



Exploring Maharashtrian Identity: Language, Region, and Religion in Historical Perspective

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Abstract

Examining the creation of the Maharashtrian identity through its multiple dominating paths, this study employs a theoretical lens of symbolic interactionism and a methodological lens of social constructionism. This paper, which only uses secondary data, aims to analyze and survey the trends in the emergence of identity politics about ethnicity, with a focus on language as a factor that influences it along with region and religion, all the while maintaining the independence and consequent linguistic reorganization of states as a backdrop. To address this, four significant historical eras or movements in Maharashtra are examined, each of which had a significant impact on the development of the Maharashtrian identity. The article highlights the distinctiveness of Maharashtrian identity, particularly for Mumbai, where socioeconomic dynamics have differed significantly from those of other Maharashtrian regions.

Introduction

According to the constructionist tradition, identity is a social construction rather than a natural phenomenon that is created by groups of people to solve issues, support or strengthen their positions, provide an explanation for their actions, create meanings, come to an understanding, or in other ways navigate their environment (Cornell and Hartmann, 2007). In addition, it is challenging to perceive and understand one's identity in this intricately interconnected world because many different identities are changing quickly. Therefore, it would appear that it is impossible to adequately express and articulate one's identity in words. The renewed need for "recognition" in today's globalized world has quickly taken on a great deal of significance and attention. This might be interpreted analytically as politics of recognition, which is entwined with identity politics. Many toxic politics, which usually aim to damage or destroy the identity of a specific group, are done in the name of identification and recognition.



According to Joseph (2004), there are two fundamental components to an individual's identity: their name, which distinguishes them from others, and that intangible "something" that makes them who they truly are but is difficult to put into words but has been attempted to be defined, such as their soul and ego. These implications, though, do not excuse what that "something" actually means or symbolizes. It seems almost impossible to sum up this other component of one's identity in a single phrase. An individual or a group's identity is what sets them apart from one another. This implies that it can be interpreted as something that both unites a member of a group and sets them apart from other members of the group. In this way, the concept of an individual's identity is created about "others." Understanding another person's identity is closely linked to understanding one's own identity. Consequently, Allan (2006) argues that our identity is continuously driven by the "meanings" that emerge from the symbolic engagement we engage in daily.

The study of the intricate process of Maharashtrian identity development, as explored in this paper, is grounded in the context of symbolic interactionist theories of identity construction. The construction of the Maharashtrian identity is argued to unfold within a specific historical and cultural backdrop, encompassing factors such as its history, customs, the state reorganization event, and the emergence of the Shiv Sena. The article aims to illuminate the nuances of identity politics in the Maharashtra context by undertaking a micro-study of select secondary sources. It acknowledges that the study adopts a particular perspective within a specific framework, recognizing the existence of alternative approaches and components that may be justifiably considered in addressing the complexities of the subject matter.

Dynamic Language Identity

Even though India is a democratic and secular country, many different segments of the population are claiming their identities these days. Conflicts and battles arise when particular groups try to assert their identities, and these are frequently waged along lines of caste, geography, language, religion, and community. As a "fundamental element of our experience of being human," Llamas and Watt (2010) examine the intricate relationship between language and identity in this way (p. 1). Oddly enough, language and identities are dynamic. Both are always



renegotiating and altering in response to the dynamic settings of our encounters. As a result, through our interactions—which seem to require language, our identities are continuously formed and changed.

Since the politics of recognition are based on identities arising from language, religion, region, and caste, it is preferred to view the entire identity politics debate from the perspective of ethnicity, given the complexity of group identity in India. When we use the term "ethnicity," we mean elements of nativism, language, regionalism, or caste loyalty. These identities are not just multiple but also overlapping and occasionally ambiguous, leading to conflict situations resulting from competing interests. Since India is considered as a heterogeneous society, it can hence be believed that the term "ethnic" adequately captures the nature of the issue at hand.

