, our lady managing director headed a group of 16 lady members and forcefully reached the Home Minister's cabin at the *Mantralaya*. This action brought the case into the limelight and then the government was forced to take action against the culprits. But at the same time, the government did not leave any stone unturned to bring trouble for those 17 lady members. Several criminal cases have been filed against them all, despite the fact that none of them carried any weapon or flag, or even pens....But we are happy that the government, which was planning to kill the case by giving it into the hands of the state CID, had finally to order a CBI inquiry...⁷⁶. We, along with other organizations, keep organizing meetings and seminars. Every year we organize an 'Abrahmani Atrhniti Panchayat' (Non-Brahmin Economic Policy Panchayat) along with the Bahujan Sahitya Sanskrit Kala Academy We also organize Phule Ambedkar Vidyarthi Sahitya Sammelan where we try to teach our history and our literature to children and youth. Some 10,000 members come to attend this annually. We are also planning to start a new 'Abrahmani Mahila Panchayat' on the similar lines.

The Khairlanjhi episode is indicative of the way in which the social and the political often come together in the working of many of the Neo-Buddhist organizations. Even when organizations are ostensibly non-political in nature, there are moments when their concern for empowerment of the community and their search for a life of dignity brings them together with others who have a stronger political presence and agenda.

Thus far we have referred to organizations that deal with a range of issues involving the welfare of community members as a whole, men and women. There are, however, organizations that focus almost entirely on women's issues. One such organization is Prabudha Rashtriya Sangh, which is working against the dowry system and harassment of women, and aims to promote women's economic independence.

Perhaps the most interesting work in this field is that of the Sanchi Mahila Sangathan. It is a Buddhist women's organization totally administered by women. Their fight was against the *manuvad* (castist ideology) which, in their view, existed even within Buddhism. According to Urmila Pawar (a retired civil servant acting as an adviser) and organization President Pradnya Lokhande, (daughter of the famous Marathi poet Daya Pawar and a member of the teaching faculty at Sadhna College):

Buddhism does not teach us only to fight against the Brahmanical order of the society; it also says to kill the Brahmanism in one-self. The males of our society speak against the *manuvad* but they are not concerned about the *manuvad* within the community. Women have participated equally with men in the fight against the hierarchical order of society, but men are not concerned about the problems of women. Whenever we tried to speak against the patriarchal set up of the community and the society as a whole, they did not pay any attention; they rather tried to stop us. They have always tried to console us by saying that by finishing the fight against *manuvad*, we will solve all problems. But the fact of the matter is that the status of Dalit women is even worse than the women of the other castes. The patriarchy within our community is so deep that the men are hardly concerned about this problem and therefore we had to establish a separate organization...and we have paid our price for this too...The family affairs of many of our members have been disturbed due to this effort...some even had to land up getting divorced [including Pradnya Lokhande herself] ...because the male members are not ready to accept our independent identity...This is only a start, but we are not afraid and soon we will make it a bigger movement...

We started our organization in 1986, but since then this has faced many ups and downs....Now we have grown stronger...and our prime focus now is to speak and write about the efforts made by the women of the community. Since the time of Baba Saheb

Ambedkar women have been contributing to the movement, but they are not given due recognition. And therefore, to get this done, we are documenting the works done by women members of the community in a volume to let the world know about the contribution of women to the Buddhist movement... Apart from that we take up individual cases and try to solve them... Our aim is to empower women... We organize meetings and discuss the ways of women empowerment in local ways...we give the women the opportunity to speak and let them share their experience in public... and we see that in this way women are getting confidence to speak against all kinds of discrimination and violence on them⁷⁷.

Although there are a number of organizations working on social welfare, we found that most members of the community, including women, were not well informed about the new marriage act. What was clear was that none of them were willing to follow any Hindu ritual in marriage, birth or death ceremonies. Marriage invitation cards had been reframed. An even bolder step was that some women had stopped wearing white sarees and removing *mangalsutra* (a necklace worn by married Hindu women) and bangles after the death of their husbands. Awareness among community members was reported to have increased and to be steadily growing. Education seemed to be the main agenda of every meeting. The community seemed united on all issues except those involving political choices.

It should also be mentioned here that while many organizations have links with international Buddhist organizations, hardly any were willing to speak to us about financial support that they are said to receive from these organizations. Furthermore, the concept of a Buddhist Cooperative Society had been consigned to history. In the late 1980s, community members had set up cooperatives and banks but only some were successful and there are only a few running currently. Today, not many community members are aware of them, and it seems that the present generation is confident enough to rely on existing commercial banks. Due to changes in government policy and the growing competition among banks most, including those that have been nationalized, have become more open to customers from Dalit groups than in the past.

8.2.3 Academic and political organizations

In the academic category the first person we met was the distinguished Professor N G Meshram, who has been Chairman of the Buddhist International Society for the last twenty years and has also been the President of the Buddhist Society of India, Mumbai Pradesh for some time. He has been

associated with several other national and international organizations. Professor Meshram described the objective of the Buddhist International Society as:

to create awareness among people, to counter priestly dominance and the concept of dogmatism, to dismantle caste and sub-caste in Mahars and also to include more and more communities into the Buddhist fold by organizing seminars, publications etc... We believe that people in India should follow only one religion, that is, the Constitution. It is made by the people of all community and therefore is the most secular way of understanding each other... There is no divine power. It is only the effort of human beings that creates and also solves every problem...⁷⁸.

The other organization in this category that we met with was the Babasaheb Ambedkar National Association for Engineers (BANAE), which relies on the voluntary service of the engineers of the community, and expresses the concerns of this professional group. Kuldeep Ramteke, the National President of the organization said:

We take up both service and social matters...by utilizing the resource of the engineers we try to pay back 'talent, time and treasure to the society'. We try to teach and give free coaching and books to talented students from the neglected section of the society. Some of these cases reach us directly, but sometimes we find them through our networks. We have nearly 5000 members at the national and state level. Each member has to pay a lifetime membership of Rs 1015. As an organization we meet regularly, and wherever a certain incident takes place we try to visit the place and solve it.

