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Author(s): Babasaheb Kambale

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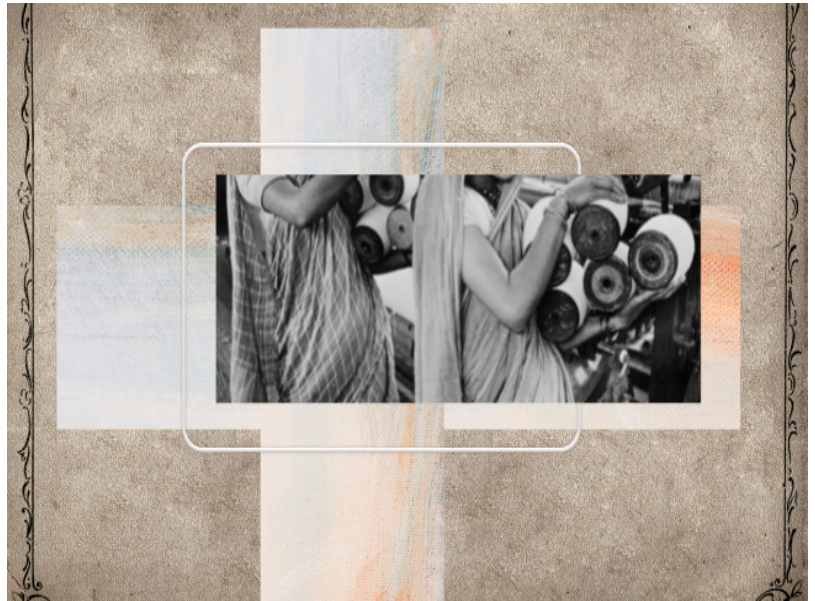
Author(s) Affiliation: Babasaheb Kambale(babasaheb82@gmail.com) is the Head of Department and Assistant Professor at the Department of History, Satish Pradhan Dnyanasadhana College, Thane.

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Non-Brahmin Labour Movement in Bombay and Indian National Movement

Babasaheb Kambale

Abstract: The development of the mill industry in Bombay[1] heavily relied on family, kinship, caste and patronage. Labour recruitment and organisation were also correlated to family, kinship, caste and patronage. The rise and growth of the Indian National Movement in Bombay was largely connected with caste politics. The early growth of the Indian National Congress was connected with the society's elite and oppressor caste community. Prominent leaders from the Indian National Congress were



mainly from the Brahmin caste. M K Gandhi and his various movements had created space for the non-Brahmin in the national movements. But it was not an easy task to convince the non-Brahmin masses to join the Indian national movements. This article explains the initial phase of Gandhi and his early attempts to organise non-Brahmin labour unions and encourage their participation in national movements. Further, it explains how these non-Brahmin leaders joined the Congress party and its various significant movements. This process primarily affected the labour unrest and national movement in Bombay.

Introduction

In the late 19th and 20th centuries, the social relationship among the working class was based on several factors, and class was one among them. A contractual relationship was not the norm. Instead, kinship and caste networks played an essential role in disciplining and controlling the workers in the cotton textile industry. The capitalist strategically used traditional means to exercise control over the workers (Haynes 2008). With the rise of non-Brahmin leadership in the unionisation of the working class, the capitalist maintained their grip through the intermediaries over the workers. The non-Brahmin leaders, on the other hand, used the same traditional caste and kinship norms to establish their hold over the workers but sought to achieve different objectives. They aimed to empower the working class for freedom from oppression by the indigenous capitalist class and British rule.

This essay seeks to examine those forms of organisations in the cotton mill industry of Bombay between the mid-19th century and the rise of the Gandhian movement in the first decade of the 20th century. Histories of labour and social relations in the cotton textile industry in Bombay during the 19th and 20th centuries is a relatively recent development. Historians working on the colonial period have explored the labour movement of Bombay as a product of class consciousness. On the other hand, historians and social scientists have examined the non-Brahmin [2] movement in the wider perspective only. Little attention has been paid to the labour movement in Bombay and its correlation to the non-Brahmin movement, with particular attention to caste as a major deciding factor for the organisation and its response to the freedom struggle.

Scholars who have examined the issue of class in Bombay's cotton textile industry includes S M Rutnagar, Morris David Morris, Rajnarayan Chandavarkar, Richard Newman, Shashi Bhushan Upadhyay, Prashant Kidambi, Priyanka Srivastava, and Neera Adarkar, among others. The non-Brahmin movement in Maharashtra has been the focus of enquiry of scholars such as Rosalind O'Hanlon, Gail Omvedt and Nalini Pandit. The recent introduction of Anupama Rao to the Memoirs of a Dalit Communist leader: The Many Worlds of R. B. More, attempts to throw light on the conflict between caste, class, and communist movement. The scholars mentioned above have worked on various aspects of Bombay's labour history but have not touched upon the role of the non-Brahmin movement and its impact on the city's labour consciousness and freedom movement. The essay continues the discussion initiated by Gail Omvedt, where she explores the caste and class discourse through the non-Brahmin and the communist movement in Maharashtra. However, for this article, I will focus only on Girangaon and the rise of the non-Brahmin labour movement in Bombay and its relation with the Indian National Congress and the freedom struggle against British rule.