Linguistic Zones in Maharashtra

We are well aware that as the colonial government grew beyond its initial coastal strongholds, it chose geographical boundaries that were solely focused on administrative convenience, giving rise to provinces and presidencies, and were thus not founded on any clear principles. But after independence, as the Congress's internal structure and political power increased, it acknowledged that the state's appropriate territorial division into linguistic zones adhered to a "democratic" ideal. It was believed that these linguistic states' vernacular languages aided in political transactions. This approach also subtly suggested that India's enormous diversity precluded the fulfilment of any homogenous cultural nationalism, and that's why it was vital to acknowledge the legitimacy of regional cultures based mostly—though not exclusively—on languages. After independence, what was evident was clear to see. Demands for a stronger acknowledgement of regional identity began to come in (Kaviraj, 1997). It is significant to note that the Congress at the Center did not view the demand for state bifurcation based on language as anti-Indian or anti-national because, in the 1920s, the Congress had declared explicitly that India would be administratively divided along linguistic lines following independence (Gupta, 1997). The establishment of the State Reorganization Commission (SRC) in 1956 is what followed.



To begin with, the lengthy process of territorial reorganization in contemporary India was established by the Partition of Bengal in 1905. It should be kept in mind that the emergence of proto-nationalism had started to acquire linguistic and religious foundations by the late 19th and early 20th century.

Thus, in the first two decades of India's post-independence history, the central government gave in to the pressure and persistence of linguistic, religious, and tribal movements, resulting in the creation of Andhra Pradesh (speaking Telugu), Tamil Nadu (speaking Tamil), Karnataka (speaking Kannada), Gujarat (speaking Gujarati), Maharashtra (speaking Marathi), and Punjab, which split into Punjab (speaking Punjabi with a Sikh majority), Haryana (speaking Hindi with a Hindu majority), and Himachal Pradesh (speaking Hindi with a Hindu majority) in the 1950s and 1960s (Singh, 2008). But this was not the end of the bifurcation process.

Later, in the 1960s and 1970s, this kind of territorial reorganization was expanded to the northeast.

Identity of Language and Regional Movements

According to Dipankar Gupta (1997), "the enduring basis on which Indian politics is played out is the acceptance of cultural and linguistic differences" (p. 229). In his analysis, India's post-independence history may be attributed to three significant events: linguistic, nativist, and regional. Soon after independence, there was an eruption of calls for states to be monolingual. The second instance pertains to the time when the "natives" of these monolingual states began advocating for the allocation of economic possibilities primarily to them within their states (a phenomenon known as "sons of the soil"). The third one, which is more in line with modern times, sees more regional economic autonomy for the states. It is possible to interpret the nativist movements¹ and the linguistic demands in particular as repeatedly emphasizing the language-based fundamental identity. Regional movements, on the other hand, are more secular since they are focused on the region rather than any particular linguistic group because these regions have both a major and a large number of minority language groups.



In Indian society, the articulation of politics of recognition and assertion based on ethnic identities has repeatedly surfaced. Insurgency and assertions are common, especially in the Northeast, where arguments over secession, language, nativism, and other topics often turn violent. Then there are problems with specific states' establishment based on language requirements. For a variety of political and other causes, there are instances where regions within regions are growing more powerful and demanding (Kumar, 2011). The statehood of Vidarbha (Kumar, 2001) and the political difficulties that resulted in the formation of Telangana, albeit they were not linguistic, are two other significant issues. The aspirations for autonomy in Jammu and Kashmir are a significant subject about India that warrants discussion. Then there are countless instances of ethnic conflict and communal tensions, which frequently result from disputes over language, geography, religion, and other issues before being given diverse political interpretations. The 2013 Dhule riots, for example, began as a minor argument between two people in a café but took on ethnic undertones in its articulation, leading to mass mobilization to establish identity. The disturbances resulted in several deaths and a scenario akin to a bandh.