We also speak of reforming the traditional education system and emphasizing vocational training...we speak for reservation in private sector for the needy....in the case of the Maharashtra Reservation Act 2004, when an upper caste Maratha, Mr. Vijay Goghre challenged it, the High Court ordered a stay on its implementation. We (BANAE) challenged the decision of the High Court in the Supreme Court and we won the case. Some 1.75 lakh students benefited....As part of our work we also arrange meditation classes and teach the spiritual values of Buddhism⁷⁹.

All other organizations in this category that we found – Karmweer Dada Saheb Gayakwad Saanskritik Kendra, Bahujan Vichar Manch and Bodhiatva Baba Saheb Ambedkar Buddhist Academy – were also devoted to the education of the members of the community. Karmweer Dada Saheb Gayakwad Saanskritik Kendra had established a marriage bureau, an IAS coaching centre, a library, a meditation centre and also organized health camps on a regular basis. The Buddhist Academy had established the Mahanaga Sakyamuni Buddhist Seminary in Nagpur, which was affiliated with the Mahachulalongkornrajavidyalaya University in Bangkok, Thailand for studying the Buddha-dhamma in India.

Lastly, we met members of organizations that played a more focused political role. Although we could not interview the main leaders, we witnessed a day-long conversion ceremony that the Dhangar community organized at the Race Course ground at Mahalaxmi, Mumbai. This programme was assisted by the Ramdas Athole wing of the RPI, along with a famous Marathi poet from that community, Laxamanan Mane. This was a huge ceremony and the only sound one could hear that day was the shout of “Jai Bheem” (victory to B.R. Ambedkar). According to organization members, approximately 3.4 lakh Buddhists (though the newspapers reported only 1.25 lakh) assembled at the Race Course and nearly 10,000 people from the Dhangar community were converted to Buddhism. This was itself illustrative of the influence of the RPI, although the party has not been able to convert such support into tangible electoral seats.

Development discourse focuses largely on the social, educational and economic needs of a group of people. In the case of poor and marginalized communities this trend is even more pronounced. There is good reason for emphasizing economic and social needs, as they are linked closely with the survival of a society. However, when we look at the Mahar community in Maharashtra it becomes evident that the struggle for equality is also a struggle for human dignity and respect. Economic wellbeing has to be complemented by this dimension. It is in this context that different kinds of social, academic and political organizations have emerged.

8.3 Issues of empowerment

The network of Neo-Buddhist organizations has grown enormously and they maintain strong ties with their international counterparts. Collectively they play a critical role in bringing people together and challenging violence and oppression against their members. In the Khairlanjhi episode, for instance, the network of these international organizations enabled the community to launch a complaint against the Government of India at the UN. Vivek Chauhan, President of Dalit Cobra, informed us that “agitations were held in 15 different nations before the Indian Embassies. A British Labour Party MP, Stephen Carbe, came down to Khairlanjhi and appealed to the UNHCR to issue notice against the Indian government.”

Members of the community regard such forms of collective solidarity as critical for their struggle against oppression. Some argued that the Khairlanjhi incident happened because of the lack of such solidarity. Vivek Chauhan explained that:

...we did not have a strong presence of Dalit solidarity in villages. In towns we are united enough to speak against any or all. But in villages we still depend upon the old village system. During the time of Dalit Panther we were present in every nook and corner of the state, but once that was over, the upper castes started feeling that we are nowhere. Therefore there is a need to revive our strength. We as Dalit cobra are trying to expand our presence in every village and town. And we are also trying to spread a message that no political party is going to help us out if we do not stand united⁸⁰.

Coming together when Dalits are targeted is only one focus of these networks of national and international organizations. They are engaged also in building a system of recognition and promotion of the work being done by members of the community. To give an example, Dr Ambedkar International Mission, with its headquarters in Canada, confers literary awards on people, primarily Dalits, who are working on Dalit issues. At the 2007 awards ceremony at Bhopal on 22nd Dec. 2007, the Mission gave six awards: three for work on Dalit issues in the States of Uttar Pradesh, Punjab and Maharashtra, one for journalism, and two for work at national level. The committee conferring these awards included members from countries like Japan (Sushant Godghate) and Malaysia (Vilas Gaikwad).

In the struggle for empowerment, Dalit women must overcome greater marginalization than their male counterparts, including marginalization by their peers. Even though improvements in the educational and social standing of the community benefit women, they still lag behind men. While there are organizations that promote education for women, and although women join in major protests and struggles as in the case of Khairlanjhi, female leadership in community organizations is limited, as it is in the rest of society. Kasikrisna, a supporter of the Dalit movement in Dubai, commented:

The Dalit women are at a double victimized position: one, at the level of being a Dalit and other being a woman. That is, untouchability from the other communities and oppression within their own community. But still the community seems to be not so sensitive to the issues of women⁸¹.

He blamed the leaders for this relative neglect of women's concerns. Whatever the reasons for this, while improvement in the condition of the community has a positive impact on even its marginalized sections, the benefits do not accrue to all members equally.

Not only is material wellbeing an essential aspect of the struggle for equality and justice, but respect and the fight against all forms of humiliation is an equally important part of the struggle for empowerment. It is this that drives marginalized communities, like the Mahars, to take on a new religious identity and in the process to reject existing forms of subordination and inequality. Without understanding this symbolic dimension of the struggle for equality it is perhaps difficult to appreciate the necessity of asserting a distinct religious identity.

The battle for symbolic space and equality is therefore an important part of the Dalit community's struggle. However, the capacity to reconfigure one's identity, desirable as it might be, is an option that is not always available to all. The Neo-Buddhist movement, for example, is strong primarily among the Mahars in Maharashtra, a community that is seen as being better-off than many other Dalit communities in the region. This is not to say that the struggle for self-respect must wait until basic material needs have been met, but that it requires organization and networks that the better-off among the marginalized have been able to build more successfully.

