

**Multiple Religious Identities among Dalits and Implication of Atrocities
Act – Case of Mahars from Rural Maharashtra**

A Dissertation Submitted to the University of Hyderabad in Partial Fulfillment of
Requirements for the Award of the Degree of

**MASTER OF PHILOSOPHY
IN
ANTHROPOLOGY**

Submitted by
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JUNE 2015**



DECLARATION

I **Ghadage Tushar Madhukar** hereby declare that this thesis entitled “**Multiple Religious Identities among Dalits and Implication of Atrocities Act – Case of Mahars from Rural Maharashtra**”, submitted by me under the guidance and supervision of **Prof. N.Sudhakar Rao**, Department of Anthropology, is a bona fide research work which is also free from plagiarism. I also declare that it has not been submitted previously in part or in full to this University or any other University or Institution for the award of any degree or diploma. I hereby agree that my thesis can be deposited in Shodhganga/INFLIBNET.

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ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I owe my sincere gratitude to my supervisor Prof. N. Sudhakar Rao, Department of Anthropology, University of Hyderabad for his valuable time he spent in unfailing guidance, sharing his ideas and thought during the course of work. His critical suggestions, invaluable help, tolerance and constant support have made this study possible.

I express my sincere thanks to Prof. P. Venkata Rao and Prof. K. K. Misra, who taught us advance research methodology and anthropological theories and made the subject easy to understand.

I express my thanks to Prof. B.V. Sharma, Prof. R. Siva Prasad, Dr. George Tharakan, C, Dr. Romesh Singh and Mr. Shaik Abdul Munaf for their valuable suggestions and inputs during pre field seminar that helped me improve my understanding and standard of my work.

I am deeply indebted to Mr. Shamuvel Waghmare for his help in the process of identifying village for the study. Without his help it wouldn't have possible to conduct this study in the villages.

Thanks are due to Mr. Vijay Sansare, Assistant Professor at Centre for Studies in Rural Development, Institute of Social work and Research, Ahmednagar. My field work was possible because of him and his family. We lost Balasaheb Sansare (Tatya) during our journey of this work. He gave me place in his family and made my stay in the field pleasant. I pay my homage to him.

Special thanks to Tabyo Liagi for his unconditional help during the field work.

Thanks are not enough for office and library staff members of the Department of Anthropology for their cooperation throughout this study.

I am happy to acknowledge my friends who pushed me time and again to complete this work. They stood with me in good as well as bad time in my life. Thanks Mahendran C, Dhilip K, and Divya S Sarathy. I am very lucky to have you people with me always.

I specially thank all my respondents who shared their bitter experiences of their life and also provided valuable information to me.

I thank my M.Phil classmates, Pravin, Mahalaxmi and Yano for making my stay in campus pleasing.

Finally, I have no words to express my feelings for my mother, whose care, love, and support have made me realize my dream. Every individual in my family, I owe them a lot for their constant support and encouragement throughout my life.

Tushar

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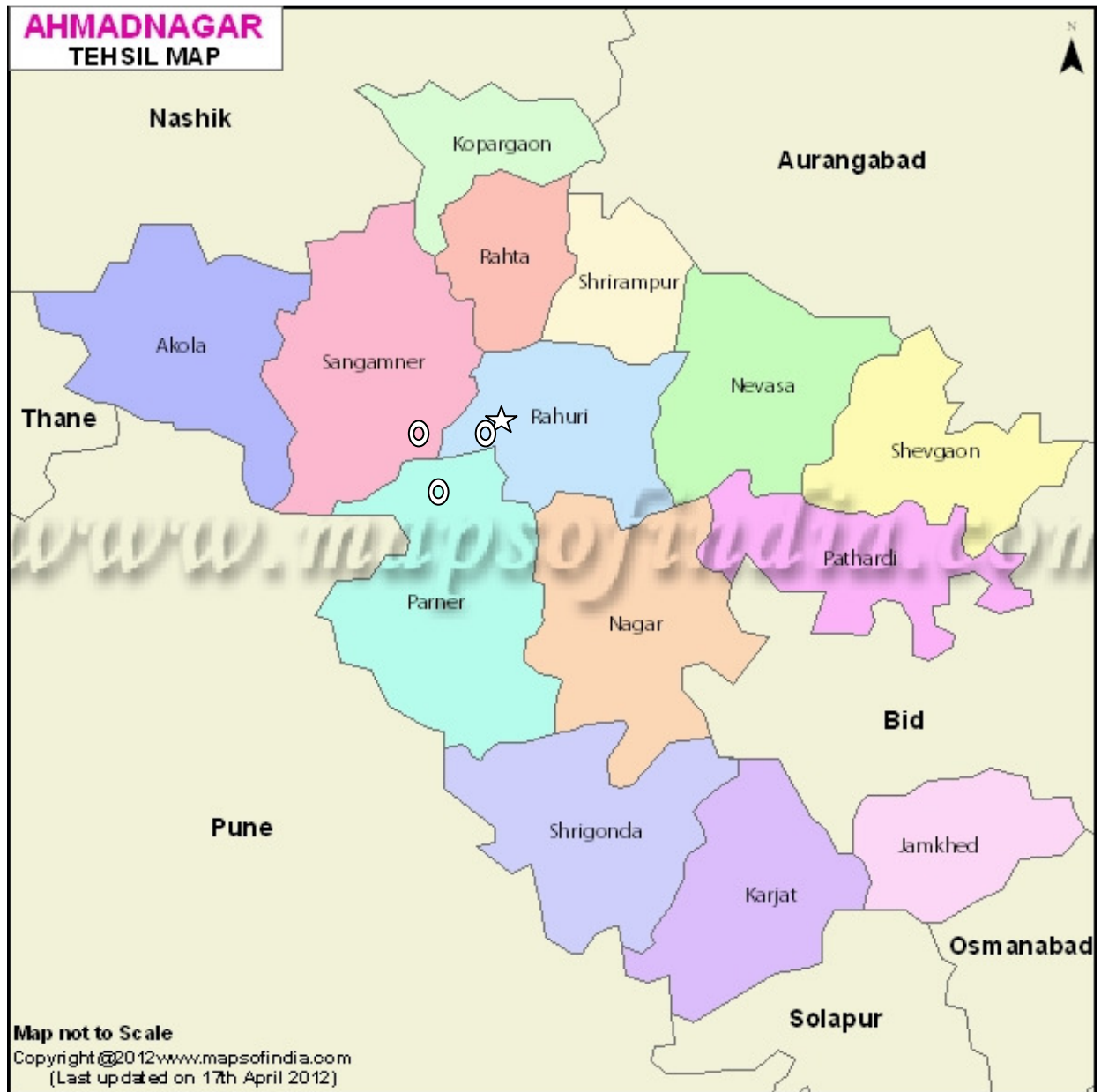
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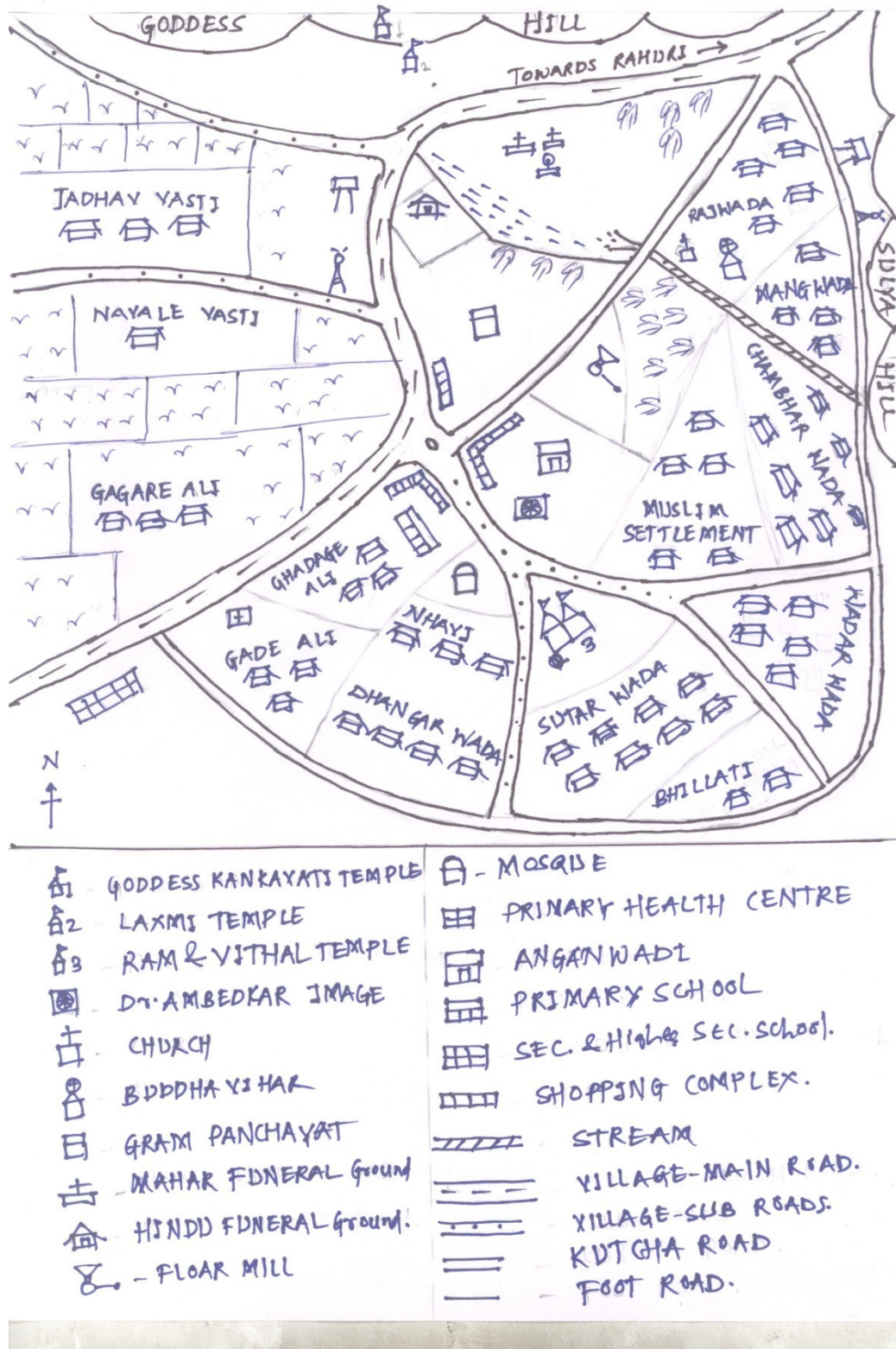
Map 1- Ahmednagar District Map with its Tehsils showing location of study village and atrocity cases.



☆ = location of Study Village in Rahuri Tehsil.

⊙ = Village locations of Atrocity Cases

Map 2- Map of the study village- Kangar Budruk.



Introduction

It has been observed that those people who are given low social status in caste hierarchy and treated unequally within Hindu-fold always have got attracted to the religion that advocated social equality at least in theory. The religions such as Buddhism, Sikhism and Jainism originated in India countering social inequality and discrimination prevailed in Hindu society providing alternative religious philosophy emphasizing social equality. However, even after conversion the Dalits in these new religions continued to maintain separate Dalit identity or given that particular identity and sometimes experienced discrimination.

Specifically about the Mahars from Maharashtra, they are converted to Buddhism as well as Christianity and few still remain as Hindu. The conversion to Buddhism has taken place in large numbers after Dr. B. R. Ambedkar's mass conversion movement of 1956. He called people to renounce Hinduism and convert to other religions that would give them dignity, equality and liberty. Dalits converted to other religions for emancipation as envisioned by Dr. B.R. Ambedkar. Those who converted along with Dr. B. R. Ambedkar in 1956 to Buddhism, almost all of them belonged to Mahar Caste (Zelliot, 2005). Today we find Mahars in Buddhism, Christianity and in Hinduism. But according to the Constitution (Scheduled Caste) Order, 1950 persons embracing religion other than Hinduism are not considered as members of Scheduled Caste. This order left Hindu Mahars who were converted to other religions out of reach of the benefits of the affirmative action. Subsequently the amendment to the Presidential Order, 1950 in the year 1990 has given Dalit Buddhists the scheduled caste status. However, Mahars in specific and Dalits in general converted to Christianity and Islam religion are not included in Scheduled Caste category.

Contrary to Constitution (Scheduled Caste) Order 1950 and Amendment 1990, though Hindu Mahars have renounced Hinduism and converted to other religion, have been targeted and subjected to atrocities, brutalities, deprivation, dehumanization and discrimination irrespective of what religion they have got converted into or what their socio-economic and political status is (Louis, 2007). The Government has enacted The Scheduled Castes and The Scheduled Tribes (Prevention of Atrocities) Act 1989 and formulated Rule 1995 (Hence forth called as Atrocity Act) to protect Scheduled Caste community from atrocities. Through this Act Mahars who still remain within Hindus fold and those converted to Buddhism got protection but those who converted to Christianity are struggling for same (Deshpande and Bapna, 2006).

Research Problem:

The present study tried to concentrate on Mahars with respect to their multiple religious identities. If the Dalits on the basis of conversion to particular religion are denied the SC status and protection under special laws, then how do we understand the religious identity construction among Dalits in such circumstances? It is also important to understand cultural and social relationship between Mahars themselves, Mahars converted to different religions and non-Mahars. The study has focused on how do Mahars construct their undivided caste identity? What is the conception of non-Mahars about Mahars religious identity and particularly those converted to other religions? Are there any differences in experiences of Hindu Mahars and those converted to Buddhism and Christianity in their day to day life? Did conversion to other religion contributed in lessening the chances of infliction of atrocities on the Mahars? What are the differences and similarities of experiences between Mahars

converted to different religions and assertion of new identities with reference to caste atrocities?

Review of Literature:

The review of literature in this proposal includes studies on Dalits in general with reference to the socio-economic conditions; discrimination and social status; religions and conversions; identities; and atrocities committed on the Dalits.

Studies relating to Dalits in general:

Dushkin (1967) while addressing one of the important question about who are the scheduled castes and under what circumstances they have been scheduled, she traced back the origin of Scheduled Caste term. It is the legal term used first by British India Government while listing Hindus of the lowest rung in caste hierarchy in the schedule added in Government of India Act 1935 for the purpose of statutory safeguards and other benefits. This scheduled caste category consists of diverse populations and is not a homogenous community or group. The most important criteria for identifying a caste to be included in the list was based on the practice of untouchability against particular caste by other castes.

Joshi's (1980) study has discussed socio-economic, political status of scheduled castes and role of the positive discrimination and special provisions in it. She has given historical background of scheduled caste policy in the country and discussed how scheduled caste emerged as one category of different castes of different characters. She says that every caste has different experience and faces different challenges, so the reason policy makers should

consider heterogeneity of scheduled caste within single category and should not consider them as a homogenous community.

She says that there are mainly four strategies adopted by Dalits to liberate themselves. First strategy is to acquire political power. This strategy has support from most Dalits because it provides prestige and it is also one of the means of achieving other ends for the Dalits. Second strategy is gaining as much economic independence from the dominant castes as possible. Economic dependence on dominant caste is one of the major causes for vulnerability of the Dalits. Third strategy is of internal social reforms primarily through education and changing life style. Fourth and final strategy she explains is religious change. Religious change is used not only for changing attitude but also self image and identity as well.

Dahiwale (1989) has critically analyzed interconnections among three aspects of Dalit entrepreneur's life- occupational shift, social mobility and affirmative action of the state. He argues that social mobility was impossible to achieve for the untouchable in the past as the society was static. There was interplay between untouchability and immobility. But post independence scenario with protective discrimination policies and programs made it possible for ex-untouchables to secure modern jobs. There is development of new social system which brought socio-economic changes in the life of scheduled castes people.

Deshpande (2005) brings a new dimension for our understanding of caste inequality in contemporary India. He says that social policy for Scheduled Castes in India is founded on the presumption that it is compensating for past injustices suffered by backward communities. This foundation of social policy has been strongly debated and questioned by

the opponents of affirmative action on the commonsense of caste inequality such as why should non-SC/ST's pay for alleged sins of their ancestors? His argument on this questions is that the contemporary caste inequality is not only relic of past, it's been reproduced in Independent India. He strongly suggests that scholars should work for bringing those new mechanisms to the notice of people so as to play important role in arresting reproduction of caste inequalities in contemporary India.

Thorat's (2009) one of the significant studies concerning Dalits in general and their status in India provides socio-economic status of scheduled castes and changes in them with respect to important human development indicators and the role of protective government policies and welfare provisions for Dalits. It has incorporated the analysis of demographic profile of SCs in terms of population growth, their regional concentration, gender dimensions and pattern of urbanization. Occupational pattern, access to land and capital, magnitude and characteristics of rural SC laborers, employment and unemployment rate in both rural and urban areas, and the incidence of poverty among them are the parameters used by Thorat to examine the social and economic status of the SC's. The analysis has also covered social development covering literacy and educational levels, health status and access to basic amenities such as housing, water and electricity. The study comprehensively brings out evidence of atrocities on SCs and the prevalence of discrimination against them in various spheres of public life, and suggests measures for the all-round upliftment of SCs in India.

Dalits in general and issues concerning to them have been studied by a number of scholars from different disciplinary backgrounds within social sciences like sociology, political science, economics and anthropology etc. and humanities as well. The focus has been on

Dalit's liberation and means to achieve those goals, which in turn include socio-economic, cultural, political and religious concerns of Dalits as these aspects are directly related to strategies used by Dalits for their liberation. Issues like social exclusion, untouchability, and caste based discrimination, inclusive development policies of state for welfare of community and hurdles to achieve socio-economic development and changes in the status of community compared to other non-Dalit castes and subgroups, religious conversion and Dalit identity are some of the important issues highlighted. Since focal point of present study is on Mahars from Maharashtra and their religious identity and its implication on atrocities inflicted on them and use of Atrocity Act much attention is given to the literature covering these aspects.

Studies on Conversion:

Gokhale (1986) in her study on Buddhist conversion of Maharashtrian untouchables argues that upper caste people have not changed their perception about the Buddhists as untouchable even after conversion. Conversion did not lead to new relations of equality between caste Hindus and ex-Mahars, and social contact between the two groups continues to be as constricted as it had been before the conversion. In addition there is consternation and anger because the new Buddhists dared to flout the eternal religion-Hinduism and no longer accepted their place in social hierarchy. The sociological effects of ideological changes and conversion of Maharashtrian Dalits are not only limited to upper castes but also has impact on the conduct of sociopolitical relationship among converted Buddhist from Mahar and Dalit community as whole.

Thorat (2002) in his paper "Hindu Social Order and Human Rights of Dalits", he says that, the reasons for continuation of practice of untouchability, discrimination and atrocities as

well as violent reaction by the higher castes are to be found in their continuing belief and faith in the sanctity of the institution of caste and in untouchability. The traditional Hindu social order continues to govern the thought process and behavior of the large majority of Hindus. The provisions in the Constitution and law are secular and equal but the customary rules of the caste system and the institution of untouchability are based on the principle of inequality in social, economic, cultural and religious sphere. This brings a conflict between the constitution and the traditional customary rules, norm, and values of the caste system and untouchability. People continued to follow the latter because it provides immense privilege and serves their social, political and economic interests. When the Dalits try to get equal access and 'assert' their rights, it often invites the anger of higher caste persons in the form of atrocities and physical violence.

Webster (2002) deals with one of the important trends in twentieth century in India, that is, Dalits, religion and liberation. He analyzes the religious strategies that Dalits have employed to liberate themselves from religiously sanctioned deprivation and discrimination by caste Hindus and changes it has undergone over the period of time. Since these changes include both religious innovation and conversion to other religion he has discussed four important aspects: religion, conversion, identity and liberation which are interlinked and central to the Dalit emancipation movement. According to him change in religion from the Dalit converts' point of view is a way of coping, resisting and surviving oppression. Apart from all these, religion has offered Dalits healing mechanism for the psychological consequences of oppression.

Robinson (2003) while discussing modes and strategies of conversion to Islam has argued that the notion of Islam spread everywhere by force or sword is over dramatized and in most of cases it is untrue. There are theories which suggest that people have converted to Islam because it was the religion of rulers at particular period of time in India and those converts had much to gain by aligning themselves with the religion of their rulers. Another theory argues that it is not force but the Sufis attracted people to the faith by their simple way of life and their stress on equality.

Clarke (2003) in his essay on conversion to Christianity argues that it is difficult to draw a single line about how Christianity linked with conversion in Indian society as there are multiple arrivals of Christianity to different regions and states in India. He further adds that conversion to Christianity came in the India in the form of political, economic and religious bundle. The enterprise of religious conversion adopted by Christian Missionaries exhibited many faces, from compassionately taking care of the orphans as a means of converting minors to Christianity to positively involved assurance of social advantages of Brahmanic communities within Christianity and negatively involved as legally eliminating conventionally enjoyed privileges for the elite Hindus. It also attracted marginalized population especially Dalits to convert in Christianity by making social and economic capital available through their positive relation with the colonial powers that ruled India.

Dr Ambedkar (2004:6) in his speech said “Conversion is necessary for your Emancipation and Advancement” delivered at Kalyan on 17th May 1936. To change this degraded and disgraceful existence into a golden life conversion is absolutely necessary. According to him conversion has two aspects, social as well as religious and material as well as spiritual.

Material aspect according to him is strength and power required for struggle. He says conversion is necessary for spiritual well being and explains what religion means to him. He quoted a definition given by Tilak one of the foremost leader of sanatani Hindus as ‘religion means the rules imposed for the maintenance of society’ (2004:12). The nature of those rules should be aiming to achieve ultimate happiness for individual.

While commenting on Dr Ambedkar’s stand on why change of religion is necessary and if there is any chance of internal reform within Hinduism Zelliott (2005) quotes Dr Ambedkar, “to remain in Hinduism and to attempt to abolish caste system is like sweetening poison”. (2005:11)

Michael (2005) analyses conversion process from marginalized people’s point of view. He has strongly argued that conversion is a powerful religio-meaning system to prevent and resist caste struggle even in pre-modern times. He points out that change of religion for untouchables was not primarily economic and social improvement but it was a search for freedom from caste oppression and an effort to change the social status.

Antony Raj (2006) has conducted comparative study between Scheduled castes and those of Christian converts from scheduled castes in Andhra Pradesh with respect to educational and occupational changes in converted and non-converted scheduled castes and their social mobility. This study concludes that conversion to Christianity has brought some transformation in the lives of the converts but it failed in erasing their past identity of caste. Conversion granted them new status of Christian but left them in their own caste group within Christianity.