In Maharashtra, and especially in Mumbai, there have been native-migrant disruptions during the past few decades. Such anti-immigrant sentiments subsequently lead to a variety of responses, such as the prioritization of domicile (which is likewise gaining traction in other regions) and consequent preference for locals in government employment, housing programs, and education, among other things. In Mumbai, for example, nativist feeling has been explicitly expressed in politics through the Shiv Sena, a political organization established in 1966 to protect the interests of the "sons of the soil" (Katzenstein, 1973).

In addition to the rise of Maratha power and the assertion of Maratha identity in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, Maharashtra's socio-cultural scene and history encompass a multitude of themes, from mainstream religious tradition and the various folk religion sects to the shaping of religious identities in the hostile presence of British rule and the political tensions in the post-independent India. The nineteenth century saw political and social reforms, and the twentieth century saw political protest movements.



The majority of these, which are the outcome of several geographical peculiarities, have a significant impact on Maharashtrian psychology (Kosambi, 2000). This study aims to examine four important historical viewpoints or periods that jointly shaped Maharashtra's current identity: the folk culture of Maharashtra, the rise of Shivaji Maharaj, Maharashtra in its infancy, and the growth of Shiv Sena.

Folk Traditions of Maharashtra

The adoption of regional languages among remote people can be attributed to the Bhakti movement and its abundance of regional literature. Maharashtra's folk culture, especially the Bhakti movement, inspired a unique feeling of pride in all that was regionally specific. In Maharashtra (the Marathi-speaking region), the rise of regional consciousness is primarily a 19th- and 20th-century phenomenon. Nonetheless, it is known that Varkari poet-saints nurtured the religious spirits as early as the thirteenth century. Bringing together pilgrims from all over the Marathi-speaking region, the Varkari poet-saints of Pandharpur (Sholapur district) were followers of the god Vithoba, and their regular pilgrimages offered "one of the clearest symbolic expressions of the unity of Maharashtra" (Feldhaus, 1986:534). The meaning of the Sanskrit Bhagawad Gita was written, or rather penned and sung, in Marathi by the saint Dnyaneshwar, a well-known follower of Vithoba, in the thirteenth century. In addition, the Pandharpur shrine was a well-known destination for pilgrims (Karve, 1962), which provides more evidence that the Marathi language was shaped by these Bhakti movements.

Similarly to the Varkaris, the Mahanubhavas are an uncommon but still discernible Maharashtrian bhakti group that was established in the thirteenth century. They are credited with penning a substantial corpus of ancient Marathi literature that explores the theological significance of the area as well as the social and religious life of medieval Maharashtra (Feldhaus, 1986). Thus, once the obvious that is, the significance of Marathi was established, the people of Maharashtra began to shape and alter their regional consciousness. Over time, the pilgrimage sites in Maharashtra gained significant importance in fostering a sense of regional identity. This illustrates how the land of Maharashtra was exalted in religious terms with the aid



of the local language. The image of Maharashtra as a site of religious significance was primarily elevated by folk and non-Brahman traditions, which used vernacular languages and dialects.

Paradoxically, the syncretism present in Maharashtra's cultural fabric is equally noteworthy. It is observed that throughout the centuries of coexistence, Muslims and Hindus have made some adaptations to get along, which has led to a few conflicts between the two. It is known that some Muslim saints from the Middle Ages, such as Shaikh Muhammad, became part of the Bhakti movement. According to these stories, Shivaji's reputation as a Hindu fighter who defied Muslim dominance is a "myth." Despite his skill as a strategist, Shivaji was accepting of all kinds of groupings. (Burman, 2001). However, the popular conception of Shivaji's mythology has been used for political ends (Date, 2007; Laine, 2000). Shivaji's image has been presented in a variety of ways by different people, depending on their goals and viewpoint.