9 Concluding comments

The case studies show that concerns for issues of development and governance may emanate from a variety of sources and may vary significantly from situation to situation. In Punjab, the internal classification of Scheduled Caste communities was a clear case of the politics of patronage aimed at dividing the potential Akali vote bank. However, over the years this has become a concern of the members of the community, who are now mobilizing to protect and expand the benefits they have been receiving from the state. In the process, the urban Balmikis have also begun to reconfigure their relationship with Hinduism and are trying to distance themselves from the ideological baggage of caste hierarchy that comes with the larger religious identity of being Hindu.

In the Maharashtra case, the benefits of OBC status for Muslims were successfully accessed through mobilization from below. There was also a direct link in Maharashtra with the experience of communal violence on the one hand and participation in democratic politics plus interaction with 'backward' groups from other religious communities. Interestingly, when OBC Muslims demanded access to the benefits of OBC status, even the Hindu communal parties found it difficult to oppose such a demand. In the process the OBC Muslims built bridges with groups from other religions with similar concerns.

The case of the Neo-Buddhist Dalits is different. In their struggle against caste hierarchy and their quest for a life of dignity, they have abandoned their Hindu identity and opted for Buddhism. Even though they see the source of their marginalization and deprivation as a religious ideology, they continue to use a religious mode of protest and seek to build an alternative religious identity. Buddhism has provided them with a source of identity and unity. Their consolidation, resulting from their attempt to build an alternative culture, their active social organizations and their ability to tap the benefits of affirmative action policies, has given them some power to bargain with the state; the political elite have to be sensitive to their concerns if they want their votes. Over the years, although everyday caste violence against them has declined, it is still present and continues to be an important community concern. Although the community has been able to develop links with state agencies and personnel, it is their organizational strength that they have to rely on to fight against incidents of caste violence and policy apathy. The community has developed its own autonomous institutions such as banks and self-help groups.

Through these three case studies what becomes clear is that religion can at times facilitate a community's struggle for power and equal space in the public arena. But there are occasions when a shared religious identity may distract from, and even camouflage, the differences of power and access to opportunities that exist between members of the same community. Thinking of a religious community as a single collective whole, therefore, may not further the concerns of equality, development and governance.

While this is a conclusion that emerges from our studies in India, it may hint at the peculiar and contradictory role that religion has come to play in most democratic societies. Indeed it is this that has led some scholars to point to the emergence of a post-secular world.

Considering the case of India, one must also add that while religion is an important marker of individual identity, it is only one of the many identities that individuals have. The other equally deep identity, and one that is open to as much construction and reconstruction, is that of caste. There is a dialectical relationship between these two otherwise distinct identities, and it is this that shapes the nature of democratic politics in India. This dialectic has at times deepened democracy by curtailing religious and cultural majoritarianism, and has allowed vulnerable and marginalized groups to benefit from policies involving some form of special consideration. On the other hand, to check the politics of patronage and preferential treatment that governments may sometimes engage in, it has also unleashed agendas of religious and cultural homogenization that were not much in evidence in the first few decades after independence.

It is a paradox of Indian democracy that even the pursuit of development concerns has brought back and re-entrenched ascribed social identities. At times these identities have been converted into permanent assets that individuals and groups may hold on to and use to access resources in a situation dominated by scarcity and competition. The relationships between religion, concerns of development and governance are complex. Religion may be a moral influence in individual lives, but the presence of religion in the political arena has contradictory effects. Often it is used instrumentally by all the parties, including the religious political parties, to promote their interests in competitive politics. Moreover, while religious values and beliefs may influence politics, the resulting ideology often appears to be malleable in the interests of political gain.

Notes

- ¹ A separate electorate system was introduced by the Morley-Minto reforms of 1909, recognized by the Montagu-Chelmsford report of 1919 and further extended to other communities by the Government of India Act of 1935. All the elections to local bodies and the Legislative Council from 1909 to 1946 were held on the basis of the Separate Electorate System. The Simon Commission (1927), which was appointed to enquire into the working of the constitution of 1919 and suggest further constitutional reforms, recommended continuing with the system of separate electorates. Indeed it extended separate representation for other marginalized communities and castes. The constitution of 1935 incorporated this suggestion.
- ² Secularism, meaning that religion is kept separate from the executive, judicial and legislative branches of government and the state from religion. Article 1 of the French constitution formally states that France is a secular republic ("La France est une République indivisible, laïque, démocratique et sociale."). It prohibits the adoption of a state religion, and the government recognizing or endorsing any religious position, be it a religion or atheism. Instead, the government can recognize religious organizations, according to formal legal criteria that do not address religious doctrine: whether the sole purpose of the organization is to organize religious activities and whether it is considered a threat to public order.
- ³ We have only to look at the disputes that have arisen around issues of dress, headgear and food habits in Western Europe and North America to appreciate the significance of this provision.
- ⁴ Article 30: Right of minorities to establish and administer educational institutions:
 - (1) All minorities, whether based on religion or language, shall have the right to establish and administer educational institutions of their choice.
 - (1a) In making any law providing for the compulsory acquisition of any property of any educational institution established and administered by a minority, referred to in clause (1), the State shall ensure that the amount fixed by or determined under such law for the acquisition of such property is such as would not restrict or abrogate the right guaranteed under that clause.
 - (2) The State shall not, in granting aid to educational institutions, discriminate against any educational institution on the ground that it is under the management of a minority, whether based on religion or language.
- ⁵ Article 26: Freedom to manage religious affairs: Subject to public order, morality and health, every religious denomination or any section thereof shall have the right-
 - (a) to establish and maintain institutions for religious and charitable purposes;
 - (b) to manage its own affairs in matters of religion;
 - (c) to own and acquire movable and immovable property; and
 - (d) to administer such property in accordance with law.
- ⁶ There was already a school of thought which argued that Indian secularism did not emulate the western model of separation. The central principle of Indian secularism was '*sarva dharma sambhava*', i.e. equal respect to all religions (Engineer, 1998a and 1998b; Gajendragadkar, 1966; Singh, 1992; Singhvi, 1992). While secular polities in the west separated religion from state, in India, the constitution did not posit a 'wall of separation'. In India religion was expected to inform, if not also define, the values that operate in public and political life. The secular credentials of the polity were dependent upon the state being 'neutral' or equidistant' from all religions. Thus, even though the state was not expected to distance itself completely from religion or religious communities, it was required to respect all religions and accord equal value to them.
- ⁷ Article 25: Freedom of conscience and free profession, practice and propagation of religion:
 - (1) Subject to public order, morality and health and to the other provisions of this Part, all persons are equally entitled to freedom of conscience and the right freely to profess, practice and propagate religion.
 - (2) Nothing in this article shall affect the operation of any existing law or prevent the State from making any law:

(a) regulating or restricting any economic, financial, political or other secular activity which may be associated with religious practice;

(b) Providing for social welfare and reform or the throwing open of Hindu religious institutions of a public character to all classes and sections of Hindus.

- ⁸ Parties that are referred to as 'secular' parties here are those that are not affiliated with a specific identity-based group – be it religious, linguistic or caste-based. They take up specific identity-based issues in specific instances but are not tied to a particular group; nor do they project themselves as the authentic voice of any one community, which differentiates them from 'identity-based' parties. However, if we look at the positions that these kinds of party take on particular issues, the differences appear much more muted.
- ⁹ There are many kinds of identity-based parties. Here we are focusing on religious parties that claim to represent the interests of a specific religious community. There are also caste-based parties, like the BSP (Bahujan Samaj Party), which speak for the interests of the lower castes and backward classes.
- ¹⁰ The Second Backward Classes Commission, with B. P. Mandal as its chairman, had recommended reservations for OBCs in all central government jobs and educational institutions. Reservations for OBCs existed in many states but similar provision had not been made for them nationally. What V. P. Singh did was to accept the recommendations of the earlier Mandal Commission, the report of which had been submitted almost a decade previously, although no government had taken any initiative in this regard. Despite the absence of public mobilization backing implementation of the recommendations of the Mandal Commission report, V. P. Singh's government decided to reserve seats for OBCs in central government. The decision led to protest and violent agitations in several states, and eventually Singh resigned as Prime Minister.
- ¹¹ On behalf of the minorities, the Chairman of the Minorities Committee withdrew the proposal for separate representation. Political scientists have offered different reasons for this. While some have attributed the shift to the intervention of senior leaders of the Congress, such as Nehru and Patel, others have argued that the partition of the country and the absence of the Muslim League made a crucial difference. Partition reaffirmed the view that recognizing religious identities in the political arena would inevitably divide society further. Accordingly, religious communities received religious and cultural rights rather than rights to separate representation or self-governance (Mahajan, 1998).

Two other explanations have been offered in this regard: i) the Partition meant that the Congress did not need to negotiate with the Muslim League and the demands that it came to represent. It could therefore go ahead with its own understanding that religion could play a divisive role in the political life of the polity (Bajpai, 2000). ii) The Muslim League refused to join the deliberations of the Constituent Assembly; consequently Muslim views were not adequately represented. And, when the minorities decided to withdraw their claims for separate representation, several Muslim leaders abstained or were not present (Ansari, 1999). Whatever the reasons for the Muslim members not voting or supporting the decision of the minorities to take back their political claims, there is no doubt that they were party to the decision and did not oppose the move at that time.

- ¹² To give one example: in Punjab, in the 1970 State Assembly Elections (elections for the legislative body in Punjab) the Akali Dal raised the issue of 'danger to the Sikh Panth (religion)'. This found little favour with the people who wanted the political leaders to address issues such as industrialization, power and irrigation. The same party in 1977 raised the issue of centre-state relations and the need to give greater autonomy to the federal units. This is what was embodied in the Ananad Pur resolution that became the basis of negotiations with central government over the next two decades. Equally importantly, it enabled the Akali Dal to form an alliance with other non-Congress governments of that time – namely, DMK (Dravida Munnetra Kazhagam), a leading political party in

Tamil Nadu, and the left front parties that otherwise had little in common, and even less tolerance of a religion-based party like Akali Dal.