Louis (2007) in his paper throws light on the problems faced by Christian converts of Scheduled Caste origin and their dilemma. He rejected the notion that in Christianity there is no caste as scriptures don't approve caste and therefore there is no caste discrimination. He argues that there is multiple discrimination of some Christians of SC origin; they are discriminated by caste Christians, by caste Hindus, by some Church authorities, by Dalits following other religions and by State itself.

Deshpande and Bapna (2008) in a status report on Dalits in the Muslim and Christian communities submitted to National Commission for Minorities, Government of India have addressed three important questions such as 1) what is the contemporary status of Dalit among Muslims and Dalit among Christians in terms of their material well being and social status? 2) How is their situation different from those of: a) the non-Dalit segments of their own communities and b) the Dalit segments of other communities? 3) Do the disabilities suffered by these groups justify state intervention within the spirit of the Constitution as interpreted by the judiciary, and in keeping with evolving national norms? It says there is no significant difference between inter Dalits status in every aspect across religions. However intra community caste differences are very high, Dalits in general are worse off than non-Dalits in same religious community. One of the significant finding of the study is that the Dalit Muslims and Dalit Christians are socially known and treated as distinct groups within their own religious communities and they are invariably regarded as 'socially inferior' communities by their co-religionists. In short, in most social contexts, Dalit Muslims and Dalit Christians are Dalits first and Muslims and Christians only second.

Gundimeda (2009) in his paper has argued that religion as emancipator in the context of converted Christians from scheduled castes in Andhra Pradesh is always seen as the best method to change the individual and group status through spiritual freedom and fellowship of equality. It is peripheral and does not lead to structural changes. He says Christianity enabled the Dalits to access spiritual experience and opened some material benefits, but it failed in giving them horizontal identity. The position of Dalits remained unchanged, the vertical identity retained caste hierarchy in Christianity. Therefore, he calls religious conversion as a mistaken emancipation since vertical identity remains prime in religion in Indian context.

Murali (2010) in his book 'Dalits and their Religions' has narrated association of Dalits with religion. He says Dalits in their own writings and autobiographies have expressed their strong association with religion. They have mentioned and presented themselves attached to some or other religion. He says each of Dalit has his or her own religion; Dalits are there in Christianity, Buddhism, Sikhism and Islam. Within the same family members practice different religions and different generations have different practice of religions.

Studies on Dalit Identity and Religion:

Tartakov (1994) has given a brief historical development of how Buddhism brought back to the nation of its origin from the status of the religion which ceased to exist as religious force in India. He says when Buddhism brought back to India through one of historic mass conversion of people majority from Mahar caste under the leadership of Dr Ambedkar; it was greatest challenge to change the identity and status of this untouchable community. According to the author new Buddhist in India has used visual imagery socially to explore, define and legitimize new Buddhist identity. They have done it through re-use of ancient

Buddhist imageries, importation of foreign imageries and invention of new imageries for identification, legitimating and the exploration of identity.

According to Zelliott (1996) identity and organization of Buddhist in India is a complex one. Buddhism before Dr. Ambedkar's conversion movement was as one of India's greatest contribution to the world and spiritual achievement and most importantly contribution to an anti-caste religion of rationality and egalitarianism. By identification with Buddhism after conversion the low caste and Dalit converts obtained largely psychological freedom more than intellectual gain. Though it gives greater courage and ambition for ex-untouchables, it does not create much difference in the minds of non-Buddhists, non-Dalit upper caste people. In Maharashtra since the majority of converts of Buddhism are from the Mahar caste, Baudh or Nav-Bauddh (New Buddhist) became alternative and synonymous with the Mahars. The ex-untouchable does not reach a position of equality automatically with conversion, but it does affect his attitude toward himself and his rights.

Alexander (1998) in his study on Pulaya the ex-untouchable caste from Kerala converted to Christianity has argued that ex-untouchables converted to Christianity are known as Neo-Christians and distinguished from the Syrian Christians. On the contrary converts from upper castes even though they have been converted recently are never called as neo-Christians and they are referred as Syrian Christians. Why Pulaya's never referred as Syrian Christian is because their connection with their past untouchable caste status. Their status in Christian community remained lower as that of Pulaya in Hindu religion. It is also observed that if converts from untouchable castes acquire good educational qualification and wealth and could manage to maintain life style like those of Syrian Christians there are chances of

interaction of these two groups but the fact is that there is vast difference between Pulaya converts and Syrian Christians in all spheres of life.

Kurane (1999) in her study on the Mahar converted to Buddhism in Pune, has analyzed the relationship between ethnic identity and the consequent social mobility. She argues that ethnic identity plays important role in bringing about social mobility of a community on which interaction takes place. Meaning of social mobility for her is a movement of an individual or groups from one social position to another; it includes change in one's education, occupation, and income, economic change in conditions, prestige, status, power and wealth. According to her Mahars converted to Buddhism got new ethnic identity and this ethnic identity provided them self-respect and self-esteem, dignity and pride. In the conclusion of her study she says that ethnic identity has become a strong basis for social mobility of the Buddhists. The people maintain Buddhist identity by adhering and propagating the doctrine of Buddhism and at the same time they have prevented themselves from preaching and following Hinduism and alienated themselves from Hinduism.

Shah (2001) argues that there are several Dalit movements in India; no movement is single and unified. Different Dalit movements highlighted different issues with different ideologies in different parts of the country. However, there is something common in all the movements; those are the quest for equality, self identity and eradication of untouchability. The struggle for identity is based on same principle that is self esteem and self image, though meaning of it differs from each other. The basis of Dalit identity formation is common culture and feeling of separateness from others which is unique.

Lobo (2001) in his study discusses dual identity of Dalits converted to Christianity, as they have their caste identity as well as religious identity. He gives example of Mahars from Maharashtra as they are termed as Christi Mahars in rural Maharashtra villages. They are no different from those of Hindu Mahars. Another manifestation of this dual identity is conversion and reversion according to opportunistic context. Whenever they want to take benefit of Christian institutes they proclaim their Christian Identity and when they look for government jobs they uphold their caste Hindu identity. He blames the state for giving scope for such a dual identity of converted Dalits as government has denied Christians the benefits granted to Hindu Dalits, Buddhist and Sikhs.

Arun (2007) has discussed the Identity formation among the Dalits in general and Paraiyar in specific in Tamil Nadu. He says conflict and symbols are the two major building blocks of the Paraiyar identity construction in which conflict leads to symbol and both conflict and symbol together give rise to the evolution of an identity. Change of identity for Paraiyar means disowning not symbol but meaning given by upper caste to those symbols in order to define them as low and polluted. He says there are three phases of identity formation for Paraiyar. Those are conflict, symbolic reversal and finally identity construction. In first phase of identity formation, conflict works as a creative and positive act, and also as a source for self consciousness. Conflict helped the Paraiyar to see inner-selves and their community. Self realization persuades them to form a new identity of their own and different from the one given by the upper castes. For that Paraiyar focused on symbols that defined their low identity and reinterpreted these symbols of social exclusion as symbols of their new identity. They have evolved new myths in contradiction to the conventional myths and which give positive meaning to symbols. Finally the process comes to the identity formation. For them

identity is the process of identification. What is significant in this is the change of meaning and practice resulting from it. The change of meaning gives them an opportunity to alter their perception of themselves and it helps them gain self respect and self dignity.

Studies on Atrocities

According to Second report of the National Commission for SCs and STs of the year 1993-94, economic dependency of the poor on rich non-SC/ST persons, social discrimination arising out of the practice of untouchability and the age-old urge to subjugate the weakest of the weaker sections make SCs/STs vulnerable to atrocities. There are many reasons for the occurrence of atrocities on SCs/STs: despite the special laws, crime and atrocities against Dalits still continue (Anonymous, 1995).

Shukla (2006) in his study deals with the issue of how caste loyalty of personnel from upper castes work in Indian judicial system and how Dalits are kept at distance when it comes to justice in atrocity cases. He has demonstrated this through two cases, the first one is about the former law minister P Shiv Shankar, a Dalit; he said that as policy, in some states if two judges have to be sworn in on the same day, the judge from the preferred community is sworn in first, so that the judge from the non-preferred community doesn't supersede him in becoming chief justice" (2006:4411). Second incident is about acquittal judgment of Bhanvari Devi rape case where District and Sessions Judge at Jaipur mentioned in the judgment that "Since the accused are upper-caste men, the rape could not have taken place because Bhanwari was from a lower caste".

Thorat and Negi (2007) in their working paper on violation of civil rights and atrocities in Maharashtra analyze the nature and causes of atrocities on Dalits pertaining to civil, social, economic, political and cultural rights and also to gender. They argue that since violence against Dalits has been rooted in the social structure and societal relations, there is very less deterrence despite provisions which protect them from the life of humiliation and subordination.

Teltumbade (2008) analyses one of the bitter experiences in the life of a Dalit family from Maharashtra where ritualistic massacre of 4 members of the family had taken place. He has described the mechanism of upper caste dominated political and state machineries, police, judiciary, and media, and how it worked collectively to secure the interest of upper caste perpetrators that executed the massacre. He unmasked some of the myths about Indian society when it comes to the atrocity. Further he also demystifies the role of globalization in eradicating caste, the civil society which comprises of progressive non-Dalits who are opposing caste and the theory constructed on Bahujan as oppressed majority class. He also rejected the correlation between economic development and incidents of atrocity. What matters to upper caste according to him is low caste status of an individual to be the prey for atrocity and nothing else.

Ramaiah (2011) states that there are many reasons why Dalits are still facing atrocities though there are special provisions and Laws for protection and welfare of Scheduled Castes. First, violence and discrimination against Dalits is justified under religious scriptures of Hindus. Since there is religious sanction one takes this issue of atrocities against them not very seriously. Second, Dalit being illiterate, ignorant and God-fearing themselves believe in

caste system and practice caste system among them. They also see an atrocity as a correction of their behavior. Third, the Dalits constitutes small number in villages and most of them are dependent on other castes for their livelihood, mostly on landlords of upper castes. Fourth the prolonged process of justice delivery system indirectly encourages commission of crime. Fifth, the given very low conviction rate of atrocity cases and majority of cases conclude with acquittal the victim becomes more vulnerable psychologically and economically and try to avoid facing further humiliation and harassment. Sixth, the overwhelming loyalty and sentiment of upper caste in Police and Judiciary towards their own castes often influence their decisions and judgments.

Sharma's (2012) working paper analyses crimes against SC and ST in India as an effect of change in the gap between upper and lower caste's standard of living. She argues that there is a positive correlation between the changes in relative economic position between the lower castes and upper castes and the incidents of hate crime. She says that more the gap between upper castes and SC/ST in their standards of living and economic expenditure, lesser the chances of committing crime against SC/ST by upper castes. Her analysis is based on the assumption that SC/ST's are meant to be low in their status compared to upper caste as prescribed in the scriptures of Hindu.

Rode, Tumsare and Bhardwaj (2013) in their study of experience of atrocity victims with judiciary, police and community have rejected the misconception about SC registers false atrocity cases and manipulative use of Atrocity Act against upper castes either to seek revenge or for monetary benefit which leads to high rate of acquittal in atrocity cases. They have argued that there is high rate of acquittal in atrocity cases not because false cases but

due to failure on the part of police, public prosecutor and judiciary to keep themselves free from any caste prejudices and loyalty towards their own castes.

From the above review of literature it may be stated that there are studies that highlighted the problem of Dalits with reference to their poor socio-economic and political condition across the states, region, religion and sects and their inability to resist the discrimination and domination of upper castes. Studies further focused on the conversion movement among Dalits as one of the strategy adopted by them for their own emancipation which has resulted in the formation of multiple identities of Dalits. Studies also dealt with intricacies on the formation Dalit identity. Many studies concerning Dalit conversion have dealt with impact of conversion on Dalits status and many of the studies have compared these with Dalits from other religion or with non-Dalit population of same community. Studies relating to atrocities have focused more on different types and forms of atrocities faced by Dalits, and reasons thereof. Another area of study about atrocities is examining protective legislative provisions and problems in their implementation at different levels.

It may be noted that the relationship between the Dalit's religion and atrocity is one area which is neglected and there are very few studies focusing on the situation of SCs from different religions with respect to atrocities that they face. There have not been studies that indicate any differences in the experiences as New-Buddhist (converted from Mahar caste) before they came under the category of Scheduled Caste and after being considered as Scheduled Caste so far as atrocities are concerned. There are no studies about Christian Mahars to reveal their experiences with reference to atrocities and their suffering as a result of not being considered as Scheduled Castes. Also studies are inadequate to reveal the

processes involved in the construction of multiple identities and how the non-Dalits construct the identity of Mahars with their religious background.

Mahar Caste¹:

According to 2011 All India Census Scheduled Caste population consists of 16.2% of India's total population. Maharashtra consists of 6.5% of countries total SC population. Compare to total population of Maharashtra, 10.2% of population is that of SC. In total SC population of Maharashtra almost 56.45% population is residing in its villages. That means only 43.55% SC population is urban. There are almost 59 castes in Maharashtra scheduled in Scheduled Caste list. Out of these 59 Caste Scheduled in SC list Mahar, Matang, Bhambi and Bhangi consists of 92% of SC population of the Maharashtra State. Mahar is the largest caste numerically among castes comprising majority of SC population in Maharashtra. Mahar consists of 60.30% of total SC population of Maharashtra. Mahar is one of the ex-untouchable castes in Maharashtra. Numerically largest among all other SC castes of Maharashtra, Mahars' are the important scheduled caste. After caste Marathas with 7.12% of total population of Maharashtra, numerically Mahar is the second largest caste in Maharashtra.

¹ Ahmednagar district consists of a total population of 45, 43,159 total populations, out of which consists of 22, 00,334 female and 23, 42,825 Male. Most of the district population is rural. On an average 79.91% people are rural which consist of 36, 30,542 of total district population. The District consist has 4.3% of total SC population of Maharashtra and it comes to 573,698. That means SCs' are 12.6% of the total population of the district. The Rahuri Tehsil in which the village Kangar Bk is located in Rahuri Tehsil of Ahmednagar district has 43,619 SC population, that is, 7.6% of total SC population in the Ahmednagar district. The majority SC population of Rahuri Tehsil is residing in villages and rural area. Almost 76.3% of SC population of Rahuri Tehsil is rural which is greater than average rural SC population of the State (Census, 2011).

Kurane (1999) referring to Karve (1951, 1961) states the fact that Mahar was an aboriginal tribe, and has non-Aryan and pre-Aryan origin. Eleanor Zelliot cites Irawati Karve (1951) stating that the Mahar is the thoroughly wide spread caste in Maharashtra and quotes the aphorism as far as the Mahars have gone, there is Maharashtra. Mahars are present all over the Maharashtra. There is a Marathi proverb that says '*Jethe gao tethe Maharwada*'². It means that wherever there is village, there is Mahar locality. People interpret it two different ways. Firstly it refers to the existence of Mahars in every village of Maharashtra. Second, the way of interpretation of the proverb is that in every village there is some dirt. Existence of Mahar locality in a village is termed as something impure and dirty. Both the interpretations highlight Mahar's existence in every village of Maharashtra and at the same time they are treated lower and dirt in the village.

Objectives:

In the light of above review of literature and the statement of problem, following objectives set for the present study.

1. To understand identity construction of Mahar caste by Mahars themselves and by non-Mahars.
2. To understand ways of maintaining the identity in different religions as Hindu Mahar, Buddhist Mahar and Christian Mahar.
3. To understand the relation between Mahars' assertion of new religious identity and effect on their access to Atrocity Act and its implication.

² Eleanor Zelliot, (1970). *Learning the use of political means: The Mahars of Maharashtra*. In Caste in Indian Politics, Kothari, Rajani (ed), Hyderabad, Orient Longman.

4. To understand the similarities and differences in experiences between Mahars converted to different religions with respect to Atrocity Act.

Rationale of the study:

Atrocities are inflicted on Scheduled Castes irrespective of one's social, economic, political and religious status by upper castes. Individual's low caste status within Hindu caste hierarchy is enough to justify atrocities inflicted on them. To get away with this barbaric practice, Dalits converted to other religions than their origin. Though Conversion helped Dalits to gain some peripheral change in their status but it failed to change their caste status at horizontal level to that of other upper castes. They remained same as they were with their previous religion. Their religious identity became multiple for various reasons. For non-Dalits they are Dalit first and their religious identity comes later. In fact there is consternation and anger because the Dalits dared to contravene the eternal religion-Hinduism and no longer accepted their place in social hierarchy. In addition to that government while extending the benefits granted to Hindu Dalits, they included Dalits from Buddhist and Sikh religion, but it denied those benefits to the Dalits converted to Christianity. Reality about continuation of atrocities perpetuated against Hindu Dalits and even those who converted to Buddhism and other religions are very true and known to us. The denial of protection under Atrocity Act has not left converted Christians of SC origin free from the vulnerability of atrocities.

Apart from this the living experiences of every caste included in the category of scheduled castes is different. The experiences vary based on their religious affiliations, geographic location, region and language etc. Though they are different from each other, they still form one category as scheduled caste on the basis of some common disabilities. In addition to that

non inclusion of Mahars converted to Christianity in SC list created another group within same caste. Most of the studies concerning Dalits and atrocities on them are focused on scheduled caste as one category. There are very few studies that focused on a particular caste. The present study has focused on religious identity of Mahars within Hindu fold and Mahars converted to different religions and what implications the Atrocity Act has with respect to new religious identities of Mahars’.

Theoretical Framework:

Present study is about multiple religious identities of Mahars’ and their relation with Atrocity Act, following the dimensions of identity with respect to construction of multiple religious identity and implications for Atrocity Act.

As McQueeney, quoted in Meeks et al. (2006) argues that most sociologists make three assumptions about identity. First, identities are not inborn, they are socially constructed, we learn them in childhood, and continue to learn and relearn them throughout our lives. Second, identities are fluid: they can change over time and across situations. And third, we perform identities in social interaction. This indicates that identity is never well finished final product. It is always in the process of formation. So it is always difficult to point it them.

Jenkins (1996) says identity is not just there, it must be always established, we need to actively identify with and against equally. According to him identification reveals two kinds of relationship with people and things; first the relation of similarity, and second the relation of difference. For him identity can only be understood as the process. He quoted Boon to explain the process of understanding Identity, according to him it is the process in which we

come to know who we are and who others are and reciprocally other people's understanding of themselves and of others including us. In this process there is dialectic of internal and external identification. Therefore identity construction is conceptualized as self and other mutual identity construction dichotomy.

Since the study is concentrating on religious identity, it is also important to link religion with identity. But before entering in to that lets define what is mean by religion. For this I have referred definition given by Durkheim. According to him, religion is a "unified system of beliefs and practices relative to sacred things, that is to say, things set apart and forbidden beliefs and practices which unite into one single moral community called a Church, all those who adhere to them" (Durkheim, 1995:44). Durkheim's definition emphasizes more on the importance of religious belief and practices, which are sacred. This sacred gets it's meaning in connection with forbidden acts. Sacredness is maintained by protecting and prohibited from something which is not considered as sacred.

When there are some beliefs and practices which constitute religion, the question arise here is why we need those sacred practices and beliefs. For this I refer to Weber's idea of "prophecy". Prophecy in any religion is one of important aspect of understanding religion and identity it can give to its followers. Weber divided prophecy in two different types, first '*exemplary prophecy*' and second '*emissary prophecy*' (Weber, 1946:285). Exemplary prophecy refers to the path to salvation by exemplary way of living, usually by a contemplative and apathetic ecstatic life. The exemplary prophet challenges the status quo by living an ideal life, with an example being the Buddha. On the other hand emissary prophecy addresses its demands to the world in the name of God. The emissary prophet is sent by God

to bring a message that people need to live differently (Weber, 1946). The emissary prophecy believe that one possesses a truth from God that must be shared with others, and even imposed on others in order to save them.

When Dr. Ambedkar called for mass conversion into Buddhism, he had also challenged the Hindu religion with respect to low status of untouchables in caste hierarchy and he promised better future after conversion. He suggested the ideal way of living for those converted to Buddhism and gave new religious identity different from that of Caste Mahar of Hindu Religion. Similarly Christianity is outcome of emissary prophecy considering Jesus as the Son of God as their messenger who came to save them. The followers of this prophecy get religious identity of Christianity.

In addition to this religion is defined further in terms of beliefs and rites. According to Durkheim religious beliefs are ideas, concepts, values, and states of opinion on religious practices and religious rites are particular modes of action in the religious realm (Durkheim, 1995). He says religious rites are related with the idea of the Sacred, “rites are rules of conduct that prescribe how man must conduct himself with sacred things” (Durkheim, 1995:38). The Sacred can be understood as something that is protected and isolated by taboos. He further defined the thing to which such taboos are applied and that must keep a distance from what is sacred as profane. Further he says that the Sacred is not similar to the divine. As per him not only gods and spirits that can be sacred, but also things like rocks, trees, pieces of wood, in fact anything can be sacred. That means anything considered sacred in particular religious belief is part of that particular religion and gives religious identity to devote of that sacred.

Durkheim also says that “religious sacred and profane life cannot coexist in the same time” (Durkheim, 1995:312). Sacredness requires religious rituals to be performed at special time and space. These ideas of sacred places and sacred times of Durkheim’s are considered here to understand the importance of religious places and times in formation of religious identity in Mahars with respect to Hindu Temples, Buddha Vihar and Church as their sacred spaces and to further understand the sacred time of religious rituals and identities generated from it.

In light of above discussion of concepts of identity and religion relation between religion and identity of Mahar and their religious identity construction has been looked in the following major categories:

1. Construction of caste identity among Mahars in situation where caste violence and atrocity committed by upper caste members.
2. Identity of Mahars based on their occupation and differences with respect to non-Mahars
3. Particular type and pattern of food habits and their contribution to the identity formation
4. Identity constructed through political affiliation of community members to particular political party
5. Identities constructed through following of particular life cycle ceremonies and distinct religious rituals and practices
6. Identities based on preferences given to marriage partners and rituals
7. Identity constructed through identification of specific symbols for specific religion, group of people and community

8. Identities determined on the basis of participation shown in particular religious practices and following religious idols
9. Identities constructed on the basis of ideal way of life prescribed by particular religion for its followers

In addition to this, Mahars have formed new religious identity after conversion to Buddhism and Christianity. So it is also very important to understand how have they demarcated the boundaries between their previous caste identities and newly formed religious identity. As Barth (1969) says that an ethnic group can be defined in terms of their objective attributes like language, religion, territory, color, diet and dress. He gives definition of ethnic groups adopted from Naroll, ethnic group 1) is a largely biological self- perpetuating, 2) shares fundamental cultural values, realized in overt unity in cultural form, 3) makes up a field of communication and interaction, and 4) has a membership which identifies itself, and is identified by others as constituting a category distinct from other categories of the same order. According to Barth boundaries are very important to define ethnic group identity.