The Great Shivaji Maharaj from Maharashtra

It is essential to consider Shivaji's image and its influence while considering the many paths taken in the formation and shaping of Maharashtrian identity, as these factors will have a significant future influence on Shiv Sena's philosophy. Without a doubt, Shivaji is a well-worn emblem of history, culture, and identity creation, whether it be in popular culture, traditional folklore, or the politics of the Shiv Sena and the Samyukta Maharashtra Samiti (Vartak, 1999). The life and legend of Shivaji form a major part of the Shiv Sena's worldview. For the Shiv Sena and Bal Thackeray, as well as the majority of Maharashtrians, Shivaji has always been their hero (Gupta, 2009). The Sena revived Marathi pride whenever the Hindutava appeal was deemed insufficient, utilizing Shivaji as a symbol of Maratha pride. For example, Shiv Sena used the issue of Marathi pride extensively in the 2002 Mumbai corporation elections, and they won handily (Palshikar, 2004).

Especially in the latter part of the 1800s, an insightful perception of Shivaji began to emerge. During this period, British colonialism was being established in Western India, leading to notable transformations in the region's governance, society, and economy. Because identity formation movements frequently employ symbols to mobilize large numbers of people through



overt attempts to recreate and revive the past, which is analogous to a "golden age" that has declined into the present. It was within this framework that the different representations of Shivaji gained popularity as a symbol. The mass media played a crucial role in this development. Ideas centred around Shivaji received a certain amount of legitimacy and wider distribution from the press in particular, even though Shivaji was frequently used as a symbol in literature, journalism, public meetings, festivals, and the traditional oral medium of "Sawada" and "Lavani" (a genre of Marathi poetry and music).

This had an impact on the middle-class educated in the West, along with English education. Shivaji's defiance of the established Mughal authority, in addition to the already present emotional association with the splendours of the Maratha past, became a well-liked political figure in the context of growing nationalism and identity-building. Shivaji's image thus became a symbol that could be employed in a range of shifting situations, such as Brahman domination, Muslim authority, or colonialism, because of his resistance and radical nature. Bal Gangadhar Tilak, Vishnu Shastri Chiplunkar, and Shivram Mahadeo Paranjpe all first appeared in Maharashtra within this intellectual framework. They maintained their adherence to traditional Hindu teachings and promoted their optimism about the advancement of society.

Phule was the most insightful among those who interpreted Shivaji in a non-Brahmanic way. Using existing symbols, myths and traditions from the live folk heritage, he cleverly created a new collective identity for all the lower classes in Maharashtra. Furthermore, Phule popularized his interpretation of Shivaji through the posada, a traditional medium that made the plain, informal, non-Sanskritized Marathi language more understandable for the lower classes. Shivaji's legacy of elevating the oppressed therefore began to shape the establishment of the non-Brahman identity. At the start of the 20th century, figures such as V D Savarkar and Rao Bahadur Gopal The approach of Hari Deshmukh, also referred to as "Lokahitawadi," Ramade, and Rajaram Balkrishna Bhagwat solidified the widely believed belief of Shivaji. Therefore, every effort was made to preserve Shivaji's image in the minds of Maharashtra's citizens. He was also portrayed as a patriotic hero who rebelled against foreign domination. In Maharashtra, the



common perception of the Shivaji Movement now portrays Shivaji as the head of the Marathas and an advocate for Hindus (Vartak, 1999).

Maharashtra is just getting started. The idea of a "mother tongue" played a major role in the state of Maharashtra's creation. The primary goal of the Samyukt Maharashtra Samiti (unity of Maharashtra), which was founded in 1956 as the principal voice for Marathi linguistic provincialism, was to persuade the Indian government to divide the Marathi-speaking region from the Gujarati-speaking portions of Mumbai state and to merge them into the unilingual state of Maharashtra. The Samiti's efforts were rewarded on May 1, 1960, when Mumbai became the capital of the newly formed state of Maharashtra (Stern, 1964). The majority of India's Marathi-speaking population lives in the state of Maharashtra, which was created as a manifestation of both individual and group aspirations (Rosenthal, 1974).