- ¹³ The Prime Minister's high level committee headed by Justice Rajinder Sachar submitted its report on the Social, Economic and Educational Status of the Muslim Community of India in November 2006. In its opening chapter, the report identifies three major concerns of all minorities in modern nation states: security, identity and equity. However, it foregrounds the concern for equity, while recognizing that the three cannot be seen independently of each other. It divides Indian Muslims along caste and class lines using their socio-economic attributes, and compares them with other "socio religious categories" (SRCs) using similar criteria. Using recent datasets like the NSSO (National Sample Survey), Census, and the National Family Health Survey, it classifies Muslims into two categories: "general" and OBCs, and shows that with respect to almost all indicators of development, Muslims are lagging behind most other communities. In many cases, the OBC Muslims are worse off than the Scheduled Caste communities. Elsewhere, it underlines the need to recognize the threefold caste-like division among Indian Muslims (ashrafs, ajlafs and arzals) and advocates the listing of arzals, the "ex-untouchable" communities among Muslims, as scheduled castes along with similar categories from the Hindu, Sikh and Neo-Buddhist communities.
- ¹⁴ Statistical Abstract, Punjab 1999 p. 232
- ¹⁵ As per the Planning Commission estimates, only 11.77 per cent of the state population was living below the poverty line in the year 1993-94. The corresponding figure for the country as a whole was 35.97 per cent (Ahluwalia, 2000: 1640).
- ¹⁶ The SAD has invariably been seen as a single political formation of the Sikhs. However, in reality, there have always been differences within the Akalis, invariably representing diverse economic and political interests and ideologies within the Sikh community. These differences have also led to divisions within the Akali Dal and the formation of separate political parties by different leaders. In times of crisis there have also been mergers of different groups, although such mergers have generally been short-lived.
- ¹⁷ After fifteen years of violence and bloodshed, Sikh militancy began to decline in the early 1990s and by the middle of the 1990s the Khalistan movement was virtually over. Nevertheless, the implications of the crisis, both for the Sikh community and for the Indian nation-state, were far too many to be forgotten with the return of 'peace'. More than 30,000 people, a large majority of whom were Sikhs, had lost their lives in Punjab and elsewhere in India in the violence linked to the crisis. This prolonged phase of militancy also had a far-reaching impact on the state economy and led to many changes in the social life of the people. More importantly, it changed quite fundamentally the popular image of Punjab. From a state known for its economic vibrancy and progress, Punjab began to be seen as a 'crisis-ridden' region with serious problems of law and order and political unrest (Jodhka, 2001).
- ¹⁸ In his book, *Ethnic Conflict in India: A Case Study of Punjab*, (2000), Gurharpal Singh argues that there was a great deal of reluctance to accept the fact that any real ethnic divisions existed in Indian society. As per the 'conventional wisdom' on the subject, much of India's contemporary ethnic conflict was a consequence of "political perversion: that is, the decline of Nehruvian values identified in post-Nehruvian processes of centralization, deinstitutionalization, and political decay" (p. 39). According to this 'conventional wisdom': (i) ethnic identities in India were not primordial but constructed, permeable and contingent; (ii) ethnic groups selectively emphasized particular dimensions of their identity as appropriate; (iii) ethnic groups lacked cohesion; and (iv) the Indian state was secular and sought to foster political integration alongside a multicultural society. The reality, according to Singh, was very different. A critical reading of the Nehruvian period clearly reveals "a high degree of 'bossism', constitutional subversions, and conscious efforts to culturally and politically assimilate minorities" (p.44). The notion of cultural pluralism is applied only to cultural

groups that remain within the broadly defined Hindu fold but discriminates against non-Hindu minorities (Singh, 1996). Such an assessment would highlight the apparent cultural homogeneity of Hinduism, which often transcended linguistic and other barriers. The notion of “underlying civilizational unity” was “encoded with Hindu myths, symbols and imagery” (Singh, 1996, p.120). Hinduism functioned as a ‘meta-ethnicity’ of the post-independence Indian nation, according to Singh, who suggested that recognition of the hegemonic and dominant place of Hinduism would ask for an alternative interpretation of the Indian state and its relation with the minorities. He also suggested that India be viewed as an ‘ethnic democracy’ as against the prevalent assumption of India being a secular, multinational and plural democracy.

- ¹⁹ Shinder Purewal argued that the Sikh identity took a determinate form in the 1980s. In his view, those who “explore the realm of identities and culture without taking into account the material context in which identities take shape” fail to answer some obvious questions, such as, why certain aspects of identity become hegemonic at a particular historic moment, whose interests are served by the politics of identity or, in other words, “what constitutes the content of these cultural identities and symbolic politics and who defines that content?” Purewal pointed out that though the Sikh reformers during the late nineteenth century had also raised the question of identity, their emphasis was on a “non-Hindu Sikh identity”, while the agenda for the “kulak-based Sikh leadership” during the 1980s was to propagate an “anti-Hindu Sikh identity” (2000, p.46). Though his study was perhaps the most comprehensive of all those in the genre, his central arguments or the ‘thesis’ were not new. As earlier argued by several Marxist scholars, Purewal located the crisis of 1980s in the contradictions and new class alignments brought into the Punjab economy and politics by the success of the Green Revolution.
- ²⁰ Important findings of the survey related to their motives for joining ‘terrorism’ Contradicting Roger Jeffery and Harjot Oberoi’s arguments, Puri et al (1999) showed through their empirical data that only a small proportion (around 10 per cent) of the militants were reported to have been committed to the cause of Khalistan or to have been influenced by Bhinderanwale. Few reported that they had joined because of police excesses. A large number reported that they had taken to the gun just “out of fun” (38 per cent) or to further their own private interests. None were reported to have come from “respectable families”. Though they belonged to the locally dominant caste, the Jats, their economic status was not very secure. They were typically people who felt that they had been “rendered useless by the existing conditions and had free time and impulse for excitement.... Access to weapons such AK-47 Assault Rifles appeared to provide to the powerless an entitlement to power” (p.184-5). A majority were, the authors write, “social dropouts who came into the business of terrorism for their own personal reasons of adventure and making money” (p. 86).
- ²¹ These seats are won by Akali Dal Sant Fateh Singh Group (not Shiromani Akali Dal)
- ²² In addition to the seats won by SAD, SAD (M) (i.e. Siromani Akali Dal (Simranjeet Singh Mann) faction of SAD) contested elections separately. It received 4.65 per cent of votes but no seats in the Assembly.
- ²³ In addition to the seats won by SAD, SAD (M) contested elections. Once again it won no seats and received just 0.52 per cent of the votes polled.
- ²⁴ The urban population in Punjab at 34 per cent is also above the national average.
- ²⁵ Geographically, historically and according to political sentiments Maharashtra has five main regions: Vidarbha or Berar (Nagpur and Amravati divisions), Marathwada (Aurangabad Division), Khandesh and Northern Maharashtra (Nashik Division), Desh or Western Maharashtra (Pune Division), and Konkan (Konkan Division).
- ²⁶ All these figures are based on 1991 Census and were collected from the office of the Department of Social Welfare, Chandigarh, Government of Punjab.
- ²⁷ Personal interview, August 2007.

28 Personal interview, August 2007.

29 Personal interview, August 2007.

30 Personal interview August 2007.

31 Official Directive, Government of Punjab, collected from the office of the Department of Social Welfare, Chandigarh, Government of Punjab.

32 Official Directive, Government of Punjab, collected from the office of the Department of Social Welfare, Chandigarh, Government of Punjab.