It is boundaries that define ethnic group and not culture enclosed in it. With the help of this explanation given by Barth about ethnic identity, I have explored the religion as ethnic identity of Mahars, their way of maintaining boundaries. Though religious conversion offered them new identity and psychological freedom and confidence. But it is also true that they are struggling to maintain those boundaries strictly due to caste prejudices of other non-Mahar communities in their day to day life. Mahars are asserting their new religious identity through their culture but while doing so they have to fall back on their caste identities or caste group for many other things. This has led them to oscillate between their previous caste

identity and new religious identities which ultimately resulted into Mahars getting multiple religious identities.

Methodology:

Research design-

This research is based on descriptive design. This research is descriptive because the socioeconomic situation and culture was described and presented on the basis of facts revealed by data. It also describes the relationship between the multiple religious identities among Mahars and implication of Atrocity Act. This research is qualitative in this sense that most of the information was taken on the basis of field observations, semi structured interviews, and case studies.

Rationale of selection of study area-

The study has been undertaken in a village of Ahmednagar district of Maharashtra. The reason behind selecting this village from this particular district is that the district saw its first conversion into Christianity from Dalit community way before Ambedkar's conversion movement in 1956. Therefore, there is diversity in religious belief among Dalits in this district. It is also because people from same village belonging to the same caste have converted to different religions. In addition to that recently a number of cases of atrocities on Dalits are reported in the district. Further, in this village some Mahars are converted to Buddhism and Christianity and while some are still following Hindu religion. Apart from this, a family from the community has faced atrocity from the dominant Maratha upper caste family of the village. Since the purpose of research is to explore the multiple religious

identities among Mahars and implications of Atrocity Act it is felt that this village gives good opportunity to meet the objectives of the study.

Technique and tools of data collection-

Household survey:

For the present study mixed method of data collection was used. The quantitative data pertaining to personal identification, religious distribution of Mahar caste population in village, population composition of family, age, sex composition, family size, education, occupation, landholding of family, their income and expenses, etc. primarily are collected through a household survey.

Participant and non participant observations:

Qualitative data are collected through participant and non-participant observations by participating in programs like prayers organized by Christian families and festivals like Ambedkar Jayanti celebration, birthday celebrations of children, etc. and also in daily life activities in village, various religious rituals of community. Participation has given insights into socio-political activities of the community by closely observing and joining political campaigns during 2014 Loksabha elections in the village. Non-participant observation with reference to food habits, lifestyle, dress, agriculture practices, education system, health condition, and surrounding and condition of their settlement helped to understand the total situation. Check list was used during observations so that things that required to be observed carefully otherwise which are likely to be left unobserved.

Unstructured Interviews

Unstructured interviews were held pertaining to the construction, maintenance and assertion of religious identity among Mahars. Community leaders, priests, head of the households, village headman, officials in village like Gramsevak, Talathi etc, women, children, elderly people from community, farmers, laborers etc were interviewed. The interviews were open ended type. Respondents had much freedom to express their views freely. The interviews were arranged as per convenient time and place of the respondent's choice.

In-depth Case study

In-depth Case studies pertaining to atrocity incidents on Mahar caste family were taken to understand deeply their experiences. Cases were identified with the help of one of organization namely Churches Auxiliary for Social Action (CASA) working in the area for community under study. Three such atrocity cases were selected from different villages and one of the villages where atrocity occurred was selected for detailed study. The cases were studied from multiple sites to develop much nuanced interpretation of phenomenon.

Chapter Schema

Apart from Introduction and Conclusion this dissertation includes four major chapters. The chapterization is done in the following manner.

Chapter one looks into Community profile of the village and specifically of Mahar caste of the village. The geographical location of study area has been described in this chapter. It includes details about village location, connectivity with nearest towns; its climate etc. There is also a brief description about demographic details of village. Detailed demographic

information about socioeconomic characteristics of Mahar caste population has also provided in this chapter. It includes sex, education level, occupations, size of family, family consumption expenses, habitation and living condition etc.

Chapter two, deals with religious identity construction and ways of maintaining it in different religions. It also tries to understand how these newly constructed religious identities are different from their previous caste identity which is imposed on them. By taking the case of Mahars in Maharashtra it tried to show that there are multiple (different) religious identities existed among Mahars in the same village.

Chapter three examines the problems of Mahars in maintaining newly constructed religious identity without confusing it with their previous caste identity. What are the difficulties and challenges they face to maintain the new religious identity. It also explores whether those newly forms of religious identities are free from their previous caste stigma and notions of purity, and whether or not accepted as equal to others in social status and hierarchy.

Chapter four describes the experiences of Mahar caste people with respect to assertion of new religious identity and implications for Atrocity Act. It also deals with the impact of their new religious identity to access the Atrocity Act and the impact of limited access to protection under Atrocity Act on the assertion of new religious identity.

Chapter 1: Kangar Budruk: The Village Profile

Administratively Maharashtra State has been mainly divided into six divisions: 1. Konkan-Mumbai division; 2. Western Maharashtra- Pune division; 3. Khandesh- Nashik division; 4. Marathvada- Aurangabad division; 5. Vidarbha- Nagpur division, and 6. Vidarbha- Amravati Division. Ahmednagar district falls under Khandesh division of Maharashtra, having its head quarter at Nashik. It is also called as Nashik division. With total area of 17413 square Kilometers Ahmednagar is the largest district of Maharashtra. Geographically the district is located at 18.2 to 19.9 degrees North Latitude and 73.9 to 75.5 degrees East Altitude and shares its boundaries with Thane, Nashik, Aurangabad, Bid, Osmanabad, Solapur and Pune Districts of Maharashtra. The district is named after its headquarter city which was founded by Ahmed Nizam Shah in 1494 AD and named after him as Ahmednagar.

There are mainly three physical divisions of Ahmednagar district: 1. western hilly region, 2. central plateau region and 3. the region of northern and southern plains. This variation in geography of the district gives it diverse climatic and weather conditions. Western hilly region of the district experiences heavy rainfall during June to September monsoon period where as the other regions in the district experience shortage of rain even during monsoon. The average rainfall in the Ahmednagar district is 566 mm annually. The maximum and minimum temperature of the district is 36.38 and 19.92 degree Celsius respectively.

Godavari and Bhima- a contributory of river Krishna are the two principal rivers that flow through the district. Apart from these two rivers there are rivers like Pravara, Mula, Sina and Dhora that flows through the district. Pravara is main contributory of the Godavari River in the district. The Bhandardara and Mula are the two important dams in the District

constructed on Pravara and Mula River respectively which are the main stay for district's irrigation and drinking water supply schemes.

Village Location and Means of Communication:

The village under study is Kangar Budruk, a small village that falls under Rahuri Taluka (Tehsil) of Ahmednagar district. It is located at 70 Km north to its district head quarter Ahmednagar. Village is connected with the Ahmednagar- Manmad state highway by 7 km tarred (pakka) road which intersect the highway at a place called Rahuri-Factory. From Rahuri factory the roads are connected to Rahuri, Deolali Pravara, Shrirampur, Shirdi and Ahmednagar. The Rahuri town which is also headquarter of the Rahuri Taluka (tehsil) is located at 13 Kilometers from the village.

The village is connected by the state transport bus service with its Taluka headquarter Rahuri. There is only a state transport bus which comes to village only two times in a day. The bus which originates from Rahuri Bus depot goes to Mhaisgaon village passing through the Kangar Bk. village. The last bus reaches Kangar in the evening at 7:15 P.M, and returns only next day in the morning at 7:15 AM while on back journey from Mhaisgaon to Rahuri. Apart from this state transport bus service there is an alternative private transport system available in the village; people call it *vadap*. These private vehicles run on shared basis. Minimum 10 passengers are required for one vehicle to set it for journey.

History of the Village Kangar Budruk:

There is a myth which says that the Godesses Kankavati, a village deity, found her place in the hills of Kangar village by carving out a cave to stay there. People when found this, then

they settled around the hill so that they can serve the goddesses Kankavati. The name of the village is originated from the name of goddesses Kankavati. Initially the name of village was Kanak Nagar, with passage of time people pronounced merging two words Kanak Nagar into a single word Kangar. The local government body called *Gram Panchayat* was set up first in the village in the year 1958 in post independent era.

Weather, Climate, and Rainfall:

The Village falls under semi drought area of the Rahuri Tehsil, as it frequently experience shortage of rain and this leads to drought situation in village. There are three seasons. Prime rainfall season for the village is south-west monsoon which is the main source of rain for the Indian subcontinent that is in months of June to September. There are some regions which get rain in month of October to December called north-east monsoons but very rarely this village gets north-east monsoon. Winter is the next season followed by monsoon which lasts for four months through out October to January. People of the village face tough summer. Dry weather and high temperature is the characteristic of summer here. Though summer is at its peak in the months of April and May, it starts showing its effects from month of February on words and it lasts till it rains in month of June.

Village Demographics:

As per census data 2011, village comprises of 771 households and 3787 total population. Out of which 1938 are male and 1849 are female. Scheduled Caste and Scheduled tribes are 18.6% and 6.8% of the total population of the village. In numbers, the Scheduled caste

population is 705 out of which 355 are male and 350 are female, and the population of tribe in village is 259 out of which 120 are male and 139 are female.

About 75.4% population of village is literate and almost 24.6% is illiterate. About 83.9% male population is literate where as only 66.6% female is literate in the village. Illiteracy among women of the village is more than that of men. Village literacy percentage is much lower than average state literacy rate.

Social Organization:

Though the inhabitations of the village are predominantly Hindu there are people from other religions such as Islam, Buddhism, and Christianity. By caste and tribe classifications the tribal people belong to Bhill tribe and the rest being castes. Religious and Caste consciousness among villagers is very visible. Everyone knows about each other's caste and religion. Generally people identify each other's caste and religions based on their family surnames. The following Table indicates caste, religious identifications found in the village with their family surnames.

Table 1.1 Castes in village, their Surnames and Religions

Sr. No	Name of Caste	Religion	Surname of the caste/ Religion
1.	Brahmin (Priest)	Hindu	Navale
2.	Vani (Trader)	Hindu	Nahar
3.	Maratha (Cultivator)	Hindu	Jadhav, Pavase, Varghude, Jagadale, Ghadage, Nalkar, Gagare, Gade

4.	Dhangar (Grazer)	Hindu	Balme, Yele, Khemnar, Inar, Bachkar
5.	Nhavi (Barber)	Hindu	Kute, Dudhade, Khandagale
6.	Teli (Oil Presser)	Hindu	Gawali, Ambekar
7.	Gosavi	Hindu	Gosavi, Giri, Puri
8.	Sutar (Carpenter)	Hindu	Divekar, Pradhan
9.	Kumbhar (Potter)	Hindu	Kumbhar
10.	Mahar	Hindu	Dive, Jadhav, Vidhate, Shinde, Rupavate, Ubale, Kasbe, Kedari, Ohal, Shejval, Arude, Mantode, Dushing, Pawar, Donde, Pandit, Shingade, Solas, Rayrand
		Buddhist	
		Christian	
11.	Mang/ Matang	Hindu	Lahunde
12.	Chambhar	Hindu	Jadhav
13.	Wadar	Hindu	Dukare
14.	Bhill	Tribe	Jadhav, Barde, Mali
15.	Muslim	Muslim	Shaikh, Inamdar, Patel, Sayyad, Attar

Language:

Though predominantly Marathi is the language spoken by almost every single villager, there are some other language speakers. Different languages are spoken by group of people of particular caste and religion. The Muslim population in village mostly speaks Hindi and Urdu among themselves and Marathi with non-Muslims in their day to day intercourse. Wadar is the scheduled caste in the village; they have their own dialect without script. They speak Wadar dialect among themselves and Marathi with non-Wadar people. Bhil population of

village has their own Bhill dialect in which they communicate with each other and use Marathi to communicate to non-Bhills.

Even though Marathi is largely spoken in the village, it has its own dialectical difference of accent. As stated earlier this village falls under Khandesh division of state and it has Khandeshi tone of Marathi. But within Khandesh division and in the villages that fall under Ahmednagar district the dialect of Marathi language spoken called as *Nagari* dialect.

Settlement Pattern in the Village:

As mentioned above there are people from different religions and castes stay in the village and as such there is a specific pattern in which households of particular religion and caste are located in village. People from a particular caste and religion stay together in one locality and that locality is known by the caste of the people who reside there (see map 2). For example the people from *Mang* caste are staying in a locality. It is called as *Mang Wada* /*Mangavda*. The location of the tribal *Bhill* people is called as *Bhillhati*. The *Chambhar* caste people stay at *Chambhar Wada*. The locality in which *Mahar* caste people reside is called *Rajwada*. But in case of Marathas and Brahmin and other non-Dalit castes their localities are mostly known by their Surnames. There are some Maratha families living inside the village and some are staying outside the village in their agriculture land; these localities are termed as '*Ali*' and '*vasti*' respectively prefixed by their surnames. So there are some Maratha families who have surname as Ghadage and the locality they are living is called as *Ghadage ali* if they are living in village and called *Ghadage vasti* if they are staying outside the village. Same is with other Marathas having different surnames. The locality of Maratha of Gade surname is called as *Gade Vasti*. There is only one Brahmin house in village. The

locality of the Brahmin house is also called as *Navale Vasti*. Navale is the surname of the Brahmin caste in the village.

All the Dalit castes of the village are located towards the east side of the village on the outskirts and peripheral side of the village. One Dalit caste is sharing its neighborhood with another Dalit caste. Inside the Dalit localities there are localities of castes considered lower than the Marathas and higher than the Dalit castes. Those castes are artisan's caste such as Sutar, Nhavi, Dhangar, Vani, Teli etc. Maratha households are located at main *Gawthan* area of the village sharing their neighborhood not with Dalit castes but with other non Dalit – artisan castes of the village.

Village Deity, Temples and Festivals:

As stated earlier there are mainly four religions in village viz; Hinduism, Islam, Buddhism and Christianity. There are several Hindu temples, a Muslim mosque and a Church in the village. There are mainly seven temples of Hindu gods and goddesses in the village. The temples of Hindu gods and goddesses include goddess Kankavati, Lord Shiva (Mahadev), Lord Hanuman, Vitthal-Rakhumai, Goddess Lakshmi, Goddess Satvai, and Sant Maharaj (God man). A temple of a village deity called Kankavati (see plate no. 6) is located in the cliff of a hill located towards north side of Gawthan (village settlement). The temple of Lord Shiva is located at outskirts of the village. Hanuman temple and Vitthal- Rakhumai temple are situated in the centre of the village at Bazar patangan (Market ground). In the same locality there is a mosque near Hanumann and Vitthal- Rakhumai temple. The temple of goddess Laxmi (see plate no. 7) is situated near goddesses Kankavati temple. Goddesses Kankavati is

the village deity and the Village got its name after the goddesses Kangavati, as mentioned before.

Different religious festivals and programs of different religions in village are organized mainly by people from that particular religion. Since majority of the population of the village is Hindu the main festivals celebrated publicly where the entire village participates are Hindu festivals like *Kankavati Devi Yatra* (goddess Kankavati Festival) and *Dnyaneshwari³ Parayan*. There are the two main festivals celebrated publicly in the village. All the organizers and volunteers are from caste Hindu. Villagers belonging to Hindu castes mostly from Maratha are the main organizers of *Yatra/* Festivals. They lead the organizing committee of the Village's religious festivals. Those committees are called as *Yatra Committee* (Festival Committee). It is their responsibility to organize those festivals in village every year. People from other castes and religion may participate in the festivals but as outsider and onlookers only.

Similarly Muslims, Christians and Buddhists celebrate their own festivals in which members of the religious community participate. People from other castes and religion participate in those festivals; here also we find participation of people from other religions also as observers for fun and entertainment.

The Dalits of neo-Buddhism celebrate Ambedkar Jayanti and these are Mahars. Among the people belonging to Mahar caste there are Buddhists and Christians the organizing committee

³ Dnyaneshwar is the saint of Bhakti movement/ *Varkari Sampraday* in Maharashtra which preaches God Vitthal and Goddesses Rakhumai of Pandharpur. He had translated Bhagwat Gita- a Hindu Sacred book from Sanskrit language into Prakrit language with illustrations in simple words for the common people. This translated version of Gita is called as Dnyaneshvari.

collects contribution to organize the Ambedkar Jayanti program in village. Other caste people including other than Scheduled Caste category and also other than Mahar caste participate and attend the program, but they do not play any important role in its planning and execution of the program. It is the sole responsibility of Mahar caste people of the village to organize Ambedkar Jayanti every year. If not they, no one initiates to organize and conduct Ambedkar Jayanti in a village.

Political Institutions:

The Group Gram Panchayat in village established was in the year 1958. Gram Panchayat is the foundation of panchayat system. Sarpanch is the head of the Gram Panchayat and ultimately of village also. Elected members of Gram Panchayat, the Sarpanch and the Deputy Sarpanch will continue in the office for a term of five years. There are eleven members out of whom seven members are from open category, two are from OBC category and one each from Scheduled Caste and Scheduled Tribe category. All these members are elected through direct election by the adult voters of the village. From them Sarpanch and Deputy Sarpanch one elected. There are two election panels for Gram Panchayat elections in village supported by different political parties. Interested eligible candidates contest the election either from Janseva panel or Vikas panel. Whichever panel wins the majority seats under their panel, they elect their Sarpanch from among elected members. Janseva panel is supported by political party, namely, Shiv Sena and Vikas panel is supported by political party, namely Rashtravadi (Nationalist) Congress Party (NCP). Current position Sarpanch of the village is held by a Scheduled Caste member under the reserved category who has in the Vikas panel supported by the NCP.

There are several groups' and associations in village. Some groups are exclusively of particular caste and some are mixed caste groups and associations. Ambedkar Jayanti Utsav Committee is a group consisting of Mahar caste people and no other caste person is member of this group. This group is supported by RPI (Athawale) Party. Similarly Shiv Jayanti Utsav Mandal is another group in which predominantly Maratha caste people are the members. There are two other organizations in village which are covertly involved in political activities of village. Predominantly they are religious organizations, formed to organize religious festivals in village. These are Akhand Harinam Saptah/ Dnyaneshwari Parayan Committee and Kankavati Devi Yatra Committee. Saptah Committee is mainly managed by Political leaders working for Janseva Panel and Devi Yatra committee is managed by Political leaders working for Vikas panel.

Educational institutions:

The educational institutions in village are of two types: first, governmental institution run by state and second semi governmental institutions run by private institutions supported by state funding. The educational institutions are further divided into three levels: Primary and Secondary and Higher Secondary Schools. There is primary school in a village up to 5th Standard run by Zilla Parishad. After 5th Standard students go to secondary school to attend 6th standard which is continued till 10th Standard run by private institution namely Prasad Madhyamik Vidyalaya. The same organization runs Kanishta Mahavidyalaya- Junior college for class 11 and 12 higher secondary school in the village. There are Science and Arts streams available for students to choose from for their junior college. Students after 12th

standard (HSC) go to senior college to pursue their under graduation from colleges located in nearby towns.

There are seven Anganwadies in village, run by Zilla Parishad under Integrated Child Development Scheme (ICDS) for the children below 6 years. The main objective behind starting these Anganwadies is to give pre-primary education and orientation towards education to children below six years and also look after their nourishment and well being.

Mahar Caste:

The conversion of Mahar to Christianity in Kangar village can be traced back to the introduction of Christian missionaries in Ahmednagar district around 1956. Satish Torne, the personal assistant of Bishop of Nashik Division said that the first church built in Ahmednagar district was for Mahars. It was only in the year 1956 when Dr. Ambedkar led a movement of mass conversion of Mahars to Buddhism, some Mahars from Ahmednagar also got converted to Buddhism. In this line Kangar village witnessed two types of conversions, first one to Christianity and the other to Buddhism. Apart from this there are some families still follow Hindu religion. Thus Mahars of the Kangar village follows three different religions.

According to census 2011, Scheduled Caste population of the village is 705 which constitute 18.62% of total population of the village. Mahar, Mang/Matang, Chambhar and Wadar are the castes belonging to scheduled caste category. As per household survey conducted in village, the Mahar caste has a total population of 373 which accounts to 52.9% of total Scheduled Caste population of the village.

The Table 1.2 shows the population details of Mahar caste by origin. Total 80 families are there in village belonging to Mahar as their caste of origin. Out of 80 families 30 families said they believe in Hindu religion, where as 21 families believes in Buddhism and 29 families believe in Christianity.

Table 1.2 Distribution of Mahars by Religion

Sr. No.	Religion	Total Households	Population		
			Male	Female	Total
1.	Hindu	30 (37.5%)	67 (17.9%)	65 (17.4%)	132 (35.4%)
2.	Buddhist	21 (26.3%)	58 (15.5%)	46 (12.4%)	104 (27.9%)
3.	Christian	29 (36.2%)	76 (20.4%)	61 (16.4%)	137 (36.7%)
4.	Grand Total	80 (100%)	201 (53.8%)	172 (46.2%)	373 (100%)

Mahar Habitation and living conditions:

Mahar households in the village are located at the outskirts towards the east of the *Gawthan* (main village) called as *Rajwada* (King's Palace). Here all Mahars live irrespective of their religious faith. A mud road connects *Rajwada* to main road which connects the village with State highway. The same mud road also connects *Rajwada* to the main village (*Gawthan*) at market place near *Gram panchayat* office. Since village's main road goes through market place of the village, this mud road which connects *Rajwada* with main road and main village intersect main road at two places, one at village outskirts towards north east side of the *Gawthan* and second at market place of the village.