Migration, Cotton Industry and Non-Brahmin Labour Unions

Bombay's cotton industry developed on the outskirts of Bombay, mainly Parel, Worli, and Lalbaug, later known as Girangaon or mill village. Girangaon, surrounded by various textile mills, was a hub of the migrant poor from various parts of India, employing largely Marathi, Hindi, Urdu, and Tamil-speaking population. The migration and settlement of all the groups at different locations in the city depended on their social rank. Although, the working class of Bombay had migrated from other regions across India. Konkan, and especially Ratnagiri district, was the most important source of Bombay's textile labour, followed by the Deccan (Newman 1981). Gujarat and North India too provided some share in the labour force of Bombay's textile industry. In the 19th century, the power, influence and exploitation by Khots [3] had largely affected the economic and social condition of peasants in Ratnagiri district. Khots' exactions were the most oppressive in the Chitpavan Brahmin strongholds of Dapoli, Chiplun and Khed. The domination of the khots was directed primarily towards the control of labour. This was reflected in an inverse relation between the areas of khoti domination and the inclination of labour to relocate to Bombay (Chandavarkar 1994).

In the early phase of the textile industry of Bombay, the working-class movement was led by non-Brahmin leaders. There was a rapid emergence of the Maratha identity during the 1860s

and 1870s, and several endogamous Maharashtrian peasant castes began to claim this Maratha identity, along with Kshatriya status. However, beginning in the last quarter of the 19th century, a few intellectuals from a peasant or small-scale commercial background sought to re-establish links with the disadvantaged peasantry. When this occurred, it was under the leadership of Jyotiba Phule and in a far more radical and certainly non-traditional form under the guidance of the Satyashodhak Samaj (Omvedt 1973). A closer examination of caste and its relation with the class struggle provides insight into the development of labour unions in Bombay. This social consolidation was also reflected in political assertion, and as Marathas formed about half of the city's total population and more than half of the textile workforce, mass mobilisation was impossible without taking them into account (Upadhyay 2004).

N. M. Lokhande, a staunch supporter of the non-Brahmin movement, edited the first labour journal in the country, *Deenbandhu* [4] (Friend of the Poor) (Maharashtra State Archives 1876: C 267: 3). Lokhande established "The Bombay Mill Hands' Association" (BMHA) under the guidance of Phule (Lal 1927: 14). Founded in 1880, this was the first workers' organisation in Bombay and probably also in India (Das Gupta 1994). Lokhande believed that the function of trade unionism was to address social issues like caste, illiteracy and alleviate injustice against the workers. He concentrated on the social freedom of workers rather than political freedom from British rule.

In the Bombay textile industry, jobbers mostly belonging from the Maratha caste represented the most interesting phenomenon in the occupational hierarchy of the Bombay textile mills. Congress leaders successfully convinced the jobbers to call for a strike after B G Tilaks' arrest on charges of sedition. In an interview with Baburao Arnalkar, the editor of Maratha magazine, which was devoted to the non-Brahmin movement, Laxmanrao, a reputed Maratha political leader from Pune, explained how the Marathas were used as a political tool. Laxmanrao stated, "To crack the Surat Indian National Congress (INC) conference, B.G.Tilak took near about 700 goons from Pune, most of them were from Maratha caste and I was there with them. Marathas had participated in the riots among Hindu Parsee and Hindu Muslim. In the strikes of mill workers also Maratha had been always in the forefront. This all had benefited the Brahmin community" (Maratha 1940).

The Kamgar Hitwardhak Sabha, founded by H. A Talcherkar, S. K. Bole and B. R. Nare in 1909. Apart from industrial issues, the KHS also emphasised the caste-based exploitation of workers, specifically how the Brahmin became the exploiter in the mill districts in the name of religion. [5] (A Brief Sketch of the work of The Kamgar Hitwardhak Sabha, Bombay 1909-1919). Till the rise of Gandhi as a leader in the INC, the Brahmins were at the forefront in Bombay. The working classes in Bombay and their exploitation by the Brahmin's through various forms were explored by the non-Brahmin movement. This led to keeping some distance from the various national movements by labour unions in Bombay in the beginning of the 20th century.