33 It is interesting to note that communal violence, no matter where it occurs, is a setback for the Muslim community, because such occasions bring to the fore identity-related issues and create solidarities along those lines rather than for access to resources and opportunities. Fakruddin Bennur, who was part of the 'think tank for the movement' and closely associated with Vilas Sonawane, told us:

The Muslim OBC movement had really awakened the Muslims of Maharashtra on the issues and events that are of real importance. We successfully brought the community out of identity-specific issues and made them think about their development. But Gujarat 2002 has brought us back to day one. All our efforts have gone in vain. People are afraid now and they are again going back to the politics of identity. Even we feel threatened to go and talk in the community. It was only because of this movement that the retaliation in Gujarat was not vented in Maharashtra, but we could not stop our people from going into days of fear during which the prime concern is self-protection. Not only that, in instances like the Malegaon and Bombay blasts, we are targeted the most. People were picked up by the police from their houses after the Malegaon blast in Solhapur. They were booked under false charges and tortured for many days and months. The attitude of the administration has worsened day by day. We don't know where to start the movement again.

34 Personal interview February 2007.

35 Personal interview May 2007.

36 Personal interview May 2007.

37 In the last few years, he has filed more than 100 petitions under the Right to Information (RTI) in several Departments on issues that are of concern to the Muslim community. He is a teacher in a government school by profession and has also published a booklet of rules and procedures regarding the issue of caste certificates in Mumbai.

38 Pune-based All India Muslim OBC Organisation, which is headed by Mohd. Iqbal Ansari.

39 A state government employee, who could not get the post of Secretary in the state government service because he did not have the OBC certificate.

40 Personal interview February 2007.

41 Personal interview February 2007.

42 Personal interview February 2007.

43 Personal interview February 2007

44 Personal interview Feb 2007.

45 Personal interview Feb 2007.

46 Personal interview Feb 2007.

47 Interviewed in Pune in November 2007.

48 Interviewed in Mumbai on 25 May 2007.

49 Interviewed in Mumbai on 25 May 2007.

50 Personal interview May 2007.

51 Personal interview February 2007.

52 Personal interview February 2007.

⁵³ There are probably other reasons. But the reason expressed by Hasan Kamal was no less important:

The Muslims in Maharashtra were never very strong and rich. There were no Muslim landlords in Maharashtra, unlike other states, viz., Bihar, Uttar Pradesh. Therefore there was no fear from feudalism. Also, Maharashtra witnessed a strong cooperative movement and it was successful. So, we did not face much opposition from within. But this was not the case in the Northern part of India. We so many times requested the community leaders and people there to identify their caste, but there were no initiatives. Even if there was one, it was suppressed by the present feudalism.

⁵⁴ There are other reasons for its success and government cooperation, especially that expressed by Hasan Kamal:

The Muslims in Maharashtra were never very strong and rich. There were no Muslim landlords in Maharashtra, unlike other states, viz., Bihar, Uttar Pradesh. Therefore there was no fear from feudalism. Also, Maharashtra witnessed a strong cooperative movement and it was successful. So, we did not face much opposition from within. But this was not the case in the Northern part of India. We so many times requested the community leaders and people there to identify their caste, but there were no initiatives. Even if there was one, it was suppressed by the present feudalism.

⁵⁵ A case to determine just which of these is the parent organization is currently pending before the court.

⁵⁶ United Progressive Alliance (UPA) is the present ruling coalition of political parties heading the government of India. The coalition is led by the Indian National Congress (INC), which is currently the single largest political party in the Lok Sabha (the lower house of the parliament).

⁵⁷ Personal interview May 2007.

⁵⁸ Among other things, Ali Azizi has distributed copies of the RBI information among community members so that they know the benefits that are open to them

⁵⁹ Personal interview May 2007.

⁶⁰ Personal interview February 2007.

⁶¹ In sharp contrast to this, we have Ali Azizi, with his political profile, defending reservations for religious communities and arguing that the Constitution should be amended so that reservations on grounds of religion are not overturned by the Courts.

How can somebody say that there can be no reservation on the basis of religion? If so, why then was the amendment in Art 341 accepted? How could the Neo-Buddhists and the Sikhs be included in the fold? Why not the Muslims and Christians? Therefore our prime demand is to make an amendment in Art 341 of the Indian Constitution.

As was mentioned earlier, political parties, particularly secular parties, often try to woo communities by raising strident religious and other identity-related demands, thereby appearing to be more concerned with the interests of the members of a given community than even some of the religious/identity-based parties. (Personal interview May 2007)

⁶² Personal interview November 2007.

⁶³ Personal interview May 2007.

⁶⁴ In the state of Maharashtra the three communities that constitute 90.17 per cent of the SC population are - Mahar (35 per cent), Mang (33 per cent) and Chamar (22.06 per cent). Enmities and rivalries among these three major communities are longstanding and have been exacerbated by the conversion movement. The Mahars have enjoyed a lion's share of the concessions and benefits extended to the SCs by the State government. Although in recent years there has been a move within the movement to bring the other communities into this fold, access to state benefits has until now been confined to advancing the individual capacity of Mahars. Our conversations and

other studies show the emphatic nature of the change in the minds and behaviour of the Mahar community that has resulted. There has been cohesion among the new followers of Buddhism, but today the emphasis appears to be shifting to the need to bridge the gap between the Mahars and the other SC communities.

⁶⁵ Personal interview May 2007.

⁶⁶ Personal interview April 2007

⁶⁷ Personal interview May 2007

⁶⁸ Ibid.

⁶⁹ Ibid.

⁷⁰ Mumbai; May 27 2007

⁷¹ Personal interview May 2007

⁷² Personal interview May 2007

⁷³ Personal interview May 2007

⁷⁴ Personal interview May 2007

⁷⁵ Based on the news reports, the reports prepared by Dr. Babasaheb Ambedkar Research & Training Institute, Department of Social Justice, GoM & Centre for Equity & Social Justice, YASHADA, and commissioned by Nodal Officer, SC-ST (PoA) Act, 1989, November, 2006, and watching a documentary prepared by the commission that was given to me by Maruti Kharve, a Neo-Buddhist activist.