There are altogether 80 households in the village belonging to Mahar caste that embraced presently Hinduism, Buddhism and Christianity. Out of which near about 49 (61.3%)

households owns pucca houses whereas 23 (28.7%) of households are still in kutcha houses and 8 (10%) are in huts. From 30 (37.5%) households belonging to Hindu-Mahar, 18 (22.5%) households are having pucca houses where as nine (11.3%) households are having kutcha houses and still there are 3 (3.7%) households in huts. Similarly out of 21 (26.3%) Buddhist households in the village, 14 (17.5%) are in pucca houses, whereas five (6.3%) households are in kutcha houses and still there are two (2.5%) households in huts. With respect to type of dwelling out of 29 (36.2%) Christian households in village, 17 (21.2%) households in pucca house, whereas nine (11.3%) are in kutcha houses and still three (3.7%) households are in huts.

Table 1.3 Housing and Dwelling Pattern of Mahar Community

Sr. No.	Religion	Type of Household			
		Pucca	Kutcha	Huts	Total
1.	Mahar	18 (22.5%)	9 (11.3%)	3 (3.7%)	30 (37.5%)
2.	Buddhist	14 (17.5%)	5 (6.3%)	2 (2.5%)	21 (26.3%)
3.	Christian	17 (21.2%)	9 (11.3%)	3 (3.7%)	29 (36.2%)
4.	Grand Total	49 (61.3%)	23 (28.7%)	8 (10%)	80 (100%)

The pucca houses (see plate no. 2) are made up of brick and cement walls, iron rods and tin roof, and wooden door and windows. In some cases the walls are made up of stones and cement as well. Kutcha houses (see plate no. 2) are made up of bricks/stones and mud walls, wooden support for the roof, and the roof is made up of dry leaves or thatch. However, the huts (see plate no. 3) are entirely made up of thatch or dry leaves or in some cases mud wall

and dry leaves. Most of the pucca houses have two rooms; one is used as kitchen and another as living room. In the night both kitchen and living rooms are used as bedrooms. A Kutcha house has only single room which is used for all purposes.

There is no proper drainage and sanitation system for the houses in Mahar locality. None of the household has toilet in their home. Everyone from the community goes out for open defecation. Bathrooms are there but most of the bathrooms don't have roof. Waste water from bathroom seep out to open space. Most of the time the wild bushes grow around the open space where waste water from houses get release. Almost every household has tap water connection provided by *Gram panchayat* of the village through public water supply scheme. The village gets water from Mula dam located at a nearby place. Almost all the houses have their own electricity connection.

With exception of six households, every household has a mobile phone. Mostly male members of the household possess the mobile phone. There some cases where women also possess mobile, but it is very rare. There are 24 households of community that own two-wheeler and there is only one household that owns an auto rickshaw. Out of 80 households 69 (86.2%) houses have television sets in their homes. Mostly all the houses that have TV sets in their homes have a table to keep TV on it. Very rarely has a showcase or a cupboard. None of the household has refrigerator or washing machine. But they do have mixer-grinders. Mixers are distributed by the *Gram panchayat* to every household of Scheduled Caste community of the village from the *Gram panchayat* funds reserved for Scheduled Caste development. All the kitchen utensils were of either of steel or aluminum. Families use firewood and kerosene as their main source for fuel cooking. Beside those resources

households owning livestock also use cow-dung cakes as fuel. Very few households that have permanent monthly income have gas connections.

Family:

The Mahars irrespective of their religious belief preferred to live in nuclear family. Almost 76% of families live in nuclear setup. Differences of their religious belief don't affect much in preferring nuclear family. The Table 1.4 shows the family types among the Mahars by religion. Here nuclear families consist on an average three to five members and the joint family consists on an average six or more members in each family.

Table 1.4 Family Types of Mahars

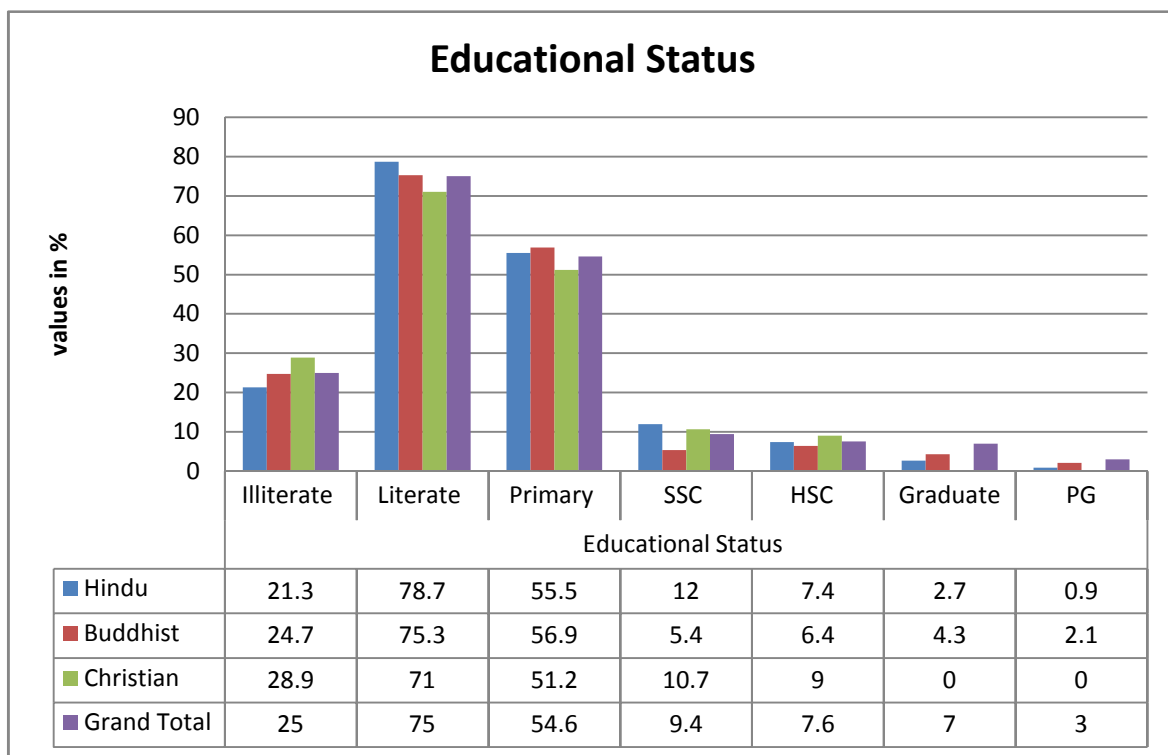
Sr. No.	Religion	Family Type		
		Nuclear	Joint	Total
1.	Hindu	25 (31.2%)	5 (6.3%)	30 (37.5%)
2.	Buddhist	15 (18.8%)	6 (7.5%)	21 (26.3%)
3.	Christian	21 (26.2%)	8(10%)	29 (36.2%)
4.	Grand Total	61 (76.3%)	19 (23.7%)	80 (100%)

The older male members of the household usually head the family and look after all the financial and other requirements household. Almost all the households are headed by elder Male who is also primary earning member. The non-earning older male in a household remains as head of the family for the aspects such as traditions, customary practices of family, social relation etc. It is also observed that women in the households look after domestic responsibilities of the households irrespective of type of family, whether joint or nuclear family.

Educational status:

The chart 1.1 shows that 54% of Mahar population irrespective of their religious affiliation has maximum education qualification up to primary level. About 54% of them completed their primary education only 9.4% and 7.6% could complete secondary and higher secondary school respectively. It is also evident from this figures that dropout rate among them is very high. When it comes to graduation and post graduation the situation is worst. Only seven members of the community have completed graduation and only three members pursued post graduation.

Chart 1.1 Educational status of the Mahar caste



It is clear from the data that no matter about the religious faith the Mahar community belongs to they are very poor in their educational status. The maximum numbers of its members are

quitting their education at primary level itself. A few members are completing their secondary and higher secondary schooling and a few are completing their graduation and post graduation.

Mahar Community Land Holding and Land Use:

According to the household survey of Mahar community though the Mahar population constitutes 9.9% of total village population, the land owned by them is 128.5 acres. Compared to Mahar's share in population and Mahar's share in land owned in relation to the total land of village, it is very minimal. Among Mahars several households are landless. To be precise there are 52.5% of Mahar caste households in village who don't own any land. The numbers of landless families according to their religious faith are 16 (20%), 11 (13.7%) and 15 (18.7%) in Hindu-Mahar, Buddhist and Christians respectively.

Table 1.5 Land owning status of Mahar community

Sr. No.	Religion	Total Land Owned (In acres)	Land Owning status of Households		
			Land Owning Households	Landless Households	Total
1.	Hindu	42.5 (33%)	14 (17.5%)	16 (20%)	30 (37.5%)
2.	Buddhist	31.5 (24.6%)	10 (12.6%)	11 (13.7%)	21 (26.3%)
3.	Christian	54.5 (42.4%)	14 (17.5%)	15 (18.7%)	29 (36.2%)
4.	Grand Total	128.5 (100%)	38 (47.5)	42 (52.5%)	80 (100%)

Among the Hindu Mahar households 46.7% of households are having 33% of the land held by Mahars together in the village. On the other hand 47.6% Buddhists Mahars own 24.6% of the land held by Mahars together. Christians have 36.2% of household out of that 48.3% are

having 42.41% of total land owned by Mahar caste in total. The percentages of landless families of particular religious category are 53.33%, 52.38% and 51.72% in Hindu-Mahar, Buddhist and Christians respectively. Irrespective of their religious faith the landless families within Mahar caste altogether are 52.5%.

Cropping Pattern and Irrigation Facility:

Availability of water for agriculture is the main factor in determining agriculture and cropping pattern in the village. Due to lack of manmade irrigation resources villagers depend on the rain fed agricultural pattern. Based on seasonal distribution of rainfall and available irrigation facilities there are two main seasons of cropping in a village. The *kharif* season starts from June and ends in September or mid October, whereas the *rabbi* season starts in the month of October and ends in January or mid February.

Out of 128.5 acre of cultivable land available 124 acres of land get actually cultivated in *kharif* season. Due to lack of irrigation sources and low rainfall in the season the number of acres of land actually cultivated in *rabbi* season has further decreased to only 64 acres in year. Out of 128.5 acres of agriculture land only 10 acres of land is irrigated under dug up wells owned by four households out of 38 land owning families from Mahar caste. *Bajra* (pearl millet), *moth/ matki* (moth beans), *hulga* (green, french, and pardina lentils), *kanda* (onion), *bhuimug* (pea nuts) are the major crops grown by farmers in *kharif* season. Since *bajra* has been cultivated on 76 acres of total cultivated land it is the major crop amongst all the crops grown in *kharif* season. The Table 1.6 shows the details of land use in different agricultural seasons by different religious groups.

Table 1.6 Land use for agriculture

Sr. No.	Religion	Total Land Owned (In acres)	Area cultivated in Kharif season (In acres)	Area cultivated in Rabbi Season (In acres)
1.	Hindu	42.5 (33%)	41.5 (32.3%)	18 (14%)
2.	Buddhist	31.5 (24.6%)	31.5 (24.7%)	20.5 (16%)
3.	Christian	54.5 (42.4%)	51 (39.8%)	25.5 (19.8%)
4.	Grand Total	128.5 (100%)	124 (96.8%)	64 (49.8%)

Followed by *bajra moth* beans, lentils, ground nuts and onion are cultivated in 13.75 acres, 11.75 acres, 11 acres and 3.5 acres of land respectively. On the other hand *jowar* (sorghum bicolor), *gahu* (wheat), *bhuimug* (pea nut) and *kanda* (onion) are the major crops grown in *rabbi* Season. In *rabbi* season, majority of the land covered by *jowar* crop. Almost 48 acres (70.5%) out of 64 acres is cultivated in *rabbi* season is covered by *jowar*. Remaining three crops wheat, pea nut and onion are grown in three, four and three acres only.

Out of all the crops cultivated in both the seasons only through onion farmers earn some money if it rains properly in monsoon season and market rates are favorable. The grains, beans, lentils and nuts are used for domestic consumption only.

The farmers grow second crop in *rabbi* season on half of the land that they cultivate in *kharif*. But production in *rabbi* season is never come to half of what farmers produce in *khariff*. Since there is no irrigation source available and there is no rain in the season the production fails in *rabbi* season. Farmers cultivate *jowar* on major chunk of land, with idea that even in the event of crop failure at least less production the dry leaves of *jowar* crop can be used as

fodder for livestock. Since the cost of production is often more than the income through crop production limited number of families are engaged in farming/ agriculture. As the primary occupation cannot sustain them they have to dependent on secondary source for their livelihood, mostly wage labor.

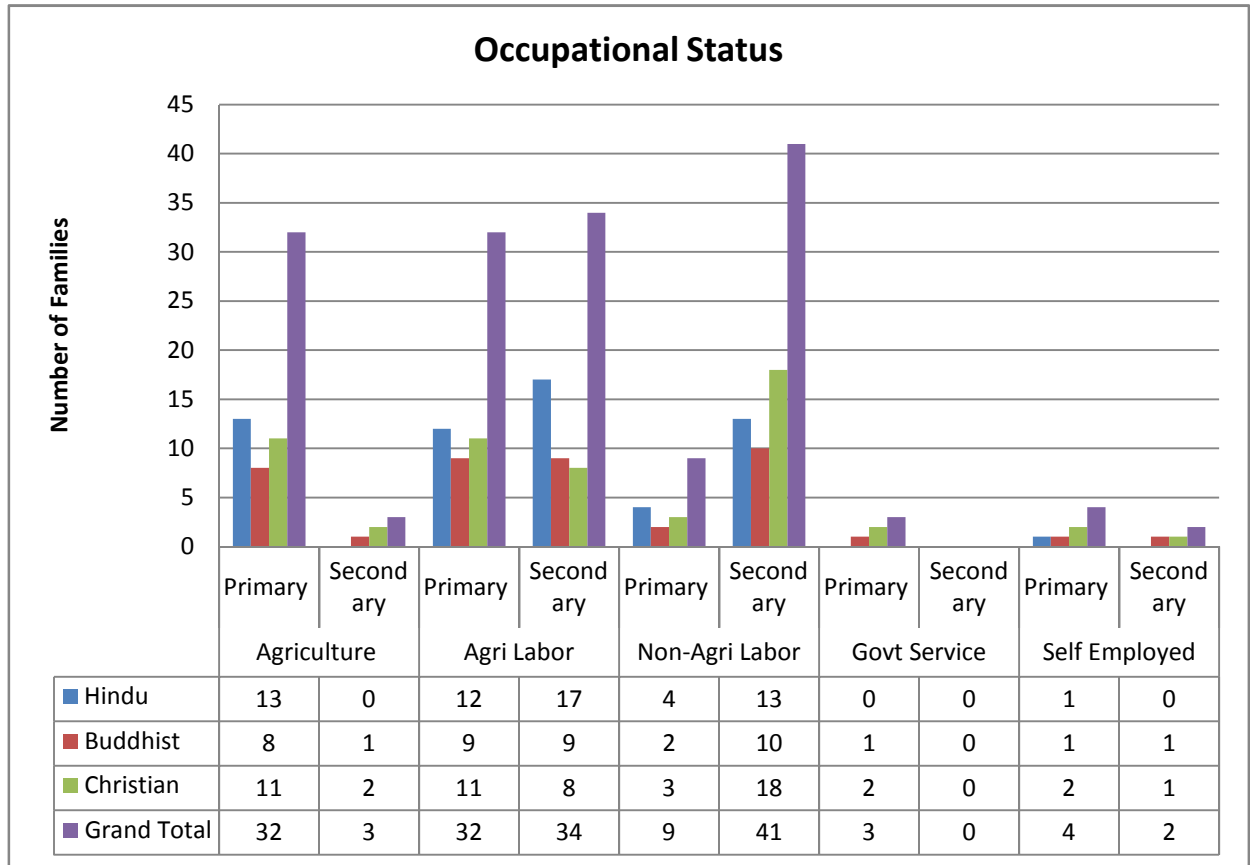
Employment and Occupation Status:

The occupations of Mahar community in the village often agriculture, include agricultural labor, non-agricultural labor, self employment and private and government services. Few families who are dependent on government services also own a patch of land and they put it on use in agriculture for their secondary source of income. The landless families primarily work in agricultural lands owned by others and upper castes as agricultural laborers and go for non- agricultural labor when agriculture labor is not available in the village.

The chart 1.2 shows occupational status of Mahars. Nearly about 80% of families are involved in agriculture and agriculture labor as their primary source of income. Very few families are engaged in non-agriculture labor as their primary occupation. More than 51% of the families are engaged in non agriculture labor as their secondary occupation compared to 3.8% and 42.5% families is engaged in agriculture and agricultural labor respectively as their secondary occupation.

The majority of farmers grow only one crop in a year due to scarcity of water in the region. So the agriculture and labor work related to agriculture is available only for six months in a year. When there is no agricultural activity in village, people look for non-agriculture labor work within village.

Chart 1.2 Occupational status of Mahar community



But it is also evident that there are no much opportunities available for non-agriculture labor within village, so villagers have to go out of their village. Because of this reason there are very less number of families prefer non-agriculture labor as their primary occupation.

In service sector no one from the community is employed in any kind of private services for their livelihood. Only three members from the entire community are employed in government services. One of them is a secondary school teacher in semi-governmental school in nearby village, another is a peon in secondary school in same village and third one is a retired peon from irrigation department of state government and receives pension from government.

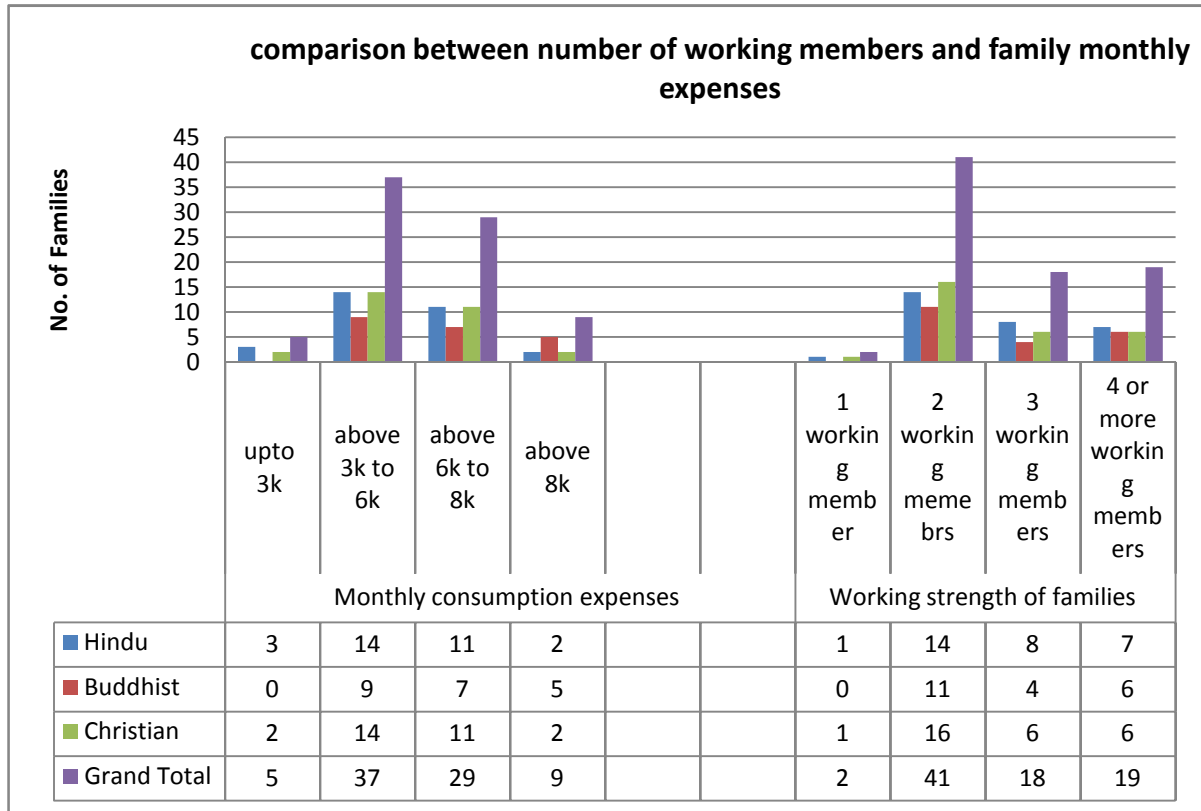
There are six families out of 80 families from the community who engaged themselves in self-employment. They run small scale businesses in village. Out of these six families for four families the self-employment is their primary occupation and for two families it is a secondary source of livelihood. The small scale businesses includes small hotel, grocery and general shop, mobile repairing and photo studio, and tailor shop. There are two pan shops in the village run by Mahar families. They open the shop in the morning and evening time only. They keep it open for whole day on weekly market day, that is, on Monday.

Family Work Force and Monthly Consumption Expenditure:

Out of total 373 people from Mahar caste in village 229 have involved in working force. The chart 1.3 shows clearly that the majority of families have at least two working members. Out of 80 families 41 families which are almost 51.3% of total Mahar families have minimum two working members in the family.

There are 37 families who have monthly expenditure between Rs 3000 and Rs 6000. There are 46.25% of total families in this category. It is clear that after minimum two family members working for their livelihood they could manage their monthly expenses maximum up to Rs 6000. Though there is more number of working members in some families their expenses remains marginal.

Chart 1.3 Work force and monthly consumption of family



From the figures showed above it is evident that there are about 19 families that have four or more numbers of working members but only nine families out of 80 are having their monthly expenses up to Rs 8000 or more. The type of work they are engaged and earnings they make out, it is main reason for no increase in expenditure capacity of family with increase in number of working members.

Chapter 2: Constructing and Maintaining Religious Identity

This chapter tries to understand the construction of religious identities among Mahars and ways of maintaining it in different religions. It also tries to understand how these newly constructed religious identities are different from the caste identity. Mahars have converted to Buddhism and Christianity and rejected the Hindu caste identity and formed new religious identity. Rejection of their past caste identity is the integral part of construction of new religious identity in both the religions. So to understand how they have constructed and are maintaining new religious identity it is also important to know what constitutes their previous caste identity, that is, Mahar caste identity and how in some cases is still continued? This chapter three sections as:

- I. Mahar: A caste identity
- II. Identity as Buddhist
- III. Identity as Christian

Mahar: A caste identity

Mahar is the caste in Hindu social order in which castes are placed in a vertical hierarchy. It is placed at the bottom and considered as untouchable caste. However, after independence and the Article 17 of the Indian constitution, declares abolition of untouchability and prohibits its practice in any form. Legally now Mahar caste is not considered untouchable. As the constitution does not recognize the caste system as the principle of social order of Indian society, the caste hierarchy lost its validity, thereby social equality grants Mahar equal status at least in eyes of law. Apart from this, after mass conversion movement of Mahars to

Buddhism led by Dr. Ambedkar with some exceptions of those converted to Christianity it is considered that all Mahars are Buddhists. No Mahar likes to be called as Mahar by non-Mahars irrespective of his status. After conversion a Mahar is not supposed to follow Hindu traditions, rituals, religious practices and worship god and goddess. Prohibition imposed on worshipping Hindu gods and goddesses is one of the requirements to be followed strictly by a Mahar after conversion to Buddhism or for that matter Christianity as well.