Non-cooperation to Gandhi and his Early Movements

Although the loyalties of the millworkers of Bombay were focused on their community rather than their class, they were even more willing to take recourse to militant action when their

economic interests were threatened. The general textile strike of 1919 was evidence of their struggle for economic defence. The strong community ties among the workers of Bombay was reflected even more clearly in their refusal to be drawn into the Rowlatt Satyagraha, which was launched by Gandhi barely two months after the strike of 1919. Muslim and Gujarati middle class supported the Satyagraha in Bombay, but the instability did not affect the working-class districts. Only two of the 85 textile mills of the city continued working right through the agitation. This happened because Gandhi relied upon the influence of leaders within the different communities to draw the masses into his agitations. Gandhi's lieutenants in Bombay were drawn almost entirely from the Gujarati community, which held a prominent position in the commercial and professional life of the city. Between the young Gujarati radicals who supported Gandhi in 1919 and the Maratha millworkers of Bombay was a gulf of caste, language and culture which was impossible to bridge (Kumar 1969).

The period from 1921-22 can be described as the beginning of the trade union movement in Bombay. The Gujarati home ruler, Kanji Dwarkadas, had started a textile union in 1919 and tried in vain to get Gandhi's assistance in this task. Even after prolonged deliberations, Gandhi decided to remain aloof. According to Kanji Dwarkadas (Kumar 1962), "he did not consider himself strong enough to handle and tackle the Maharashtrian workers of Bombay."

The Congress meeting held at Nagpur in December 1920 adopted a new constitution and a new programme of action. The new constitution reorganised the Congress along linguistic lines to create greater cohesion and to involve the masses more actively in the independence movement. (Dick 1980: 1227) According to Ravinder Kumar, Bombay's working classes' response to the Non-cooperation Campaign of 1920 was quite different from their response to the Rowlatt Satyagraha of 1919. In 1920, Gandhi appealed to the millworkers through leaders who were related to them via caste and community and who shared their cultural values and sense of identity. Therefore, in 1920-1921, the workers of Bombay were noticeable among those who gathered at anti-British rallies, demonstrations, and meetings (Kumar 1969:375).

In the post 1920s, with the growth of communists in the Bombay textile industry, the Satyashodhak Samaj and non-Brahmin movement disappeared from the political discourse of Mumbai. [6] The leaders from the Maratha community joined the Congress Party. Between the Congress and communists, they chose the Congress as representative of the non-Brahmin movement under the leadership of Gandhi. Communists, though dominated by the Brahmin leaders, got popular support among workers, irrespective of caste and religion. To counter the Brahmin dominance in the workers' movement of Mumbai, Maratha leaders within Congress played a crucial role in the 1930s and 1940s. This process was backed by the millowners, colonial government and provincial government to eliminate the communist labour unions from Bombay's textile industry.

The labour unions were dominated by jobbers who were from the Maratha community. The rise of the Brahmin leaders including communist and others altered the politics of Mumbai. The decline of the jobber system in the Mumbai textile industry led to the demise of the power of Maratha jobbers and their control over the workers. Though the jobber system was on the verge of decline, labour unions, including most of the political parties used the

dominant jobbers for their own trade unions to gain popularity in the mill district. The Congress used some popular jobbers to establish their stronghold in the textile industry to counter the communist labour unions.

Congress at the same time attracted the Maratha labour leaders from the Girangaon area. Some Maratha intellectuals who managed the monthly Magazine called Maratha [7] supported the Congress against the communist as they considered them to be dominated by the Brahmin leadership. In 1939, this magazine appealed to the Maratha masses to join the Congress party. [8] In the municipal corporation election of 1939, the candidates of the Maratha community who contested from the Congress Party were supported by the Maratha magazine. [9] The appeal of the Maratha newspaper for the Maratha candidates indicates that identity politics was rooted among the masses.[10]

During the Congress rule between 1937 and 1939, conflict between political parties and trade unions expanded in the public field. By the mid-1940s, labour politics in Bombay was driven by political rivalries and partisanship. Congress had created a political base among the mill workers in the late 1930s. In the 1940s, the power and influence of the communists and their trade unions in the mill districts of Bombay began to decline. Initially, the Girni Kamgar Union (GKU), owing its loyalty to the Communist party, was attractive to the workers for its uncompromising opposition to mill owners. By the 1940s, its place was taken by Congress (Chandavarkar 2008). The 1942 Quit India Movement (QIM) essentially put communists in a dichotomy. Initially, the Communists and GKU opposed the World War II and did not participate in the QIM. Opposing this stance, the mill workers joined the QIM, which led to the further decline of the left base in Girangaon (Adarkar 2010). The Congress formed its own union of textile workers, the Rashtriya Mill Mazdoor Sangh (RMMS), in 1945 competing with the GKU for membership and subscriptions. Ironically, mill owners and managers helped the RMMS to recruit members and expand it in Girangaon. To increase recruitment, they also took advantage of workers' neighbourhoods and social networks with jobbers (Chandavarkar 2008). Thus, caste consciousness became central to the masses, especially in the Girangaon area, which was dominated by the Maratha workers [11] (Bombay Disturbance Enquiry Committee Proceeding, 1938: D3). The caste Consciousness of the workers had been channelised by the Congress for against the Communists and for the Indian National Movements.