⁷⁶ Personal interview, May 2007. Bhai Vivek Chauhan: President, Dalit Panther, Pune, told us:

There was no coverage of the (Khairlanji) issue and therefore people could not know much about the case very soon. There were only three Dalit Buddhist families in the village and the other two families opted to keep quiet due to fear. It took us nearly a month to know this event. When we, in a group of 25 people, visited the village on Oct 30 we found that there was no FIR registered till then. We tried to contact the media but there was no response. We could get it published only in Samrat, Loknayak [newspapers owned by Dalits] and Times of India. But we were shocked at the attitude of the police and administration; then we decided that we will go for a mass agitation and also adopt all possible means to raise our voice. The RPI then came to our help. We thereafter started holding demonstrations in all the district headquarters. The protests began in the first week of November, as the realization came that the entire case was being suppressed by the police and political authorities to protect the perpetrators of the crime. This therefore led us to adopt violent means. In this violent protest we lost several of our brothers in different parts of Maharashtra in the police firing and lathi charges.

All this was also being done because, despite there being such a law and order situation in the state, the CM [Chief Minister] of the state was out of India on a family tour and the Deputy CM did not bother to visit the family or even the village even once. ...The Deputy CM termed the protests of the Dalits as Naxalism and hundreds of our friends were booked under that charge. Nearly 15 thousand people were arrested and charged under Act 307, 395 and put under bar for months and months. But this could not stop us. Young school-educated youth and women were in the forefront of the protests. Neither the large forces of the police nor the rapid action force could stop them. They faced arrest only to be back on the streets the next day in larger numbers. The Maharashtra government was just unable to stop these protests, though they tried strong repression and disinformation. The appeals of the established Dalit leaders and the Buddhist clergy to use peaceful means fell on deaf ears. Though we are only 10 per cent of the population of Maharashtra state, we wanted to prove our strength and paralyse the entire economic life of the state. We were prevented from organising all morchas [united front marches] planned by the people if there is a whiff of militancy. The Long March from Nagpur to Khairlanji was forcibly stopped. To prevent the march to the Vidhan Sabha in Nagpur on 4 December the state

government pulled out all the forces in its arsenal. Nagpur was converted into a police camp with ten thousand special police, including the Rapid Action Force, deployed all over the city to ensure that the march would not take place. All the Dalit leaders were detained. Trucks from villages were turned back and people were not allowed to come out of their houses. Dalit masses in Nagpur were imprisoned in their homes and were not allowed out. Ultimately the voice of the assertion of the masses reached Sonia Gandhi and she cut short her trip and asked the Maharashtra CM to fly back from Singapore handle the situation. (personal interview November 2007)

⁷⁷ Personal interview May 2007

⁷⁸ Personal interview May 2007

⁷⁹ Personal interview May 2007

⁸⁰ Vivek Chauhan, personal interview Personal interview Nov 2007.

⁸¹ Personal interview by telephone, Nov 2007

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Appendix I

Religious communities in India: Maharashtra and Punjab

Religion	Total population in India		Maharashtra		Punjab	
	No.	%	No.	%	No.	%
All religions	1,228,610,328	100	96,878,627	100	24,358,999	100
Hindus	867,578,868	80.5	77,859,385	80.4	8,997,942	36.9
Muslims	158,188,240	13.4	10,270,485	10.6	382,045	1.6
Christians	24,080,016	2.3	1,058,313	1.1	292,800	1.2
Sikhs	19,215,730	1.9	215,337	0.2	14,592,387	59.9
Buddhists	16,947,992	1.5	5,838,710	6.0	41,487	0.2
Jains	4,225,053	0.4	1,301,843	1.3	39,276	0.2
Others	6,639,626	0.7	236,841	0.2	8,594	0.03
Religion not stated	727,588	0.1	97,713	0.1	4,468	0.01

Source: Census of India, 2001.

www.indiastat.com/india/ShowData.asp?secid=293359&ptid=293358&level=3 - 39k

Appendix 2

Post-independence incidence of communal violence in Maharashtra and Punjab

A. List of towns with reported communal riots in Maharashtra (1947-1995)

City	Year
Ahmadnagar	1967, 1981, 1987
Alibag	1984
Akota	1978
Ambad	1986
Amravati	1986
Aurangabad	1968, 1983, 1986*, 1987, 1988, 1992, 1995
Beed	1987
Bhayander	1984
Bhiwandi	1969, 1970, 1982, 1984
Bhokar	1990
Buldhana	1992
Chikhli	1989
Chikodi	1987
Chinchani	1987
Dabhadi	1983
Daund	1965
Devlali	1982
Dharavi	1978
Dohad	1950
Dombiwali	1970*
Gaurai	1986
Jalgaon	1970, 1980, 1985, 1986*
Kalian	1973, 1980*, 1984
Kamptee	1973, 1990
Karad	1982, 1984
Karmala	1983
Khemgaon	1986
Khar	1962
Lahari	1986
Malum	1989, 1990, 1993*
Majalgaon	1986
Makalpur	1962
Malegaon	1963, 1967, 1975, 1982, 1983*, 1987, 1992
Mangrul pir	1966, 1980
Manwat	1986
Miraj	1983
Morshi	1986
Mumbai	1947*, 1948*, 1950, 1955, 1968, 1970, 1972, 1973*, 1974*, 1975*, 1977, 1980, 1981*, 1983, 1984*, 1985*, 1986*, 1987*, 1990*, 1991, 1992, 1993*

City	Year
Nagpur	1950*, 1956, 1968, 1989
Nanda	1969
Nanded	1986, 1992
Nashik	1982, 1986*
Paithan	1983, 1986
Pandharpur	1982
Panvel	1985, 1986
Patur	1990
Pune	1965, 1973, 1975, 1977, 1982*, 1988
Puntamba	1983
Sangamner	1986
Sangli	1983
Sangor	1950
Sion	1987
Solapur	1982*
Thane	1970, 1984, 1988
Vada	1970
Varud	1986
Vashind	1970
Washim	1966
Yavatmal	1980
Yaval	1975

* The riots occurred twice or more than twice in that particular year.