Practical application of renouncing Hinduism and gods and is one of the toughest challenges for the converted people to face. Families had *Kuladevata* (god or goddess who was worshipped by their clan members for generations) and they had to stop worshipping them. Out of fear that something bad might happen to their family if they give up worshipping their *Kuladevata* and some did not stop worshipping them. The excuses given by them were that women in the family particularly mother is illiterate or too old to change her attitude or the tradition is so ingrained that she continue to worship the *Kuladevata* despite the fact that no one in family follows her. Many times whenever relatives or even people from community find idols and images of Hindu gods and goddesses in home they ridicule them.

It resulted in hiding gods and goddess from the sight of visitors. There is a strong tendency of hiding the reality and publicly telling that they don't worship Hindu gods, but secretly keeping Hindu gods in their kitchen and bedroom. How far they can hide it from their own community people? They do practice and follow some of religious rituals as well. They found their way out from this situation by accepting Mahar caste in Hindu fold and its religious belief and practices limited to themselves with some alterations and modifications.

Traditionally caste is constituted on the basis of their occupation which determined their hierarchical status within caste system and Hindu religion. The relations among the castes are based on factors such as status, privileges, authority, power, subordination, locality and culture. Castes are different entities and each of them is identified with food habits, clothing, religious practice, political organization etc. Now most of these aspects of differences are disappearing, but caste is still remained there. The form of caste in village has been transformed. Similarly Mahar caste in village also transformed and still persisted as separate caste with an identity of its own as different from other castes in the village. How Mahar caste identity has been still persisted, maintained and reinforced in village is described here in following pages.

Practice of Endogamy and Exogamy:

To follow social norms concerning the marriages within the same caste is not legally mandatory but practically it is strictly followed even today. Marrying out of one's own caste or for that matter out of one's own sub-caste is not acceptable almost every caste. On the other hand within same caste it is also prohibited to marry within same *gotra* or clan or surname. The Mahar caste of the village under study here is a surname called Dive. No other caste except Mahar in the village has this surname. Mahar caste people of surname 'Dive' can't marry any one bearing the same surname. People bearing the same surname are called as *bhauki* and marriages are prohibited within *bhauki*. It includes people who are descendants from a common male ancestor. Even if people of other village bears same surname as Dive, marriage is not allowed among them. Because they are also considered as their *bhauki* since they bears same surname.

The practice of caste endogamy and *bhauki* exogamy is strictly followed by all the castes in village. This is one of the important norms why caste is still persisting. This practice makes sure that all the castes of the village maintain their status quo and existence without confusing their identity with each other. It is very easy to demarcate who belongs to which caste in the village.

Caste identity attached to particular food practices

Though food practices of all the castes are more or less very similar in the village, still there are particular food habits and practices differentiate Dalits in general and Mahar caste in particular from rest of the castes of the village. Very significant food practice of Mahars of the village that differentiates them from other castes is beef eating. Apart from Mahars Matangs (Mang) and Muslims also eat beef.

A *Khatik* (butcher) belonging to Muslim community sets up a beef shop in Mahar locality for three to four times in a week in *Rajwada*. Monday is the village market day so he sets up his shop on every Monday. He doesn't set up the beef shop if there is any Hindu festival in the village. But if there is any festival in Mahar community like Ambedkar jayanti and other festivals like Christmas he sets beef shop.

It is also interesting to take note that the place where the beef shop is set up in village. There are shops in village chicken, fish and mutton shops are located in and around village market place, but only beef sellers are not allowed to set up their shop in village market place. Beef sellers set their shops only in Mahar localities. Since Mahar localities are at out skirt of the

village, therefore, villagers have no issue with Muslim beef sellers setting up their shops in Mahar localities⁴.

Separation from others:

Separate locality: Mahar caste is considered as an untouchable though officially and legally it is no longer an untouchable caste and always kept at distance by the upper castes of the village. It has been an age old practice to avoid possibilities of contacts with them and getting polluted. In this context they were given a place located at the outskirts of village. Even today Mahar settlement in the village is still located at the outskirts of the village on the eastern side of the *Gawthan* (main village). There is a belief that as the wind blows from the west to the east, if Mahar colony is located at east of the village *Gawthan* then there will be fewer possibilities that the air passing through Mahar colony touches the upper caste localities. This prevents the upper castes getting polluted by air. The locality of Mahar used to be called as *Maharwada*, but it has been renamed as *Rajwada*⁵. Though the name changed it is often called as *Maharwada*.

Separate funeral ground: Traditionally Mahars bury their dead and for that they have a separate burial ground as the caste Hindus do not allow the Mahars to bury their dead in their burial or cremation ground lest their dead are polluted by untouchable's existence even after death. There are seven funeral/cremation grounds in the village. Hindu cremation ground is separate. The other Dalit castes such as Matang and Wadar the other Dalit caste in the village

⁴ Since the government of Maharashtra has recently banned beef, it is yet to be seen the changes that will take place in the future.

⁵ This is so because according to Dr. Ambedkar, the Mahars traditionally associated with Rajas as fighter and warriors.

who are Hindu bury their dead in separate burial grounds for each caste. The non-Dalit Hindu Vani caste, The Bhil Tribes and Muslim community do have separate burial ground. These separate burial/ cremation grounds exist to make sure that caste identities persist and are maintained through them.

Separate Land of Mahars: Mahar caste was one of *balutedar*⁶ in past and was providing free service to the villagers under *vatandari* system. *Balutedar* in lieu of their service to the villagers got some piece of land for which they need not pay revenue tax to the state. This land remained with them after abolition of Mahar *vatan*, and the place where the land is located is called as *hadulki*. The *hadulki* is located at one place in the village. The only way to acquire land elsewhere than *hadulki* is by purchasing it from others since not a single Mahar caste family owns land in other than *hadulki*, and if any Mahar wants to purchase land he has to purchase from non-Mahar only as majority of the land in the village is owned by upper caste families. It is a matter of status to own land. Selling land to lower caste person is against their dignity and pride. There is no any written rule but in practice people follow it. But this has played important role in persisting caste identity through separate land locality land owned by Mahars and practice of land dealing within caste.

Worshipping of Hindu Idols:

Traditionally Mahars were not allowed in temples and sacred places of caste Hindus⁷. Mahars had their own deities and *Kuladevata* separately from other caste Hindus. Goddesses

⁶ It is a form of *jajmani* system prevalent in Maharashtra.

⁷ Dr. Ambedkar's movement towards equal rights for every citizen to ensure temple entry and many other rights to all castes in general and Mahars in particular but it was not a success.

Mariai, Satvai, Mhasoba, and other gods Mahars worshipped by. Temples of these gods used to be in Mahar locality itself. Even today these temples are there in Mahar locality and Mahar priests have been performing all the rituals.

Mahars pray to god Khandoba, goddess Kalubai of Mandhargad, goddess Mahalakshmi of Varkhed, goddess Tuljabhavani of Tuljapur, god Jotiba of Kolhapur and some others like Dhauji Patil, Nana Bua, etc. They also worship village deities such as Kankavati, Lord Mahadeva, Kanifnath of Madhi etc. Mahars of the village also participate in yearly festival of goddess Kankavati Yatra organized in the village and perform the rituals at home. Some of the Mahar families also participate in Akhand Harinam Saptah (Part of warkari tradition) of Dnyaneshwari Parayan (recite Dnyaneshwari text for seven days) in village.

Religious Rituals and Ceremonies:

Among Mahars there is a tradition of *Potraj*, a god's son, and he is represented by eldest son in the family who has the responsibility to serve the goddesses Laxmi throughout his life as *potraj*. The families whose Kuladevata is goddess Lakshmi has the obligations of their eldest to serve the goddesses. The *Protraj* has to wear particular type of clothes, grow his hair (not to cut the hairs from childhood itself), and perform *puja* to the goddess every day. In lieu of his duties toward the goddesses Laxmi, *Potraj* gets right to collect offerings from the families within Mahar colony. Those offerings may be of money or grains. Nowadays it is not necessary to follow all these traditions, need not grow hair and wear traditional clothes, collect offerings but the *potraj* perform his duty towards the goddesses by performing *puja*. There are very few those follow the tradition of *potraj* even today.

One Popat Dive says,

“I am a Hindu Mahar and believed in my duties to the caste deity goddesses Laxmi. My father who was elder in his family used to perform all the duties towards the goddess Laxmi. We are five brothers and I am the eldest. As per traditions the eldest son of the family has the responsibility to serve the goddess Laxmi throughout my life. Therefore it is my responsibility to serve the goddesses. If I don’t serve her I and my family, my children will have to bare bad consequences”.

Those families whose Kuladevata is god Khandoba has to organize *jagaran* program once in every three year. In *Bhakti Jagaran* program *Waghya-Muruli* (Servants of god) performs and sings devotional songs throughout the night. A Goat is sacrificed to the god. First meat of the goat is offered to the god and remaining meat is shared by other Mahars, relatives and friends. Mostly the sacrifice is organized in the evening that follows by feast in the night. After feast the *Waghya-Muruli* performs devotional songs throughout the night. One end of the sacred metal chain of the god will be kept under sacred stone and other end out. Organizer devotee has to pull that metal chain in the morning after the *Bhakti Jagaran* ritual. If the chain comes out easily then it is considered that god is satisfied with service and *Bhakti Jagaran* program is considered to be successful.

These are ceremonies/ rituals that are practiced today by Mahars of the village. There are other domestic rituals that are required to be performed under the guidance of a priest. These priests for Mahars are not Brahmin caste; they are either from Mahar community or from castes other than Brahmin. Engaging Brahmin priests to perform religious rituals is one of the significant aspects of Hindu religion and this gives status to castes. Non-requirement of

Brahmin priests for particular religious rituals for Mahar caste gives them different status within Hindu religion.

However, there are certain rituals where they need Brahmin priest. Rituals like *pitru paksh*, and *satyanarayana puja* need to be performed by Brahmin priest. Mahars observe *pitru paksh* ritual for their dead ancestors. As per Hindu traditions it is the 16 days period starting from full moon day of *Bhadrapad* month of the Hindu calendar and ends on new moon day called as *sarvapitri amavasya*. In those 16 days Hindus pay homage to their ancestors through offering food. People also believe that the soul of their ancestors come in the form of crow and visits the homes. So on that day they have to offer food to crow. Specific days are allotted for people who died in a particular manner and also had particular marital status when died. The fourth and fifth day respectively, are allocated for people deceased in the past year. The ninth day of *pitru paksh* is allotted for married women who died before their husband. The twelfth lunar day is allotted for children and persons who renounced the worldly pleasures and became saint or monk. The fourteenth day as known is reserved for those people who got killed in war or suffered a violent death.

Satyanarayana puja ritual has most significant place in Hindu religion. This ritual is performed by caste Hindus on major occasions such as marriage and house warming ceremony, besides on special occasions of achievements such as new job, and the purchase of a new home etc.; as an offering of gratitude to the God. The *puja* starts with a prayer to Lord Ganesh followed by other rituals such as reciting of *Satyanarayana* story. Brahmin priest performs the *puja* and it is mandatory for the organizer of *puja* to sit and hear till the end. It is concluded with distribution of Prasada (food) blessed by God.

Religious Festivals:

The Hindu religious festival observed by all the Hindus including Hindu Mahars in the village are Dasara, Diwali, Bail Pola, Gudi Padawa, Nagpanchami, Sankrant, are the main festivals celebrated by Mahars of village.

Dasar as it is called in Marathi is the festival of goddess Durga, and during the Durga puja the nine day festival, Mahars perform Ghatasthapana ritual in their homes. It is one of auspicious ritual, and is also called as Navaratri. On the first day of Navaratri people setup ghata (sacred earthen pot) ritually; the earthen pot has to be placed on clean soil obtained from a farm land and seven different grains are sown in the soil. Water is filled in the pot and it is considered as sacred water. While one end of a cotton thread put in water of the pot and other end is tied at height. The last day of *Ghatasthapan* is called Dasara, on that day five people touch the pot and uproot it from soil to be taken and dumped at a farm land then the ritual is considered to be over. On that day families cook sweet dishes. Leaves from a particular tree are collected *apata* are collected and distributed among themselves as gold and greet each other wishing healthy and prosperous life.

Diwali is the most important festival celebrated by entire village. The festival of Diwali is celebrated for five days. Out of which Lakshmi puja, Bhaubij and Balipratipada are important days. On Lakshmi puja day they pray to goddess Lakshmi who is considered as goddess of wealth. Bhaubij is another important day in Diwali, and on that day sister ties colored thread on brother's wrist and perform arti by swinging a plate containing lamp burnt with edible oil, other things such as rice, vermilion, gold ornament etc. She gets blessings from the brother and wishes him long and prosperous life. In return the brother gives saree or

some money as gift. Abhyanga snan is one of important ritual people perform during Diwali. Mothers' give bath to children with scented soap early in the morning, put vermilion and ask them to wear new cloths, buy new cloths for children and women, prepare sweet dishes in homes and distribute among themselves. Fires works are organized at each home which is the highlight of Diwali.

Gudi Padwa is another important Hindu festival for the Mahars of the village. It is the first day of Marathi calendar. It is called as Marathi New Year day. It is a tradition to tie a new cloth mostly saree on the top of a new bamboo pole in addition to a small pot containing some sweet on it and a few neem tree leaves. Then raise the bamboo pole outside the house. It is called *gudi*. On that day people cook sweet dishes, mostly *puran poli* (Maharashtrian special dish). It is considered as one of auspicious days for Hindus. If one has to do any important work or have to buy new items or even investment, it is done on *gudi padwa* day.

Nagpanchami and *Sankranti* are festivals of women. On *Nagpanchami* all women worship *Nag devata* (Snake god). They feed snake⁸ with milk and cook sweet dishes. Newly married women visit their parent's home for the festival. They wear new clothes gifted by the parents on the festival occasion. In the evening all women gather at a common place and sing songs of prosperity, achievements of their husbands, brothers and family members. Similarly *Sankranti* is also a festival of women. All married women whose husband is still alive and worship the goddess Sita. They wear new bangles replacing all old bangles. On the day they

⁸ They go to a snake mole, do puja and pour milk in the hole of the mole believing to have fed the snake sitting inside the mole.

observe fast, worship the goddess and then break their fast, by eating the sweet food specially prepared for the occasion.

Devotion and Loyalty towards Dr. Ambedkar:

Apart from those Hindu festivals, Mahars also celebrate Ambedkar Jayanti as their festival. People have deep faith in and respect for Dr. Ambedkar for the work done by him for Mahars. On Ambedkar Jayanti every one from the community, children, youth, women, men, young and old sports with new dress and participate in a procession taken through the village. Families cook beef biryani to celebrate the occasion.

Kesharbai Dive said in this regard,

“We believe in Dr. Ambedkar. We are thankful to him for his sacrifices and efforts he had made for our development. We call him as Baba, which means father. He is our father. We always organize Dr.Ambedkar Jayanti and other programs in the village. On 6th December we go to Chaityabhumi, Mumbai every year to pay our homage on the occasion of Dr. Ambedkar’s death anniversary. It is one of the very important days in the lives of our people. We will never forget this man and his work in our life time”.

Practice of particular life cycle rituals and ceremonies:

The Mahars organize rituals on the occasions of child birth, marriage, pregnancy, and death.

Birth rituals-

The Mahars perform birth rituals as per the tradition established by the ancestors. On the occasion of birth the rituals performed includes *pachvi*, *barse*, and *satvai (javal)*. When pregnancy is confirmed, the woman is sent to her parent's home either in 7th month of her pregnancy or in 9th month, if it is the first delivery. On subsequent deliveries sending the woman to the natal home is unusual.

On fifth day after delivery *pachvi* ritual is organized. This ritual is dedicated to goddess *Satvai*. *Satvai* is also known as goddess of sixth day in the community. It is believed that on that day goddess *Satvai* writes destiny of the new born child. So on that day the new mother and child offer prayers to goddess *Satvai* for bright future for the child.

The ritual organized on the twelfth day is called *barase*. The new born is also christened on this day. Before organizing this ritual, parent of the baby get the *patrika* (horoscope), written by Brahmin priest based on birth time for the new born. With the horoscope the priest suggests a name for the child. Parents either keep the same name for the baby or give some other name of similar initials suggested by the priest.

Javal is another important ritual observed by community on the occasion of birth. To please the goddess *Satvai*, first hair of the new born child is offered to the Goddess. It can be done within the first year or in the third year of the baby. Usually mother's brother as it is mandated cuts a tuft of hair and offers the same to goddess.

Marriage rituals-

The Mahars call upon a Brahmin priest to perform wedding according to Vedic rituals. Now a day's Brahmin priest who performs wedding rituals for upper castes in the village,

performs rituals for Mahars as well. Even today elders arrange the marriage for their children. The process of arranging marriages includes ceremony of *supari* (preliminary engagement), *sakharpuda* (engagement), and *lagn* (Wedding).

After confirming through negotiations by elders on both the sides both girl and boy get ready for marriage and give their consent for the same. The parents proceed further and call community elders for discussion and fixing the marriage. This ceremony is called as *supari*- (which literally means giving betel nuts) ceremony. It is preliminary engagement and usually it takes place at girl's home. The boy's parents invite close relatives and respected members from community to go to the girl's home officially announcing the confirmation of marriage. Traditionally they will announce it by breaking betel nut. Here the girl's mother's brother has special responsibility to perform this ritual.

Sakharpuda means engagement that follows *supari* (see plate no. 15). On the day of *sakharpuda*, the bridegroom's parents give saree and sugar packet to the bride's parents. It is considered as a gesture of acceptance of the girl as their daughter-in-law. Girl's parent's gives coconut in return signifying their consent for the same. Usually this ceremony takes place two or three days before the wedding ceremony.

Wedding proceedings starts with a procession in village on the previous day of wedding in which the groom accompanied by relatives and friends goes to offer prayers to village deities and takes their blessings. On same day, mostly in the evening, the paste made from turmeric powder is applied to bride and groom separately at their respective homes. All the relatives who have come for the wedding and the local people first put vermilion spot on forehead and then they apply *haldi* to bride and groom on their face, hand, shoulder, and legs one by

one. Relatives also play among themselves by applying haldi on each other, mostly among those who share joking relations. On the day of wedding, bride is dressed in new clothes and she is taken accompanied by mother's brother to the wedding venue. Brahmin priest is required to perform the wedding rituals. He chants the Sanskrit *mantra* and *mangal ashtaka* while bride and groom stand facing each other separated by *antarpath* (white cloth). *Mangal ashtaka* are eight *shlokas* priest recites at the time of wedding. After every single *mangal ashtaka* those who are attending wedding throws *akshada* (rice grain) given to them on bride and groom. After chanting of *mangal ashtaka* bride and groom exchange the flower garlands. After exchange of garlands the groom ties *mangal sutra* (sacred thread with golden pendant). Lastly they receive blessings from elders. If wedding is conducted at groom's place then after marriage, girl's parents and relatives leave her at grooms place and return to their home. If it is organized at brides place then the bride leaves her parents home and goes along with groom to his home.

Death Rituals-

Traditionally Mahar used to bury their dead (see plate no. 12) and same is practice even today. It was duty of Mahars to make all the arrangement for cremation of caste Hindus of the village. But now they have discontinued this practice. Since then every caste in village takes the responsibility of its funerals. After death Mahars follow Hindu traditions of *antim sanskar*, *savarne*, *dahava*, and *terava*.

If someone is dead among Mahars in the village, every single member of Mahar community comes to the diseased family and be there till the last rites are completed. Children, very old people and pregnant women are exception for it. Before proceeding to burial ground, they

give bath to the dead body with hot water and put on new white cloths to it. If the deceased is man, only men of community change the cloth of the deceased. In other case if the deceased is female then only women will change the cloths. People offer flowers and put *kumkum* (vermillion) on deceased. In case the deceased is women, and her husband is alive then people make her wear green saree and also put *kumkum* (vermillion) in big round circle on her forehead for the last time.

Before carrying the dead body to the cremation ground, four to six people from community will go ahead to funeral ground and dig a pit. They will not return home till the last rite is done at burial ground. While carrying the dead body the body wrapped in a big white cloth and four men hold it from front, back, left and right sides. If anyone gets tired he may be replaced by another. It will be rested once on the way to cremation ground. Women are not allowed to burial ground for burial ritual. They can watch it from a distance. They participate however in all rituals after burial but not during burial.

It is the responsibility of caste people to take care of all the arrangements of funeral. No other caste members generally participate in some other caste funeral. Sometimes close friends of deceased family from other castes come and help. Till the last rite is completed no one from community cooks nor eats. Children, old people, and pregnant women are exception for this.

Everyone from community observe grief period/pollution (*sutak*) for three days from the date of death. The family in which death has occurred has to observe *sutak* for thirteen days as per Hindu tradition. As per tradition, son of the deceased has to get shaved off his head to symbolize the grief period of family. On the third day of death people go to the funeral ground and perform *savarne* ritual. Friends and relatives attending the program offer flower

tributes to dead. They also adjust/correct the soil if there is any damage done by any animal or weather conditions such as rain or wind to the burial.

As per Hindu tradition on thirteenth day family needs to put *naivyad* (religious offering in the form of food item) at the grave. They keep the food, *naivyad*, which dead person loved when alive, and the items such as non-vegetarian food, tobacco, liquor etc.; at the grave of the dead. They wait for the crows to touch that *naivyad*. It is considered that dead person comes back in the form of crow and touches the *naivyad* offered to him if he or she is satisfied with his life. If he or she has some wish which has not been fulfilled and he or she wants it to be completed by his or her relatives then crow will not touch the *naivyad*. If such situation occurs, then close relative prays to crow that whatever is the incomplete wish of that person will be fulfilled. People will sit at a distance from the grave till the crow touches the *naivyad*. If crow touches the *naivyad* every one will move back to the home. The grief period/pollution according to Hindu ritual will get over on 13th day from the burial.