Since then, the Shiv Sena in Maharashtra has served as an illustration of a nativist movement turned political organization. In terms of terminology and orientation, the Shiv Sena of the 1960s and 1970s became a clear local and nativist group. Thus, the state of Maharashtra has been promoting the distinctiveness of Maharashtrian identity throughout its infancy with the assistance of Shiv Sena.

Therefore, the early stages of Maharashtra served as a bridge between the socio-historical periods, which included the development of Shivaji and folk customs as well as the creation of the Shiv Sena as a political organization, all of which contributed to the negotiated Maharashtrian identity that exists today.

The Ascent of Shiv Sena

The Shiv Sena, a nativist movement founded by people who speak Marathi, originated in Maharashtra, a state where the majority of people speak the language. The Shiv Sena is a significant emblem of nativist sentiment in India, although it is primarily restricted to Mumbai. Shiv Sena, which was founded on June 19, 1966, is named after Shivaji Maharaj, the founder of the Maratha Empire (1672–1818) who, among other things, protected Maratha territory from the Moguls' northern assaults. Shiv Sena began claiming "Maharashtra for the Maharashtrians"



shortly after its founding. It put special emphasis on energizing the middle class and young people in the race for white-collar jobs. This latter aspect clarifies Sena's initial motivation for attacking South Indians. Shiv Sena, however, attacked Muslims and Communists by focusing on "anti-nationalism" concerns after establishing influence in local politics. Sena is known to revisit the native-outsider controversy, nevertheless.

Shiv Sena developed a reputation throughout time for being violent and "ruthless," and media outlets and newspapers regularly promoted this image of the group regarding its violent altercations. The Sena's extremely authoritarian organizational structure also had a role in creating this kind of aggressive image. With Shakh Pramukhs serving as branch heads, more than 120 branch offices were opened around the metropolitan area starting in 1967. By the end of 1988, there were roughly 40,000 branches located throughout Maharashtra.

Nonetheless, Thackeray, the leader of the upper leadership, held the final say. Furthermore, it should be mentioned that the Shiv Sena was not just a phenomenon of the middle class. Rather, it was the result of a deeper and maybe more pervasive pathology, which was the Maharashtrian community's sense of subordination to their "own native soil."

Maharashtrians made up 43% of Mumbai's total population in 1961, making them a minority in terms of numbers. Maharashtrians continued to be the largest single language group, nevertheless. Gujaratis made up 19% of the population, followed by South Indians (including members of the four major South Indian linguistic communities) at 9% and Hindi speakers at 8%. However, when we examine this in terms of linguistic composition, we find that the fact that non-Maharashtrians (those who do not speak Marathi) outnumbered Maharashtrians (those who speak Marathi) in their own "native city" had a clear impact on how Maharashtrians saw themselves and "others" (Katzenstein, 1973, 1979). Thus, the Shiv Sena may have used this apparent categorization of Maharashtrians as a relatively economically backward group⁵ to incite the nativist movement in Maharashtra, which quickly altered Maharashtrian psychology and contributed to the strengthening of the Maharashtrian identity.



The Shiv Sena was instrumental in escalating the suppressed resentment of the people for not witnessing tangible improvements in their economic circumstances since Mumbai was granted capital status, thanks to its "consciousness-raising" weekly Marathi magazine Marmik (straight from the heart). Thus, the primary cause of nativist sentiment in Mumbai is the economic and social divide between Maharashtrians and non-Maharashtrians. The Shiv Sena was initially sparked by a psychological rather than material factor, as the awakening of these sentiments through the cries of Marmik and the modification of Maharashtrian expectations and consciousness brought about by Samyukta Maharashtra led to the establishment of organized nativism in 1966 (Katzenstein, 1973). Marmik unintentionally began ingraining in the locals' minds the value of speaking one's native tongue and the need to express sentiments that they had likely always felt but had never spoken aloud and honestly to connect with the literate Marathi crowd. According to Shaikh (2005), Shiv Sena successfully channelled emotions based on cultural and linguistic identity, or, to put it another way, an ethnic Marathi identity created via the use of mass media.