Source: Compiled from Appendix in Wilkinson (Ed.), 2005, pp. 405-444.

B. Communal violence in Punjab

The political trajectory of communal relations in post-independence Indian Punjab has been very different from that of Maharashtra or some other regions of India. Partition violence and the community-specific migrations that followed completely transformed the structure of communal relations in the region. This is not to suggest that there has been no communal tension or inter-community politics in the State. However the nature of this political conflict has been very different and has only rarely led to the rioting and mass violence associated with communal violence.

Perhaps the most difficult period in the communal history of post-independence Punjab was during the fifteen years of the Khalistan movement (1980 to 1995). However, even during this time Punjab did not witness much communal violence. When Sikh militants attacked local Hindus, for example, the violent attacks took the form of individual and targeted killings or indiscriminate terror attacks.

Appendix 3

Religious political parties

National-level religious parties

- Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP): founded in 1980; Hindus.
- Bharatiya Jana Sangh (often known simply as the Jan Sangh): 1951 to 1980. It merged with the BJP in 1980.
- Ram Rajya Parishad: 1948-1980.
- Muslim League: 1906-present. After the partition of India, the Muslim League lost most of its support within India, with the exception of Kerala.

State-level religious parties

- Shiromani Akali Dal: 1920-present; Sikhs, Punjab
- Shiv Sena: 1966- present; Hindus, Maharashtra
- Indian Union Muslim League: 1948 Muslims, Kerala
- All India Majlis-e-Ittehadul Muslimeen: 1927; Muslims, Andhra Pradesh

Appendix 4

Note on methodology and list of main interviews.

Note on methodology: The paper has two parts. The first part includes a) a discussion on the framework of Indian democracy and India's Constitution on the subject of religion and politics; and b) a mapping of the manner in which religion and politics have interacted in India over the last six decades since independence from colonial rule in 1947. The second part of the paper contains three case studies of instances in which marginalized sections of different religious groups/ communities have tried to use the available structures of democratic politics to insert their concerns into the governance agenda of the state at the regional level in Maharashtra and Punjab. These case studies are based on qualitative interviews with key informants in the two settings.

Darshan Rattan Ravan, President of the Adi Dharm Samaj, Ludhiana, Punjab, August 2007.

R.L. Sabberwal, a retired officer of Punjab government and an ideologue of the Balmiki movement, Chandigarh, Punjab, August 2007.

Senior Bureaucrat (name withheld) from the Social Welfare Department of the Punjab Government, Chandigarh, Punjab, August 2007.

A junior officer (name withheld) in the Social Welfare Department of the Punjab Government, Chandigarh, Punjab, August 2007.

Manjit Singh, Panjab University, Chandigarh, August 2007

Gurinder Pal Singh, Lawyer, Punjab and Haryana High Court, Chandigarh, August 2007.

Fakruddin Bennur, acting as the think tank for the 'Muslim OBC movement', Solapur, Maharashtra, November 2007.

Vilas Sonawane, leader of the Hindu OBC movement, Mumbai, Maharashtra, May 2007.

Mohd. Iqbal Ansari, President, All India Muslim OBC Organisation (New), Pune, Maharashtra, November 2007.

Hasan Kamal, poet and lyricist, a non-OBC leader of the OBC Muslims, Mumbai, Maharashtra, May 2007.

Shabbir Ahmed Ansari, President, All India Muslim OBC Organisation (Old), Pune, Maharashtra, November 2007.

Asghar Ali Engineer, scholar and Director of Centre for the Study of Secular Society, Mumbai, Maharashtra, May 2007.

Mohd. Parvez Iqbal, founder of the Muslim OBC Council and the Vice President of the AIMOBC Organization, Mumbai, Maharashtra, May 2007.

Syed Iftikar Ahmad, Editor of Shodhan, a weekly journal of Jamat-e-Islami, Mumbai, Maharashtra, May 2007.

Sarfraz Arzoo, Editor of Hindustan Daily (Urdu), Mumbai, Maharashtra, May 2007.

Ali Azizi, President, All India Muslim OBC Federation, Mumbai, Maharashtra, May 2007.

Jeenat Shaukat Ali, President WISDOM foundation, also head of the Department of Islamic studies of Saint Xavier's College, Mumbai, Maharashtra, May 2007.

Dharmamitra Santosh, a senior member of the TBMSG, Delhi, May 2007.

Jagdish Gawai (Buddhist name- Jaisen Baudha), National General Secretary of the BSI, Mumbai, Maharashtra, May 2007.

Baban Babu Pawar, member Sanghmitra Bauddha Vihar Saanskritik Kendra, Mumbai, Maharashtra, May 2007.

Rahul Bodhi, Chairman of Bhikhu Sangh's United Buddhists Mission, Mumbai, Maharashtra, May 2007.

Anil Pawar, editor of a news-daily Mahanayak, Mumbai, Maharashtra, May 2007.

Bhai Vivek Chauhan: President, Dalit Cobra, Pune, Maharashtra, November 2007.

Pradnya Lokhande, President, Sanchi Mahila Sangathan, also teaches at Sadhna College, Mumbai, Maharashtra, May 2007.

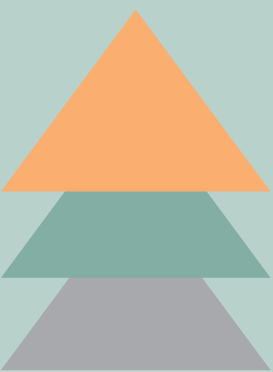
N. G. Meshram, former President, Buddhist Society of India, Mumbai, Maharashtra, May 2007.

Kuldeep Ramteke, National President of Babasaheb Ambedkar National Association for Engineers, Mumbai, Maharashtra, May 2007.

Kasikrisna, a supporter of the movement located in Dubai, interviewed on phone in Pune, Maharashtra, November 2007.

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