Identity as Buddhist:

The revival of Buddhist religion in India in general and among Mahars in particular found its base in Dr. Ambedkar led mass conversion movement. On 14th October 1956 Dr. Ambedkar embraced Buddhism with lakhs of his followers at Nagpur. The main aim of such conversion was to seek freedom from slavery which the Hindu religion imposed on Dalits and live a life with self respect and a sense of equality. There were two main aspects of conversion; social as well as religious to achieve the ultimate goal of living with self respect

and equality. For him religion is an institution which binds people together, and he relied for this definition on Tilak who said “That which knits the people together is religion.” He then dissected the Hindu religion and said it as a religion in which man's human behavior with man is prohibited; a religion which does not recognize a man as man; a religion in which the touch of animals is permitted, but the touch of human beings is prohibited. So nowhere the Hindu religion is living up to the definition he had accepted as religion. Every where it is dividing and separating humans, therefore for him the Hindu religion is not a religion but a mockery (Ambedkar, 2004).

According Dr. Ambedkar, strength is what one required to fight against the social injustice and gain the freedom and life of equality and self respect. Establishing close relation with other society through conversion is the way to gain the strength of that other religion. Changing religion is also change of name for him. The new name will be free from all filth which is attached to caste that they belonged to. Changing name means changing your identity from being Hindu of particular caste to member of new religious group and new religious identity. In new religion, people have nothing to do with their caste identity. On the occasion of conversion in the year 1956, Dr. Ambedkar given 22 owes to Buddhist convert to guide them in state of confusion and contradiction with that of Hindu beliefs and practices (Omvedt, 2003).

Those 22 owes are as follows,

1. I shall have no faith in Brahma, Vishnu and Mahesh nor shall I worship them.

2. I shall have no faith in Rama and Krishna who are believed to be incarnation of God nor shall I worship them.
3. I shall have no faith in 'Gauri', Ganapati and other gods and goddesses of Hindus nor shall I worship them.
4. I do not believe in the incarnation of God.
5. I do not and shall not believe that Lord Buddha was the incarnation of Vishnu. I believe this to be sheer madness and false propaganda.
6. I shall not perform 'Shraddha' nor shall I give 'pind-dan'.
7. I shall not act in a manner violating the principles and teachings of the Buddha.
8. I shall not allow any ceremonies to be performed by Brahmins.
9. I shall believe in the equality of man.
10. I shall endeavor to establish equality.
11. I shall follow the '**noble eightfold path**' of the Buddha.
12. I shall follow the '**paramitas**' prescribed by the Buddha.
13. I shall have compassion and loving kindness for all living beings and protect them.
14. I shall not steal.
15. I shall not tell lies.
16. I shall not commit carnal sins.

17. I shall not take intoxicants like liquor, drugs etc.
18. I shall endeavour to follow the noble eightfold path and practice compassion and loving kindness in everyday life.
19. I renounce Hinduism which is harmful for humanity and impedes the advancement and development of humanity because it is based on inequality, and adopt Buddhism as my religion.
20. I firmly believe the Dhamma of the Buddha is the only true religion.
21. I believe that I am having a re-birth.
22. I solemnly declare and affirm that I shall hereafter lead my life according to the principles and teachings of the Buddha and his Dhamma.

Since it was new beginning for people these owes are the basis of new religious identity among converted Buddhists from Mahar caste in Maharashtra. In the light of these owes it has been looked in to how Buddhist in the village have constructed their new religious identity as Buddhist and how they are maintaining it in the village.

Rejection of Hindu religious beliefs and practices:

The rejection of Hindu religious beliefs, traditions, and practices are the most important indicators of showing faith in Buddhism for the Mahars converted to Buddhism in Maharashtra. But those rejections are not easy since everyone are accustomed to the practice for several years, and it is very difficult to put an end to them at once. It is said they people if devote themselves to Lord Buddha and Dr. Ambedkar they will overcome this. Loyalty to

Dr. Ambedkar and Lord Buddha is the foundation on which their new Buddhist identity is built. Rejection of Hindu traditions and practices is essential step towards accepting Buddhism. People have accepted the teachings of Buddha and Dr. Ambedkar and started following them in their day to life. Performing prayers and worshipping Hindu gods are replaced by paying homage to Lord Buddha and Dr. Ambedkar and it became integral part of new Buddhist identity in village.

Religious structures:

To assert their new religious identity in village, Buddhists in village constructed Buddha *vihar* (see plate no. 5). The term *vihar* itself is an attempt to depart from Hindu religion. Since they abandoned Hindu gods and discontinued worshipping them they came up with alternatives for Hindu temples. Unlike Hindu temple, Buddhist *vihar* in the village is not place of worship. Buddhists of the village don't perform any religious rituals on daily basis. They have kept images of Dr. Ambedkar and Buddha along with other images such as Mahatma Phule, Savitribai Phule, Shahu Maharaj, and Shivaji Maharaj in *vihara*. But it is not necessary to pray and perform puja daily. There is no any such tradition or practice. Only on specific days they perform Buddha *puja* in *vihar*. They use this place for community gathering for any celebrations and functions. On exigency or emergency like losing house due to natural calamity or due construction or repairs work one or two families use it as a temporary shelter. Presently a migrated family from other village is putting up in the *vihar* till it finds some arrangement.

Ceremonies and Festivals:

Buddhists in village do not celebrate Hindu festival remain committed to 22 owes formulated by Dr. Ambedkar for following the Buddhist principles. But against these people celebrate Buddhist festivals, such as the birth anniversary of Dr. Ambedkar, Buddha Purnima (birth anniversary of Lord Buddha), Dhammachakra Pravartan Divas (day of mass conversion to Buddhism), and Mahaparinirvan Din (death anniversary of Dr. Ambedkar) as their major Buddhist festivals in village.

People celebrate Ambedkar Jayanti (see plate no. 17) on 14th April every year in the village. Taking a procession is the major event of the Ambedkar Jayanti festival. On the mid night of 13th April youth, elderly people of the community gather at *bazar patangan* (village market ground) where there is a wall painting of Ambedkar. Exactly at 12:00 AM of midnight of 13th and 14th April fireworks are organized that signify their happiness of Ambedkar's birth in the community. Later elders host a blue and *panchashil* flag (Buddhist flag of five colors) on the *peepal* tree located near the wall painting of Ambedkar.

On next the day in the morning people gather again at the village market to offer homage to Dr. Ambedkar. Village level politicians from other community are invited as guest and they garland the image of Ambedkar and also offer flowers. People light candles and incense sticks near the image. At the end the guest breaks the coconut in front of the image. After bowing down to pay homage to Dr. Ambedkar they recite Buddhist verses in Pali language. At the end few elders and the guests give speech declaring their love, and gratitude to Dr. Ambedkar and show their support to the community.

That day every household of Rajwada (Mahar colony) cooks biryani and enjoy the birth anniversary of Dr. Ambedkar to show happiness and respect to Dr. Ambedkar. In the evening a procession of the images of Dr. Ambedkar and Buddha through the village is organized keeping the images on decorated vehicle with flowers and other decorative items. The participants usually wear new white clothes; women wear white saree and also every one put on a badge on chest and shoulder bearing Dr. Ambedkar's images and also written Jai Bhim on it. Slogans hailing Dr. Ambedkar and Buddha are shouted during the procession.

Other Dalit castes from village are passive participants. They remain present for the program but don't take responsibilities of organizing it. While most Mahars irrespective of their religious affiliation whether Buddhist or Christian contribute financially very rarely people from other castes do so for the Ambedkar Jayanti. Political motive is the reason for the participation on upper castes seeking the support of the Mahar community for them in the *Gram panchayat* election and for their party in other elections.

Another important festival people celebrate is Dhamma Chakra Pravartan Din (anniversary of mass conversion)⁹ at Diksha Bhoomi Nagpur on 14th October. There are some differences of opinion about when the festival should be celebrated. As per Hindu lunar calendar the conversion in 1956 took place on Vijaya Dashmi/ Dasara(Dashehra) festival of Hindus. So some say they should not follow Hindu calendar and celebrate it on 14th October and some celebrate it on *Dasara*. People appropriated Hindu festival of Dasara as Ashoka Vijaya Dashmi. Since emperor Ashoka embraced Buddhism on that day. So every year on Dashehra

⁹ Dr. Ambedkar along with lakhs of Mahar caste people converted to Buddhism at Nagpur. The conversion in Buddhist tradition is called *diksha*. The place where conversion took place is called as *diksha bhumi*.

youth from the community go to Nagpur and joins thousand others coming from different corners of Maharashtra and India come to celebrate this day as one of the important festivals. Those in the village on that day they prepare *khir* (a sweet dish) and invite neighbors and relatives to home and serve them *khir*.

Buddha Purnima is the day on which Lord Buddha's birth is celebrated. It comes on full moon day of *vishakha* month of Hindu lunar calendar. On that day also people gather together at *vihar* and perform Buddha *puja* and serve *khir*. Mahaparinirvan Divas is the death anniversary of Dr. Ambedkar which is considered as an important day to remember Dr. Ambedkar and pay homage to him¹⁰. People perform Buddha *puja* and offer flowers to Ambedkar's image and then pay homage in village. On that day some visit *chaitya bhoomi* located at Dadar, Mumbai¹¹. They visit this place to show respect to the great leader and also pay homage at his *samadhi* (Monument of his ashes)¹².

Sacred places and pilgrimages:

Dr. Ambedkar said Buddha is the *dhamma* and *dhamma* stands for morality. In Buddhism morality is *dhamma* and *dhamma* is morality. In Buddhism there is no place for God. The place of God has been taken by morality. Since there is no place for God, there is only place for prayers, pilgrimages, rituals, ceremonies in Buddhism.

¹⁰ Dr. Ambedkar passed away on 6th December, 1956.

¹¹ This is place where Dr. Ambedkar was cremated.

¹² It is a pilgrim centre for every follower of him.

But Buddhists in village they visit places such as place *diksha bhoomi* Nagpur and *chaitya bhoomi* Mumbai not perform any ritual or gives offerings seeking any favor from Buddha or Ambedkar in return, but to pay homage and to show respect. The visit to two places is like pilgrim to assert of self respect and dignity. No other castes except Mahars irrespective of their religious affiliation visit to these places to pay homage.

Mahad is also one of the significant places for the Buddhists of the village. It is a place where Dr. Ambedkar did the satyagraha for the 3right to use water from public well and tanks in the year 1927 and also burnt Manu Smriti in the same year to protest against it. So this place stands as monument of people's struggle against caste discrimination and right to equality.

Apart from these places there are many other historical places related to history of Buddha and Buddhism in India. This include Buddha's birthplace at Lumbini, the place where he gave his first seremon at Sarnath in Uttar Pradesh, Bodh Gaya the place where Buddha attained enlightenment located in Bihar, Kushinagar the place where Buddha breathed last, Ajantha-Ellora caves at Aurangabad in Maharashtra etc. Villagers do not visit these places frequently but often go on tour from villages for site seeing. Now a day's tourist agencies arrange special tours for these places. People take opportunities of such tourist packages and make a visit to these places.

Life cycle rituals and ceremonies of Buddhists:

Unlike Hindu tradition, Buddhism of the villagers doesn't have place for soul and God. So they don't have any particular mandatory rituals to be performed to please God or soul. But they do organize certain ceremonies and construct their new religious identity, to

differentiate themselves from Hindu Mahars. These in fact contribute for construction of their new identity and maintaining it. It is also their way of linking this new identity with other Buddhists on the basis of common practices. Buddhists in the village do celebrate birthday, marriage, death etc. They developed new practices to perform those rites differently from their previous practices as Mahar.

Birth: On the occasion of birth, Buddhists in village discontinued the Hindu tradition of *pachvi*, *satavai* and *barse* which are concerned with birth rituals. They invite relatives and neighbors on any convenient day and serve special food and also announce name for the new born on that occasion. However, it is also not compulsory for everyone to do this. Those who are economically well off only organizes such event.

Marriage: The Buddhist wedding does not requires Brahmin priest to perform wedding ceremony. *Bhante* Ji performs the weddings (see plate no. 14). The bride and bride groom wear sports with white clothes unlike Hindus who don't wear white clothes for their weddings. In fact in Hindu tradition, women wear white saree after the death of husband and it signifies widowhood.

Buddha puja, *trisaran panchasheel*, *ashta mangal gatha*, *shapat* (the oath) and *ashirvad* (blessings) major rites performed during wedding. The images of Dr. Ambedkar and Buddha are placed at the altar. *Bhante ji* lights candles and incense sticks placed front of images. They also put five fruits of different variety at the altar. *Kalash* filled with water and few

peepal tree leaves¹³ kept at the altar. *Bhante ji* ties a white thread to that *kalash*. Two ends of the white thread given to the bride and the bride groom to hold during ritual of Buddha *puja*.

As in any Buddhist function which starts with *panchang pranam*¹⁴, the bride and groom have to do this before *bhante* performs the Buddha *puja*. After Buddha *puja*, *bhante* ask bride and groom whether they are agree to be husband and wife. After that *Bhante* asks couple to take oath of duties and responsibility of bride and groom towards each other and their family. Mean while *bhante* asks five *suvasini* (married but not widow women) to come and put *haldi* and *kumkum* tilak to bride and groom. Bride groom first puts the *kumkum tilak* on bride's forehead and it is followed by five *suvasini*. Once the *ashta mangal gatha* is chanted, priest first asks the bride to put garland in Bridegroom's neck and similarly bridegroom puts garland in the neck of the bride. While bride and bride groom garland each other all the relatives and people present for the wedding throw petals of flowers on bride and bridegroom.

Before *bhante* and parents of bride and groom bless them the bride groom puts *mangalsutra* (auspicious thread) in bride's neck which is generally made up of gold. It is the groom's responsibility get *mangalsutra* made for bride. *Mangalsutra* is the sign of marriage. Only married women wear it. Once the wedding rituals are over, *bhante* calls parents of the bride and groom and asks the newly married couple to seek blessings (*ashirvad*) from the parents. At the end *bhante* ties a thread which is placed at the altar during *puja* around the wrists of newly married couple.

¹³ *Peepal* tree and its leaves are considered to be sacred by people.

¹⁴ On knees and bows down three times.

In Buddhists do not find out the muhurat (auspicious time) from Brahmin priest for the wedding. After confirmations from the boy and the girl about their consent for marrying each other, parents and close relatives of the bride and the bride groom sit together at brides place and find out any public holiday for wedding so as to make it convenient for the employed relatives and friends to attend the wedding. They also decide the place of the wedding and terms of expenditure of wedding and other things such as buying clothes for bride and groom. Food is also served to the relatives and those who have attended the meeting. It is called as engagement. On that day both parties make oral as well as written agreement about fixation of wedding and its terms.

The Buddhist wedding is different from a typical Hindu wedding in that the Buddhists don't match their *patrika* and *janm kundali* (horoscope). Among the Hindus matching the horoscope of boy and girl before giving consent for marriage is necessary. Even if boy and girl show interest to marry each other and their *patrikas* do not match they don't proceed further and ends there forever.

The practices of *haldi* ritual and *vardava* which Hindu Mahars follow the Buddhists do involve in the enjoyment of the event. However, the Buddhists take bride and groom in a procession as part of enjoying of the event. They dance and make fun during procession but don't pray or seek blessings from the village deity.

Death: In case of death Buddhists adopted cremation as the way of death rites after mahaparinirvana of Dr. Ambedkar. Traditionally Mahars bury their dead, so to get away from practice Buddhists started cremating their dead. But Buddhists of the village continued burying the dead. They don't cremate.

The reason for the continuation of same old practice is that, it is the responsibility of Mahars to take care of all the arrangements of funeral. No other caste person takes any responsibility. Some time close friends of the deceased from other castes may come to help, but it is very rare. Buddhists use the same burial ground used by Hindu and Christian Mahars and burying is cheaper than cremation practice. So Buddhist prefers to bury their dead. But within this tradition they have different practices (see plate no. 11). Irrespective of religious affiliation all the Mahar families join together and perform the death rituals. Before proceeding to burial ground, people give bath to the dead body with hot water and put new white cloth around it. Digging work of the burial pit is done by community people only. Four people carry the dead body to the funeral ground in big white cloth. They will take rest once on the way to funeral ground. Buddhist doesn't require priest to perform last rites. As mark of respect to dead people offer flowers to dead person. They pray to Buddha, in which people collectively recite of *trisanan panchashil* (pali verses) before lowering the dead body in the grave. After completion of burring elders from the diseased family announce the date and time for *Jaldan Vidhi* (Hindus call it *savarne*) program.

Priest is required for the *jaldan vidhi* program, which is organized on the third day of death. On this day people go to the cremation ground and perform Buddha *puja*. Relatives and friends attending the program offer flower tribute to dead. They also adjust/correct the soil if there is any damage done by any animal or weather conditions such as rain or wind and returns back to home.

On coming back to home *bhante* ji perform Buddha *puja* at home as well. During this program they keep photo frame of the dead person besides the images of Dr. Ambedkar and

Buddha. *Bhante ji* keeps five different fruits whatever available at the time in front of those images with peepal leaves kept in *kalash* filled with water. He also lights candles and incense sticks on altar. Buddha *puja* is followed by serving food to relatives and others who attended the program. They serve sweet and declare that the grief period/ pollution is over now. In Buddhist grief period gets over on third day of the death.

Buddhist Monk (Priest):

The Buddhists in the village stopped involving the Brahmin priests to perform the religious ceremonies and programs. Instead they invite Buddhist priests for their religious programs. There are different terms they refer to Buddhist priest, such as *Bauddhacharya* or *Bhante ji* or *Bhikku* etc. *Bhante ji* is the term commonly used in the village. *Bhante ji* is the one who has attended *shramner shibir* (training camp) and learned basic Buddhist text and verses. There is no one in village, who has attended *shramner shibir* and knows the basic Buddhist texts and verses. Some of the people know *trisaran panchashil*, which is very common among Buddhists and recite on every occasion. Generally people call *Bhante ji* from Rahuri- the nearby town. *Bhante ji*, is who has renounced family life and living the life of a monk and wears yellow and orange robes. *Shramner* is not renounced family life and still perform the religious rituals wears white cloth at the time of ceremonies.

Practice of Endogamy and Exogamy:

Buddhism doesn't recognize caste, so theoretically Buddhists don't have to practice endogamy. Social norms pertaining to the marriages within the same caste though it is not mandatory but still strictly followed by majority in the village, though inter caste marriages

are not opposed same time there was no such proposals nor was any acceptance. Not even other Dalit castes accept inter-caste marriages with Buddhist. However, Buddhists if there is such proposal would prefer inter-caste marriages with upper caste girls and not with lower caste girls. Similarly if their girls also marry any upper caste boy they don't have any issue but when it comes to marrying lower caste boy, they have problem. On the other hand it is also a taboo to marry within same *gotra*. As mentioned before people from same clan holds same surname, *bhauki* and marriages do not take place within *bhauki*.

Use of Religious symbols and Texts:

Buddhist identity is asserted by not following certain traditions of Hindu Mahars and also through certain symbols. Specific colors of clothes, flags, images, and nomenclature of certain things, etc.; are used by Buddhists to signify uniqueness in a particular way.

White gives religious identity to Buddhists. For any religious ceremonies or social functions Buddhists wear white clothes; males wear white shirt and pants, whereas women wear white saree (see plate no. 14). On wedding bride and groom wear white clothes. The Buddhist flag bears the blue color flags flutters at their every religious and social event¹⁵. Buddhists also use *Dhammadhvaja*, a multi color flag of international level, in order to relate Buddhists at a larger level across the national borders.

Buddhists in the village assert their identity through specific images, i.e., Images of Dr. Ambedkar and Buddha (see plate no.8). On all the religious, political, social events and

¹⁵ The political flag initially used by Scheduled Caste Federation and then used by RPI political party Dr. Ambedkar founded has blue color. Today it is not limited to any particular political party of Buddhist, but used by all. The blue color flag represents Buddhist in India particularly those who converted after 1956.

programs these two images find a place at the centre stage. Every Buddhist household keeps these images or hangs the photographs of Dr. Ambedkar and Buddha on their wall. Some of them fix these images on outer walls of their houses as well.

Bodhi tree¹⁶ is also one significant symbol for Buddhist in the village. On every Buddhist function and ceremony leaves of Bodhi tree are used. It is also a practice among Buddhists to plant a Bodhi tree near Buddha vihara.

Dhamma wheel also known as Dhammachakra is also an important symbol. This Dhamma wheel is used by Buddhists in the village on their houses as design to represent their identification with Buddhism. Unlike other Buddhists of Maharashtra, the Buddhists of the village bury the dead. The burying the dead is the practice of Hindu Mahars, but the Buddhist try to be different by renouncing the ritualistic part of the Hindu Mahars. Further they put Dhamma wheel on the grave. Some people also put impression of Dhamma wheel on their vehicles and other immovable properties to show their identity with Buddhism.

The book written by Dr. Ambedkar, 'Buddha and His Dhamma' is considered as path showing for new Buddhist in Maharashtra. It takes symbolic significance when given to other as gift. It is the text they give as a gift to each other on certain occasions.

Political Affiliation and Religious Identity:

RPI is the political party with which the Buddhists in village are associated. Though it is a national political party, its presence can be felt predominantly in Maharashtra. The party is

¹⁶ Bodhi tree is the peepal tree. Buddha attained the enlightenment after long meditation under peepal tree, that's why it is called as Bodhi tree. Due to this it is considered very special in Buddhism.

divided into different parties under different leaders. In this village the RPI is representing Athavale lead RPI party. The RPI party is very active in organizing Ambedkar Jayanti and other Buddhist programs in the village. Though the party is open and any one can be a member and be part of it but since the leadership is with Dalit caste in village, the people belonging to other than Mahar are very few in the party. Religion is no bar to be a member of RPI party and it is open for everyone. Anyone from any caste can be part of RPI but no one from other caste apart from Mahar is member of the party. Even people from other Dalit castes such Matang, Wadar and Chambhars are not members of RPI party in the village.