With time, Shiv Sena began concentrating on matters other than the conflict between outsiders and residents. After the Emergency, it turned even more anti-Muslim, anti-communist, and anti-Congress. This anti-Muslim nationalism will eventually come to define Shiv Sena's identity as a political organization. Shiv Sena, which originated from the Marathi weekly dedicated to cartoons, the Marmik, now uses Saamana, a Marathi daily that was founded in 1989, as its voice to communicate with both the general public and its adherents. It no longer only appeals to lower middle-class urbanites; now, it has a sizable and committed fan base that spans the entire state. Only because Shiv Sena carried on the emotional appeal started by the fight to create the Marathi-speaking state of Maharashtra did all of this become viable. Mumbai 'belonged' to the Marathi people, it was said, hence Marathi culture and society had to be present in the city. It claimed to represent the interests of all Marathi people, not just Mumbai residents, and not just their employment interests, but also their cultural interests and anxieties, by evoking the hitherto preserved memories of Shivaji, the seventeenth-century Maratha warrior (Palshikar, 2004).



Shiv Sena's emphasis on the misery of Mumbai's unemployed Marathi youth resonates with the Marathi identity on the one hand, but it also makes clear that regionalism, which is expressed in Mumbai as nativism, is strongly rooted in nationalism on the other. It succeeded in appropriating Shivaji as a symbol of Maharashtrian identity by very cleverly accommodating areas within the borders of the country. Shiv Sena was already a force for Hindu nationalism by the middle of the 1980s. This turned into a need since it was meant to reach far into the other regions of Maharashtra, which meant that the focus needed to change from regional to national for the Sena's appeal to be meaningful in the state's rural areas. Shivaji was once again brought into the discourse when this nationalism took on a "pronounced militant Hindu shape," but this time he was portrayed as a "Hindu" king who stopped the "Muslim" expansion rather than as a regional or national hero (ibid).

Conclusion

With a literary legacy dating back to the eleventh century, Marathi is a language spoken by over fifty million people in western India. As events unfold, we learn that the Maharashtrian identity started to take on its current form due to folk traditions such as non-Bramanic cults, the ascent of Shivaji as a warrior hero, the political struggle that culminated in 1960 for a new state for the Marathi people, and the dramatic political rise of Shiv Sena, which undoubtedly contributed to the creation of the Marathi manus identity. It's crucial to pause at this point and clarify what we mean when we talk of Maharashtrian or Marathi identities. It is important to remember that the Maharashtrian identity is split into three categories: geography, caste, and community. Furthermore, as Date (2007) notes, the Maratha community is not homogeneous and there are approximately 96 Maratha clans that are socially distinct from one another in addition to the adherents of other religions and cults who, as we have already seen, have syncretized their cultures through their coexistence.

What we now identify as Maharashtrian identity was primarily formed in Mumbai, naturally, and in the setting of the Shiv Sena. As we can see, this identity has many facets, though. Shiv Sena's varying degrees of success outside of Mumbai bear out Katzenstein's (1973) contention that the Maharashtrian consciousness sparked by Shiv Sena was not widespread like the



Samyukta Maharashtra sentiment, but rather more localized due to the unique circumstances of Mumbai metropolitan life and the Maharashtrian community's place within it. The state's many areas speak Marathi in diverse ways, preserving their own identities. This is not an attempt to downplay the state's overall identity; rather, in the state of Maharashtra, the regional identity is making a stronger, more obvious case for recognition. This is most likely the reason why the people of Vidarbha now wish to reject this collective identity. But in this instance, it is undeniable that there are more Hindi speakers in Vidarbha. Consequently, the declaration of Maharashtrian identity as it exists in Mumbai is, if not wholly, then certainly largely, a Mumbai construct. Mumbai is the only place in Maharashtra where the Marathi language is asserted in this manner. This is not to imply that other sections of Maharashtra do not have identity assertions, especially linguistic ones, but rather that their forms and contents differ.

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