Conclusions

The migration of workers with their caste and traditional ideas had deeply influenced Girangaon. The rise and growth of Satyashodhak Samaj and the later non-Brahmin movement raised awareness about the importance of unionisation among the workers. The rise of the non-Brahmin labour unions controlled the labour movement in Bombay till the 1920s. Indian National Congress and Gandhi could not convince the labour movement due to the strong hold of the Non-Brahmin movement in Bombay's textile industry's labour movement until the 1920s. Labour unions were influenced by the non-Brahmin ideology. Hence they concentrated on social issues and freedom from the indigenous capitalist class rather than participating in the Indian National Movement in Bombay. Caste consciousness played a crucial role in determining the direction of the labour movement, and it was with the eventual participation of

the jobbers and the Marathas that the Congress was able to establish its stronghold within the textile labour union of Bombay, reducing the influence of the Communists thus succeeding in bringing the labour movement close to the national movement.



Endnotes:

[1] Bombay was renamed Mumbai in 1995.

[2] Maharashtra's first expression of social revolution was the non-Brahmin movement, organised with Mahatma Jotirao Phule's Satyashodhak Samaj ("Truthseekers Society"). It was organised in 1873 as a revolutionary cultural movement directed against the traditional caste system and the religious and social domination of Brahmins. See Gail Omvedt, Non-Brahmans and Communists in Bombay, *Economic and Political Weekly*, Vol 8, No 16, 21 April, 1973, pp 749-759.

[3] Khot system prevailed in the Konkan area of the Bombay Presidency. Khots mainly belonged to the Brahmin community, who had control over the land.

[4] Deenbandhu was the mouthpiece of the Satyashodak movement. It was started on 1 January 1877 by Shri Krishnarao Pendurang Bhalekar in Pune. For three years, the newspaper ran into losses. However, the Bhalekar brothers (Krishnarao and Ramchandrarao) tried to run the newspaper by taking loans. The newspaper was extremely important in order to continue the Satyashodak movement; thus, Narayan Lokhande left his job and from 9 May 1880 with Ramji Santuji Avate and together they took the responsibility of publishing the paper from Bombay. The newspaper was not published after the death of Lokhande. In 1905, Vasudev Lingoji Biraje revived the newspaper in Bombay see *Maratha*, Vol II, March 1940, p. 9.

[5] The following complaint clearly indicates this: "Mill operatives have complained that in several mills there is a practice when wages are paid to withhold sums forming fractions of an anna under the excuse that amount thus much of the men's wages is utilised for charities or payment to the Brahmin who doles out water to thirsty workmen"

[6] See for detailed analysis Gail Omvedt, (1973): "Non-Brahmans and Communists in

Bombay”, Economic and Political Weekly, Vol. 8, No. 16, 21st April, pp. 749-759.

[7] It was published at Girgaon, Mumbai by Baburao Arnalkar for the welfare of the Maratha and Bahujan community.

[8] Ramchandra Shirodkar, Maratha Tarunapudhil Kary, Maratha, Vol -I, February 1939, pp.21-22

[9] Maratha Tarunapudhil Kary, Maratha, Vol-I, February 1939, pp.29-32. The following Maratha candidates stood for the election from the Congress party. Ramchandra Gole (E Ward, Congress), who worked for the mill workers in Byculla, Ramchandra Shirodkar (F Ward, Congress) who worked in the Social Service League and Non Brahmin Movement and who also started schools for the workers, P K Sawant (E ward 11, Mazgaon, Congress) who was a founder of Maratha Vidyarthi Sangh in 1929, Gangaram Mane (Ward No 8, Independent Labour Party) who was a founder of Maratha Volunteer Core, Giridhar Nare, (F Ward, Congress) who himself was a mill worker and the founder of Kamgar Hitvardhak sabha, Maruti Borade, (Ward 4, Umarkhadi, Dongari Congress) who was a president of Shivri Labour Union, and Dadasaheb Jagtap, (Trade Union Congress) who was representative of Girni Kamgar Sangh. There were some more Maratha candidates but due to lack of space, Maratha weekly could not provide the information.

[10] This election was fought for the 109 seats, and Congress had given 70 candidates, out of which 54 candidates won the election. The following Maratha candidates won the elections. R A Gole, R K Shirodkar, Shri P.K Sawant, Shri R B Raut, Shri R.S Wagh, Shri K L Borkar, Shri Patil Narayan Kajale, Shri Acharekar, Shri Nagvekar, etc.

[11] Arun Parab, a worker from Shreenivas mill, was a congressman and proud of the Maratha caste.

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