There are other political parties in the village led by upper castes in which all the caste people become members. There are BJP, Shiv Sena, Congress, and Nationalist Congress Party as major political parties in the village. These political parties are more active during the elections. During the Gram Panchayat elections villagers contest elections from two different panels lead by BJP-Shiv Sena and Congress-Nationalist Congress Party (NCP) from the four different wards of the village and eleven members get elected for the Gram Panchayat. Vikas Seva Panel is lead by BJP-Shiv Sena political party and Janseva Panel is lead by Congress-NCP party.

RPI alone cannot gain power in the village politics. So they have to go with local panel. In the 2014 lok sabha (Parliament) election RPI was in alliance with BJP-Shiv Sena at National level. But at village level RPI party didn't extend their support to BJP-Shiv Sena. Since at village level they are in alliance with Congress- NCP lead Janseva panel and it is not possible to go against those people in village.

If there is any political gathering where their national leaders and participating at district and Taluka level programs, RPI cadre from village do participate in it even though they support BJP-Shiv Sena party. But in village they always go with their own favorable party and not according to choice made by RPI party at national and state level election alliances. It is very much visible and related to their day to day affairs in the village. They can't ignore or sideline the existing dominant political parties in the village they are in alliance with.

Buddhist Songs and Bhajans:

Songs and Bhajans praising Buddha and Dr. Ambedkar is one of the very effective way Buddhists in the village are asserting their new religious identity and show their respect and loyalty to the ideas of Buddha and Dr. Ambedkar. The principles and thoughts of Buddhism are converted into Bhajans and songs. There are songs about work done by Dr. Ambedkar, his struggle, life, achievements and the importance of him to the community. Some songs are also there which tell about what is the difference between their previous life as Mahars and what change they are experiencing in their life today due to contribution of Dr. Ambedkar and Buddha's principles of equality and justice. People play those songs on the occasion of Ambedkar Jayanti, marriage ceremonies, and other Buddhist festivals.

Identity as Christian:

Though Christianity found its way to India long back in first century A.D., the conversion of Mahar caste to Christianity can be traced back to only in 1841. The first Mahar who got converted to Christianity was from Ahmednagar district (Michael, 2010). The missionary

work in Ahmednagar started in the year 1931, and it happened to be the first protestant Christian mission called the American Marathi Mission. The Catholic Mission made its way to Ahmednagar district little late in 1878. The Mahars' encounter with catholic mission could be traced back to the opening of Jesuits missionaries in 1878 (Michael, 2010). All these missionaries though worked for preaching gospel in Maharashtra but they mainly worked in the districts of Ahmednagar, Aurangabad and Nashik. In Ahmednagar district, missionaries predominantly worked extensively in the Tehsils of Sangamner, Rahuri and Shrirampur.

In Kangar Budruk village Christianity made its presence during British era itself, but first time the church was constructed in village in the year 1959. Before construction of the Church in the village, missionaries used to preach gospel at a home. They had established school, colleges, hospitals, churches, training centers at district head quarter of Ahmednagar district which opened new opportunities to Dalits at that time.

One Parvati Dive- a 75 year says,

"I am not sure what my age might be at the time of my marriage, but I was very young when I got married. We belong to Mahar caste and converted to Christianity. When first I came to this village after my marriage the situation of Mahar caste people was very poor. We didn't have any specific occupation. We were living on the mercy of upper caste land lords of the village for our livelihood. The church was not there in the village at that time, but a priest used to come once a month to organize prayer and preach gospel to villagers. At that time Christian missionaries also used to work in our village to provide employment opportunities, medical facilities, education and other facilities like

food grains and refined oil. We used to get recommendation letter from the priest to take medical facilities from missionary run hospitals in cities like Pune and Ahmednagar. People may say we converted because we were greedy to receive all those benefits, but the true reason was that we felt their humanity. They were more humans than those who tortured us by putting in degrading conditions to live with”.

This narration of women tells many things about Mahar caste approach to Christianity and reason for accepting the religion with conscious choice. They mainly attracted towards this religion because humanitarian approach of its preachers.

In this section it has been described how villagers have constructed and maintaining their new religious identity.

Refusing Hindu Traditions and accepting new sets of beliefs and practices:

Dr. Ambedkar said in his speech given to the Bombay Presidency Mahar Conference on 1936, that Strength is essential to fight against social inequalities and gain self respect and dignity. According to him it was impossible to gain that strength within Hindu folds and strength can only be gained from outside. To gain strength from outside, it is possible only through establishing close relation with that other society by joining some other religion (Ambedkar, 2004). Mahars of the village used this way of gaining strength from outside way before Dr. Ambedkar conversion movement, and converted to Christianity. By converting to Christianity, Mahars have attempted to distance themselves with Hindu religion.

One is considered to be Christian only after undergoing baptism ritual. After baptism they become members of the church and they need to follow 10 *aadnya* (behest/commandments), the core of Christianity. Those are, first there is only one God and one will believe no other God. Second is there will not be any idol worship. Third is observing the first day of every week as Shabba day. On that day every believer will attend church prayer/Mass (*missa*) and pray to god. Fourth is to respect parents and will take care of them. Fifth is about not to use name of the god for unnecessarily, there should not be any misuse of name. Sixth is about keeping away from crimes. In this individual is prohibited from committing any crime. Seventh is about avoidance of adultery and incest. Eighth is not being greed of any things, not desiring anything of others. Not to give false witness is the ninth aadnya and last tenth aadnya is about love. Every Christian follower should love their neighbor without any condition. These are the behests or commandments a Christian need to follow in his life.

Religious structures:

Building church in the villages is one of the important factors to construct and maintain religious identity of Christians in village (see plate no.4). Attending prayers in church is another form of change that occurs in the life of converted person which is visible and can be considered as important to assert ones identity as Christian. Churches are constructed with the attributions made by the villagers, on the land donated by the villagers. In the village the land was donated by a Mahar family who converted to Christianity and the church is located in *Rajwada*. It is expected that every Christian should observe first day of the week as shabba day. In urban areas it is not difficult to observe shabba on Sunday as offices and other establishments are closed and people are free. But in the villages as the agricultural

operations and other activities go on Sunday people are not free. In such cases church is flexible to observe these shabba days on weekly market day of the village as people get free time. It is the practice in rural area that on village market day laborers will get a holiday. Since majority of the population including Christian in village is dependent on labor work for their livelihood and they get work on Sunday also they are not available on Sundays. Therefore church organizes prayers for the particular village on the day when it is the market day.

Religious Festivals:

Celebrating the Christian festivals is one of the important forms of construction of their religious identity as Christians. Christian religious festival includes Christmas, Good Friday, Ester, Church foundation anniversaries, observance of lent period (*upavas kal*). On the occasions of Christian religious festivals people organizes mass (*missa*) in the village. People gather at church to celebrate festival at community level. *Bhajan* program (singing devotional songs of god) are organized at church on the occasions of festivals. On Christmas day people organize prayer (Mass) at church.

In the midnight night at 12 AM early hours of 25th December people celebrate birth of Yesu by organizing firework and singing songs. People decorate their home as well as church on that day and wear new cloths and go to church. Biryani is prepared in every household. Relatives and friend are invited for lunch and dinner. There are some people who observe lent period for 40 days. Though it is not compulsory many also stop eating non-vegetarian food during lent days.

Sacred places and pilgrimages:

In Ahmednagar district there is very special pilgrim centre for Marathi Christians. There is big church at Haregaon of Shrirampur Taluka of Ahmednagar district. The anniversary of *Mat Mauli*¹⁷ Mount Mary is celebrated as big festival here, and the visit is called as *mat mauli yatra*. Every year lakhs of people gather in Haregaon on second Saturday of September month to offer prayers at Mat Mauli. To reach Haregaon on the occasion of Mat Mauli festival devotees walk from their villages to Haregaon. It is also called Pandharpur of Marathi Christians. Christian says, “It is our pilgrimage”, ‘*Haregaon chi Mauli Nausala Pavli*’. It means mother of Haregaon fulfills all the wishes.

Practice of Particular Life Cycle Rituals:

The Life cycle rituals of Christians in the village include with respect to birth, baptism, confirmation, marriage and death.

Birth and Baptism: The priest is invited to bless the new born child, usually on the fifth day called pachvi. On that day the priest performs baptism ritual and a name is given to the child. Baptism is basically christening ceremony. It is not compulsory though to name the child on fifth day itself. But as a practice it is done on the fifth day of the birth. Usually woman gives birth to her first child at her parent’s home. It is her parent’s responsibility to take care of their daughter in her first pregnancy. For subsequent deliveries it is up to her-in-laws where they want her to deliver the child.

¹⁷ Mauli means mother; mat mauli means mount of mother Mary.

Baptism is one of the important life cycle rituals of Christians irrespective of the denomination that one is affiliated the rite is observed by different Christian churches in different ways. The most common practice of it among most of the Christian denominations is infant baptism. But there is also a provision for baptism of adult person in the case of adults converting to Christianity. Though there are two different age groups of persons to be baptized the rite are same. For the baptism the child is taken to the church accompanied by at least two persons termed as god-parents. It is the duty of those persons to answer the questions put by the priest to the child on behalf of the child.

The priest puts specially-blessed salt in the mouth of the child and then asks the child whether he or she ready to receive the baptism. For this question parents of child answer it affirmatively on behalf of the child. Then priest pours blessed holy water on head of the child saying "I baptize this child in the name of the Father and the Son and of the Holy Ghost." In some denominations the child/adult is immersed in holy water. During this ritual priest gives name to the child and that remains the Christian name of the child. It is not compulsory to continue the same name on his official records and documents. They can change it later. But it remains same in the record of the church where this baptism ritual is performed. At the end child is presented with white clothes, and they lights the candle to denote that child is a member of the Christian community.

Confirmation: Confirmation is a one of the life cycle rituals practiced by most of the Christian in the world. It is the ritual which enables a person who got baptized when he was very young to confirm the promises made by parents on his behalf at baptism. It also gives the person full membership of Christian community and church. Usually a bishop conducts

the service. Confirmation can be held at any age. The rite of confirmation is done usually at the age of 14 in the case of child baptized at very young age. Otherwise there is no such age prescribed for confirmation. In some cases it is conferred on infants' right after baptism. But in most of the time it is done after that person is old enough to understand the importance of the ritual and the promises made by him. The confirmation entitles one to take part in the Holy communication.

Holy Communion: it is an important rite organized on every Sunday or once a month or at different frequency depending on the practice of denomination. In this rite a piece of bread and grape juice called holy wine which represent the body and blood of Christ are distributed to those who had undergone baptism.

Marriage: Marriage is a very important event in the social life of all human-being, it is considered as very important ritual since it gives social sanction to start new life. Ideally a Christian is expected to marry a Christian regardless of caste or racial background of the person. In almost all denominations once the marriage is fixed, they inform the church authorities to read what is called ban. It is the public announcement of the marriage and it is said if there is any abjection to any one on valid ground it should be report to the Church authority. The bans are read on two or three Sundays. In some cases the third one is read or announcement is made on the day of wedding itself. If there are objections bigamy or surpassing any rules of the country the marriage ceremony is stopped. It is unusual for a marriage proceeding get stopped because of the objections. The marriage is fixed at the bride's home by the elders of both the sides. Usually they consult Hindu calendar to avoid inauspicious days. The marriage ceremony is also usually avoided on Sundays and lent days.

Christians have particular ceremony to conduct the marriages. They have specific clothing pattern to be worn at the time of marriage (see plate no. 13). The bride is dressed all in white and her head covered with a white veil. Usually marriage takes place at the church, but the church in the village is very small. Hence marriages take place either in the courtyard of bride or groom's house or big churches at nearby towns such as Rahuri, Shrirampur etc. Now a day marriages are also solemnized at wedding halls where they decorate altar like that of church altar.

At the time of wedding bride comes into the church or wedding venue with her father or any other elder male relative by holding his hand. On the other hand the groom comes with a personal attendant who is called as the best-man. The pair comes to the altar accompanied by two witnesses.

The priest asks both bride and groom one by one about their free consent to the marriage. Priest question the bride and the groom whether they lawfully accept each other as husband and wife? Which they will be committed to each other, and take care of each other in good days and bad days etc. Both in turn give their affirmative reply, "I will". Then the father or the elder male relative of the bride formally confirming the groom accept the bride. On which groom takes her right hand in his hand and says I accept her as my wedded wife. Then bride takes his hand in hers and utters the same things. Then the priest, their hands still being joined, blesses the marriage in words and sprinkles holy water on them. The priest then blesses a ring and hands it over to the groom who then puts it on the third finger of the bride's hand. After this the priest says a prayer and the ceremony is over.

The Hindu custom of wearing a *mangalsutra* is still practiced by Christians of the village. Though it is not compulsory to wear but still they tie it. It is first blessed by the priest and then tied by the groom round the neck of the bride. It is made of gold and black glass beads. Some of the other Hindu traditions are also followed by Christians in their weddings; traditions such as *haldi* and *vardava*. Applying *haldi* on bride and groom is organized on the previous day of marriage and take them to village procession as part of *vardava*.

Death: In Christian death the priest to performs the last rite. If the dead person was baptized, a member of the church and Christian community, then only the priest performs the Christian burial. It is the practice among the Christians in village to bury the dead. Usually the ceremony is arranged at deceased person's home. It is also called funeral home. Priest, family members, relatives and friends pray for deceased. It includes hymns, Bible reading and prayers. After prayer is over people get opportunity for last time glimpse to say goodbye to the deceased and express their feelings towards it. The dead is carried from home to grave either in coffin or white cloth, it depends upon financial condition of the family. After reaching grave, priest prays once again for the deceased person. The priest also blesses the place where the deceased is finally put to rest. Family members, friends, and relatives participate in last rite.

Like Mahars and Buddhist in Christianity also people and close relatives' go for correcting or adjusting the soil on third day to protect the grave. They offer flowers to dead in respect. But unlike Mahars and Buddhist the grief period/pollution in Christians ends on the 40th day of burial. On that day, they organize special mass at funeral home. Priest comes and prays for

the deceased. They also serve food to relatives and people that came for 40th day ceremony and declares that grief period for family is over.

Practice of Endogamy and Exogamy:

Like Buddhist and Hindu Mahars in the village the Christians also have continued this practice of prohibiting marriages within same *gotra*; *bhauki* marriages are prohibited. There are no cases of inter-caste marriages, though there are inter-religion marriages in the village among the Christian Mahars.

Preferences in Food Culture:

Food practices of all the communities in village are more or less same. The particular food habit of a particular group of people from different castes and religion is considered different from other majority community. That particular food can be differentiated as vegetarian and non-vegetarian food. And within non-vegetarian food practices that differentiate Dalits in general and Christians with Mahar caste in particular is beef eating practice. All the families belong to Christian's eat beef. Apart from Mahars Matang (Mang) caste and Muslims also eat beef in the village.

Use of Religious Symbols and Texts:

The cross is one and the only powerful symbol used by Christians to show their faith in Jesus Christ and assert their identity as Christians. Which is and Christians of the village are no exception. This symbol is just not limited to churches and cathedrals, but it is everywhere, in homes (see plate no. 8), on outer walls of home, their assets, vehicles, on their body, their graves (see plate no. 11). They also wear it too, on earrings, on a necklace. Paintings and

prints of cross are made on clothes. Along with cross some people also print images of Jesus at their homes.

The Holy Bible is the scriptural text of Christians. The village Christians uses the translated Marathi New Testament and called *Juna Karar*. Every Christian household in the village has a copy of *Juna Karar* with them. The Bible has special place in home. The Holy Book and cross have replced the space of Hindu gods in home.

Distinct Category of Converted Dalits in Legal Documents:

Mahars converted to Christianity change their religious status from Hindu to Christianity after conversion. In Maharashtra Scheduled Caste converted to Christianity is listed under Other Backward Classes (OBC). To claim the status of OBC in their legal document, converted person has to produce his baptism certificate or the letter given by the concerned church stating that the particular person is baptized and is permanent member of Christian community. After such identification letter the government authorities issue them OBC certificate. Claiming OBC status through legal documents is one of the ways to leave away their caste identity and join other group to assert their new identity with new status.

Chapter 3: Construction and Maintaining New Religious Identity - Problems of Continuity and Change

Previous chapter has focused on Mahar's way of construction of religious identity and ways of maintaining it as Hindu, Buddhist and Christians separately. The basis of newly constructed religious identity as Buddhist and Christian is the departure from Hindu traditions and practices and establishing new practices different from their previous caste tradition and practices. Through this Mahars have formed new religious identity after conversion as Buddhist and Christian. It has demonstrated that they are different in their religious identities among Mahars of same the village. But at the same time it is also very important to understand how have they demarcated the boundaries between their previous caste identities and newly formed religious identity. This present chapter examines the problems of Mahars in maintaining newly constructed religious identity after conversion. What are the difficulties and challenges they face in maintain that new religious identity without confusing it with their previous caste identity.

Practice of Endogamy and exogamy on the basis of Mahar as caste of origin:

The practice of endogamy and exogamy is strictly followed by all the castes in village. This is one of the important aspects why caste is still persisting. This practice makes sure that all the castes of the village maintain their status quo and existence without confusing their identity with each other. It is very easy to demarcate who belongs to which caste in the village.

Marrying within one's own religion is the preferred practice of endogamy even in Buddhist and Christians in the village. The Buddhist and Christians families in village at the time of marriage, they first prefer to marry within the families have faith in Buddhism and Christianity respectively. Marathi language is one of the other important criteria they prefer marrying within the religious community. In Maharashtra Buddhist population consists of mainly converted Mahars. Similarly Christians in Maharashtra are consists of mainly converted Mahar caste. Very rarely do we find converted Buddhists and Christians are from castes other than Mahars. Since mostly all the converted Buddhist and Christian are from Mahar as their caste of origin, marriages within Buddhist and Christians are indirectly restricted to that of Buddhist or Christian converted from Mahar as caste of their origin. Apart from this to follow the social norms pertaining to the marriages within same caste is also continued to govern Buddhist and Christians in light of their social relationships with their non-converted kith and kin. Marrying out of one's own caste is not acceptable for traditional families. To maintain the bond with their family, kith and kin they have accepted the norms of endogamy even after conversion.

On the other hand within the same caste as mentioned it is also prohibited to marry within same *gotra*. Even after conversion their blood bonds with their clan never ends. Along with endogamy they also need to follow the rules regarding prohibitions. It is believed that families with the same surname are descendants of common male ancestors. To maintain these prohibitions and to avoid confusions of prohibited relations to marry with converted Buddhist and Christians in village continued with same surnames. This is one of the important reasons for persistence of caste of their origin even after converting to other religion among Mahars in village.

Inter religious marriages between Mahar, Buddhist and Christians:

The practice of endogamy and exogamy among Mahar, Buddhist and Christian in village compel them to follow certain rules of prohibitions. It resulted in decrease in marriage choices they can make within the families of same faith. This led them to marry within Mahar as their caste of origin irrespective of their religious faith. Marriages take place between Christians of Mahar origin and Hindu Mahar, Christians of Mahar origin and Buddhist of Mahar origin and Hindu Mahar and Buddhist of Mahar origin. Such inter religious caste marriages take place only if they are from the same caste. In all such cases girl and her family has to compromise with her belief. After marriage she has to adapt the religion and practices of family in which she is married into. It is not possible for the girl to continue with her religious belief after marriage if married to family having faith in different religion, at least for early years of marriage. Therefore, though some of families have converted to Christianity and Buddhism, inter marrying among them is solely based on caste criteria. There is caste endogamy even though the Buddhism and Christianity never recognize caste as the principles of social organization in village. The situations like this make sure that caste still persists in these religions as well.

Dominant Perception of Hindus:

Birth is the only criteria to acquire caste status in Hindu social order. There is no scope for conversion and change of caste. One has to be born in a particular caste and there is no movement in it. This is the perception among the caste Hindus who happen to be the majority in village and therefore they cannot perceive mobility among castes and any scope for change in it. It resulted in contradiction in caste Hindu perception about persistence of caste even

among the converted Buddhists and Christians for whom new religion has given a new identity. This popular perception of the caste Hindus that caste comes to one by birth, keep dominating Mahar assertion of new religious identity.

In addition to this social norms imposed and practiced among the converted Buddhist and Christian regarding endogamy and exogamy in caste have placed converts in to a disadvantaged position. They left with no choice but to marry within Mahar caste. Even after conversion marriages are confined to particular caste. Buddhist marries Buddhist of Mahar as their caste of origin and Christian marry Christian of Mahar as their caste of origin. This led to persistence of caste even in their new religion and caste remains as dominant force to determine their identity.

New religious Identity and Caste Identity attached with Locality:

Mahar caste was considered untouchable in the past and Mahars were always kept at distance from other upper castes of the village. It was practiced to avoid possibilities of contacts with them and getting polluted. In this context they were given a place in the village for their habitation at the outskirts of village. Even today Mahar settlement in the village is still located at the outskirts of the village. There is no structural change in their dwelling location within village. The locality in which the families belong to Mahar caste has been staying called *Maharwada*, for a long time despite the fact that has been renamed as *Rajwada*. Since all the families residing in the *Rajwada* are of Mahar caste, even new name of the locality '*Rajwada*' stands equal to its previous name '*Maharwada*'. Mahars after conversion continued to stay in the same locality. They have no other option but to stay in same locality because they don't own land anywhere else in *gawthan* except *Rajwada*. If they have to

change the location, they have to go out of village in their agricultural land. This is also an option which is not available for many of the families since half of them are landless. Those who have agriculture land and willing to move out of main village to agriculture land, that land also known as Maharki or Hadulki which is specified as land owned by Mahars. So the option of rejecting caste identity attached with the residential area they are living in is not available and caste identities still persist and precede their religion. This situation is not changing because there are preferences in land dealing as well. Upper caste villagers do not consider Mahars irrespective of what their religious and economic status is as someone of their level and deserve to buy their land.

One Shankar Salve, a 45 years old farmer says,

“I have never seen in my life upper caste selling their land to Mahars in my village. First of all we don’t have enough resources to buy the land. But even if we have they won’t sale it to us. Most of the time we didn’t get any such information about upper caste people selling their land until the deal occurred. They inform their own relatives, caste people and people from other upper castes about selling of land. Even if we come to know about it they quote high price so that we lose interest in buying it”.

Sahebrao Dive, 55 years old farmer has another opinion on the same line. He says,

“There are examples in the village where upper caste people buying the land from the Mahars. But there is no single example where they have sold their land to Mahars. It is against the status and pride of upper caste to do such dealing.

They feel inferior to do such business with people from lower than them in caste hierarchy even though they have economic capacity to do so. They treat the land as mother. Selling own mother to lower caste people is an insult to her and for themselves as well. That's why they never sell their land to us".

It is not mandatory to reveal everything to everyone in the village, and in this case particularly about one's intention to sell the land. It is very personal and matter of owner's choice that whom he wants to sell his land to? No one can force any one to sell their land against his or her wish. It will be very subjective feeling to say that they are discriminating Mahars in land dealing. But it is also true that most of the time they prefer not to sell the land to Mahars.

Continuation of burial ritual and common funeral ground in all:

Burying dead is traditional practice among Mahars. Christians worldwide also do have this practice of burial. Buddhists across the Maharashtra cremate their dead. Dr. Ambedkar was the first Mahar who was cremated among converted Buddhists. But in the village the situation is different. It is the responsibility of the caste to look after the funeral arrangements of its members. Within Mahar there are three different religious faiths; Hindu, Buddhist and Christian. Anyway as the Hindu Mahars and Christians bury their dead there is no issue at all and moreover they form the majority among Mahars in the village. The problem is for the Buddhist for funeral. They have to use the same burial ground as that of Mahars (see plate no. 10). Since majority of the community who take responsibility of funeral among Mahars as their caste of origin bury their dead and have to use same burial ground the Buddhists prefer to bury their dead for the convenience. It is also because burying is cheap than

cremation. Continuation of burial practice among Buddhists and Christians of the village help maintaining social solidarity on the basis of caste though they are divided with reference religion, the enthrone stream. In addition to this use of same funeral ground for burial due to lack of alternative space for separate burial ground didn't allow converted Buddhists and Christians to maintain exclusive religious identity. Caste follows them to the grave as well.

SC status and caste claims- confusing identity:

Dalits converted to religion other than Buddhism and Sikhism are denied of Scheduled Caste status after conversion. This left the Mahars converted to Christianity in particular vulnerable. They have no resources other than what others have. Their condition in village is as same as other Mahars converted to Buddhism or those who remained as Hindus. To maintain the balance between their spiritual and material aspects of life converted Christians swing between Christianity and Hinduism and maintain same sort of dual identity depending on the situation.

One of the converted Christian on promise of confidentiality and unanimity said,

“I am the first person in my family to receive education. My parents were illiterate. Following certain rituals and practices of Christian religion has not changed socio-economic status of my family. Following Christian rituals did not change my parent's educational status from illiterate to highly educated persons. We didn't become land lords in the village. By giving up Hindu traditions we feel liberated from psychological slavery. How can mere following of some rituals of Christianity change the plight of my family that they had

undergone through the generations? It doesn't change our past, the struggles of my parents for survival, the struggle I had undergone to educate myself with minimal resources available. Even after getting education if someone is not able to secure a job then what is the use of education he has received for his family?"

As per rules Dalit converted to Christianity falls under Other Backward Classes. During the village elections people contest election in the wards reserved for particular caste categories. If a person who is converted from Hindu caste to Christianity and wants to contest election he/she has to contest from the ward reserved for OBC. As per rules and matter of right, such person can contest the election. But villagers don't support them. There are OBC castes in village, such as *Kumbhar*, *Nhavi*, etc; they don't come to support to such candidate. They prefer candidate from their own caste. Since OBC candidate usually contests from the ward where the OBCs are in majority and in that locality there are no OBC Christians contested from the OBC castes. Christian OBC can't make majority to vote for him. In such situation they have to be with their caste and claim caste identity. There also it is not easy to for them to claim caste identity and contest. They have to convince their own people, as it amounts to change of identity depriving the benefit to the genuine Scheduled Caste according to the government rules

People have their justifications for claiming caste identity by hiding their religious status as the government stand a rule cannot be justified as the above statement make it clear. This resulted in to continuation of caste on legal documents and practice of religion in practical

life. Such situations in village create confusion about one's religious identity and caste claim, and lead to conflicts within the caste, who often are relatives or *gotra* members.

Differences of religious beliefs among the blood relations and relatives:

There are families in the village in which though they are from same parents, they are siblings living in the same village and in the same locality they following different religious faith and converted to different religions. In such situation they do not flout all their relations with each other. Not all their or other relatives follow the same religion but still they are relatives. They can't erase the blood relations with their fellow relatives just because they got converted or have different religious faiths. Those relations and bondages between families continue to persist irrespective of heterogeneous religious faiths. This is a unique phenomenon with respect to Mahar families converted to different religions. They left their religion of origin yet the common factor which still binds them together is consanguinity and caste. It has its own effect on Mahars claiming new religious identity after conversion.

One Maryabai says,

"I have five sons. I and my three sons are Christians but two of my son' are not following Christianity and they prefer to be Hindu only. Being mother I can't part away from them, neither their brothers ceased to be brothers. Irrespective of their religious beliefs they remain brothers. Can we change that? It's not possible. We can't".

Situations like this add further confusions among converted Christians, Buddhist and Mahars of the village about their identity. These kinds of confusion are not limited to themselves but

it also extends to those of other caste people. This is confusing state of identity that leads to negating the religious claim by non-Hindu Mahars and pin it down to that of caste Mahar for all.

Devotion and Loyalty towards Dr. Ambedkar and identity:

The people in village have great respect and propound faith on Dr. Ambedkar. They are thankful to him for sacrifices and efforts he had made for the cause of humanity. He is called as Babasaheb, which means great father. He is like fatherly figure for everyone. Out of immense respect they have towards him they pay homage to Dr. Ambedkar. All Mahars regardless of religious affiliations pay tribute and homage on the occasion of Ambedkar Jayanti (Birth Anniversary) and Mahaparinirvana Din (Death Anniversary) is common across state and country. The villagers under study are no exception to this. The Mahars are always leading in organizing Dr. Ambedkar Jayanti and other programs in the village. It doesn't matter whether they are Buddhist or Christian or Mahar, people irrespective of their faith are the leading figures in organizing Ambedkar Jayanti and conducting the procession of Ambedkar image through the village. On that day every household of *Rajwada* irrespective of their religious faith cook biryani and celebrate the birth anniversary of Dr. Ambedkar. On 6th December they go to Chaityabhumi, Mumbai every year to pay homage on the occasion of Dr. Ambedkar's death anniversary.

In this regard Mahars of the village has common ideal leader Dr. Ambedkar, the common sacred place such as Chaityabhumi, the common practices of paying homage to Dr. Ambedkar such as visiting sacred places and celebrating Ambedkar Jayanti created the social solidarity among Mahars from different religious faiths. They greet each other by saying 'Jay

Bhim', which means glory to Dr. Ambedkar. On the other hand use of term Mahar by non-Mahars with respect to Mahar as untouchable caste is considered derogatory. In the village people use the greeting word 'Jay Bhim' to refer Mahar of the village. As nomenclature the greeting 'Jay Bhim' gives identification of people with Dr. Ambedkar and express faith in him. 'Jay Bhim' stands as new term referring to Mahar caste in the village. Since there are confusions regarding caste and religion of Mahars in the village, people use term 'Jay Bhim caste' to identify themselves as Mahars of the village irrespective of their religious faith.

Precedence of social relations over caste and religion:

Marriage and death are two important rites in the life of every individual irrespective of their religious faiths. Hindu Mahars, Buddhists and Christians in village are no different with respect to importance of Marriage and Death rite. But what makes it more of important for Mahars in the village is this becomes basis of their preference to caste based social relations. *Bhauki* is the base for it. *Bhauki* governs the social relations of caste in the village. If one is not having good relations with *bbauki* the life in village becomes a mess. From birth to death every individual has to depend upon *bhauki*. Religious belief and practice is personal and limited to individual and his choice but *bhauki* remain at central to their preference in social life.

At the time of any death in community, no one from *Rajwada* eats anything till the last rite of the dead is over. It is the traditional practice across all the communities in the village. Small children and pregnant women are exempted from this practice. Difference in religious faith within Mahars' is not an excuse here. Irrespective of one's religious faith they have to observe these practices. Perform all the rites of funeral are the responsibility of *bhauki*. As

per traditions the *bhauki* has the responsibility to serve food to all members of the mourning household at least for next two days. It is the tradition that funeral home should not light the fire in hearth till third day on which ritual of the *savarne* is over. So it is the duty of caste people to provide food to the family till that day.

One Padma Dive says,

“In my life I have never given food to anyone other than families from my caste. Neither other caste people have given food to my family when someone died. There is no such prohibition though; if anyone wants to give they can. But till the date I have not seen any family doing this. It is not wrong not to give food on death of someone from family not belonging to one’s own caste”.

Marriages in villages get fixed with the help of community elders. Community has major influence on getting things done without any problem. Participation of *bhauki* in wedding is vital in many aspects. Christian family follows Christian rituals of wedding, Buddhist family follows Buddhist rituals and there are few who still follow Hindu rituals. But every family from community participates and helps in process of wedding. Everyone participates and help each other. Marriage needs social sanction and in it community play important role. The bride’s parents agrees to marry their daughter not only because groom and his family but also because they have respectable status among their *bhauki*. If the groom’s family doesn’t have good relations with *bhauki*, groom faces problems in arranging his marriage.

In such circumstances families irrespective of their religious faith have to adhere to social relations based on caste and *bhauki*. Priority is always given to one's own caste fellows and relatives.

Gender in caste and religion of Mahars:

Endogamy is practiced not only in upper castes' but by all the castes in the village including the Dalits. Every caste prefers to marry within the caste. Among Mahars' though some of families are converted to Christianity and Buddhism marriages and inter marrying among different religious faith is solely based on the caste. A Christian convert marries only among Christian families that have Mahar caste as their caste of origin. Some time marriages do take place between Christian and Hindu Mahar, Christian and Buddhist Mahar. Such inter religious marriages take place only if they are from same the caste. In all such cases girl has to compromise with her belief. After marriage she has to adapt to the religion and practices of the family into which she is married. It is not possible for girl to continue with her religious belief after marriage if married to family believing to different religion, at least for early years of marriage. This compulsion and compromise imposed on girls during marriages leads to continuation two different traditions being practiced at same time in that family. With the religious practices and traditions of in law's-family, girl also some time follows her own traditions and festivals. For example Nagpanchami, Sankranti, Rakshabandhan, Vata apurnima, and Bhaubij in Diwali are important festivals particularly for Hindu women. A girl from the household having faith in such traditions and festivals if married to Buddhist or Christian groom she struggles to come out of her beliefs and to discontinue the practices. So

it results in dualistic or multiple beliefs and faiths for the girl who continues with her own beliefs, and at the same time following the practices of husband's family.

There are certain other practices, traditions and rules related to marital status of women which affect the religious faith. There are certain things which are only practiced by married women. There are prohibitions for unmarried girl and widow women regarding those practices. There are certain ornaments, certain colors of cloths and bangles meant for married women. Similarly putting a vermilion spot on forehead is only allowed to married women as long as husband is alive. There are some practices which are followed after the death of one's husband. When husband is dead woman has to give up wearing mangal sutra. She can't wear kumkum (vermilion) on forehead which is the symbol of suvasini, i.e., those women whose husband is alive. Only these women are allowed to put on kumkum spot and mangalsutra. Widows are also not allowed to wear toe ring, green bangles and green saree. There are other restrictions imposed on widows. Interestingly enough there is no difference so far as these restrictions are concerned across all religions. Family members take out the *mangalsutra* at the time of burial and the gold out of it, is put in the mouth of the dead man. On the third day of the death of the husband when people go to burial ground for *savane* ritual, the women from the community break all the bangles of widow. Then they put lot of *kumkum* on the widow's forehead for last time in case of Hindu. On coming back to home the women give bath to the widow and washes off all the kumkum they had put. This is done in all the cases regardless of religious faith. All widows' even upper castes like Marathas or other Dalit castes like Matang and Chambhars all will undergo the same rite.

Continuation of celebration of such religious festivals and traditions and practices pertaining to women being followed by Mahars irrespective of their religious faith create confusions of their religious identity. These practices put women of Mahar community in a vulnerable state. Mahar women in the village are instrumental in overtly claiming new religious identity and covertly continuing Mahar caste's old religious traditions and practices.

Appropriation of Buddhist and Christians as part of Hindu:

Suresh Dive, a 28 year brick factory worker of Mahar community of the village says about his caste status in legal document such as caste certificate issued by government authorities,

“Though my caste certificate is Hindu Mahar I didn't face any problem while registering Buddhism as religion of my two daughters in their birth certificates and subsequently in their caste certificate. There is no such requirement to show any conversion certificate issued by religious authorities to claim Buddhist as religious status. They also don't ask for same”.

On the other hand, Paulas Dive, a 58 year old Pan Shop owner in the village says,

“One of my cousins at Pune had converted to Christianity and wanted to be a priest. He joined a seminary of Christianity to study. There he had to give his community certificate of Christianity. He had to produce his Baptism certificate issued by Church authorities. After all compliances of documents he got community certificate as Christian convert from SC which is recognized as Other Backward Class in Maharashtra”.

The two examples mentioned above shows double standards of Government authorities in issuing caste certificate to different religious sect among Mahars are fishy. Caste certificate plays crucial role in asserting one's religious and caste status in legal documents. The same status also gets recorded in demographic details of government offices. By not compelling Buddhist to produce conversion certificate or documentary proof in support of their conversion plays important role in reducing Buddhist identity to that of Mahar caste. Buddhist in the village is not bothered about conversion ritual or its importance. It has become interchanging identity for Mahars in village. In a way it is positive step but it is also has negative impact on Buddhist as religious identity. Mahars without converting to Buddhism, just to avoid embarrassing situation among their community claim Buddhist identity and continue their caste traditions and practices. This leads to Buddhism in the village as an alternative identity for Mahar caste.

On the other hand, baptism certificate is compulsory for Christian converts to prove their claim over religious identity. In the village there are people converted in Christianity, for that they have to undergo the Baptism ritual. But as soon as they get converted to Christianity they lose their Scheduled Caste status. Therefore even after conversion they use Mahar caste in their community certificates. This has been working as strategy that put check on number of families converting to Christianity. People either get refrain from conversion or they remain Mahars on paper and Christian by faith. These double standards are working exactly as tool for reducing Buddhist and Christian religious identity of converted Mahars to that of caste identity.

Chapter 4: Multiple Religious Identities among Mahars and implications of Atrocity Act

In previous two chapters on the Mahar's way of construction of identity and ways of maintaining it as Hindu, Buddhist and Christians separately and problems associated with it has been discussed in these chapters that the basis of newly constructed religious identity as Buddhist and Christian is the departure from Hindu traditions and practices and establishing new practices different from their previous caste tradition and practices. Through this Mahars have formed new religious identity after conversion as Buddhist and Christian. It is their self identity, constructed by themselves.

These identities constructed and asserted are maintained whether these are acceptable to others or not and would they be approved by others or not. But on the other hand it is also demonstrated that the socio, economic, political, religious aspects of village life keep influencing the Mahar's claim of new religious identity separate from their previous caste. They are struggling to maintain the boundaries between their previous caste identities and newly formed religious identity.

The multiple religious identities among Mahars have three aspects. First aspect deals with existence of more than one religious faith among the Mahars of the same village. Second aspect deals with individual's dilemma or confusion about his religious identity dependent on religious status divided in more than one religion. Third is the original caste identity given by others despite one's claim for a different religious status. In this regard the present chapter is describing correlation between multiple religious identities among Mahars and implications of Atrocity Act. Three case studies are presented here to argue that there is only one identity

given by the upper castes to the Mahar though the latter claims multiple identities. The conversion to other religion has made them more vulnerable to atrocities committed by upper castes.

Dalit's vulnerability to caste atrocity and Religion:

The Mahars of the village under study are divided in to three different religious faiths, viz; Hindu, Buddhist and Christianity. As per Atrocity Act Mahars those remained with Hindu religion and converted to Buddhism can be considered as Scheduled Caste that comes under the purview of Atrocity Act. On other hand the Act doesn't cover the Mahars converted to Christianity as Scheduled Caste and they remain outside the Atrocity Act. This raises the question, does religion has anything to do with Mahar's vulnerability to atrocities?

As per Ramaiah (2011) one of the many other important reasons what makes Dalits more vulnerable to become a pray of atrocities is their dependency on other castes for their livelihood, mostly on landlords from upper castes. Exclusion of Mahars converted to Christianity from Scheduled Caste category automatically excludes them from the protection ensured at least on paper under Atrocity Act. Is it that the exclusion of particular religious conversion of Mahars from protection of atrocity is based on assumption that only Mahars those remained with Hindu fold and converted to Buddhism are dependent on other caste for their livelihood and not those who got converted to Christianity? The assumption indirectly states that the Mahars converted to Christianity have become completely self sufficient and are not dependent on other caste for their livelihood which is completely false. Also is it that perpetrators of atrocity discriminate Mahars on the religious ground and do not commit atrocity on the Mahars converted to Christianity? The reality is that the religious conversion

of Mahars didn't change their dependency on other castes for their livelihood in village. Irrespective of their religious status majority of the Mahars still continue to depend on upper castes for their livelihood.

Agriculture is the major source livelihood for rural population in India. Land holding of families constitutes the important parameter to measure their dependency on others for their livelihood in such conditions. Irrespective of their religious category more than 50% of the families belonging to Mahars are landless and dependent on other caste for their livelihood. The percentage of landless families of particular religious category of Mahars in the village is 53.33%, 52.38% and 51.72% in Hindu-Mahar, Buddhist and Christians respectively.

Educational status can change their situation in the village, but the situation of Mahars irrespective of their religious affiliation is no different. The number of illiterate among Christian converts is higher than those of Hindu Mahars and Buddhist. While 28% of Christian converts of Mahar caste are illiterate, 21% Hindu Mahars and 24% of Buddhist Mahar are illiterate in the village. Similarly, only 10% is able to complete the SSC from Christian converts compared to 12% Mahars and 5% Buddhist in village. Not a single person is a graduate among Christians in the village compared to a few from Hindu Mahar and Buddhists. As 3% claim acquiring post-graduate degree from Mahars none of the Christian Mahars has acquired a post-graduate degree.

Educational qualification is basis for availing jobs in government as well as private sector. When there is hardly any one crossing SSC and HSC there is very rare chance for them to become a graduate or a post-graduate in the community. Low educational status in community has reflected in the number of people employed, only one person from Buddhist

families and two from Christian families are employed in government sector. Only six families from the community are found having self employment- one from Hindu Mahar, two from Buddhist and three from Christian families. Majority i.e.; almost 50% to 97% work as agriculture labor and Non-agriculture labor in terms of their primary and secondary source of livelihood respectively.

When equal numbers of families irrespective of their religious faith are landless, educational status is very poor no matter what religious faith they have the majority work in others' agriculture land as agricultural laborers or work as non-agricultural laborers for others. Except very few that have government jobs and very few engaged in self-employment, the situation of excluded category of Mahar Christians from protection of Atrocity Act does not make much sense. The discriminations in the village are not different from those of Mahars who remained as Hindu and those converted to Buddhism. Even after conversion they remain dependent on other castes for livelihood. This situation left every religious sect among Mahar caste equally vulnerable to atrocities. When they have to live on the mercy of other castes for their livelihood they remain most vulnerable. Even when, the protection available though actually less effective, is denied to a particular group of people on the basis of their religious faith is a grave injustice.

Caste Hatred by upper castes towards Dalits-as Base of Caste atrocities:

Thorat (2002) says that, the reasons for continuation of practice of untouchability, discrimination and atrocities as well as violent reaction by the upper castes are to be found in their continuing belief and faith in the sanctity of the institution of caste and in untouchability. The traditional Hindu social order continues to govern the thought process

and behavior of the large majority of Hindus. Ramaiah (2011) has pointed out that the particular scripture which sanctions and governs the thought process which allows the violence, discrimination and practice of untouchability against the Dalits, is in contravention to the Indian Constitution. That scripture is one of the most popular Hindu scriptures called *Manusmriti* written by Sumathi Bhargava in 185 BC (Ambedkar, 1987: 240). The provisions in the Constitution and law are secular and equal but the customary rules of the caste system and the institution of untouchability are based on the principle of inequality in social, economic, cultural and religious sphere. This brings a conflict between the constitution and the traditional customary rules, norm, and values of the caste system and untouchability. People continued to follow the latter because it provides immense privilege and serves their social, political and economic interests. When the Dalits try to get equal access and 'assert' their rights, it often invites the anger of upper caste persons in the form of atrocities and physical violence (Thorat, 2002).

Therefore it is continuation of faith and belief in sanctity of caste and privileges attached to it by privileged upper castes that makes them not to take the issue of atrocities against Dalits very seriously. It is one of the main reasons why they keep perpetuating and inflict atrocities on Dalits. Dalits rejecting caste and converting to other religion is not leading upper caste to do away with caste and change their perception about caste discrimination. It is rather considered as an insult to the sacred religion and its norms. They also see an atrocity as a correction of the behavior. This in addition leads to the increase in consternation and anger among upper castes because the Dalits dared to flout the eternal religion-Hinduism and no longer accepted their place in social hierarchy (Gokhale, 1986).

It has been seen in many cases that victims of atrocity reject low status imposed on them and assert equal status. But contrary to their expectations they are still treated as lower caste and discriminated on the basis of their caste, as the following cases reveal

Case 1:

In July, 2007 there was gram sabha (village public meeting) in the village at Gram Panchayat office (Village Administrative Office). *Sarpanch* and other Panchayat members, Talathi (village revenue officer), Gramsevak (village administrative officer) and around 50-60 villagers were there in that meeting. They were discussing some of their issues and problems in the meeting. A Buddhist had also shared his grievances in that meeting regarding irregularities in fair price shop run by one woman belonging to upper caste Maratha community of the village. He complained about groceries that he should get rightfully what he should be getting. When he had brought this issue in that meeting, that woman got furious and started abusing him and slapped him in front of everyone present in the meeting. She was telling that, 'Now Mahars- the lower caste, servants of the village and survive on the meat of the dead animals will teach us how to run the shop and serve the people? Don't dare to teach us how to serve people?'

This case suggests that though Mahars got converted to Buddhism they are being treated as Mahars. The stigma of lower caste is still haunting them. The upper castes continue to have faith in caste privileges. The assertion of new religious identity as Buddhist as self identity constructed by themselves and not being accepted by other castes. Identity must be understood by self and others equally. But in this case only victim identifies as Buddhist whereas others keep treating them as lower caste.

Case 2:

In another case Mahar converted to Christianity has faced similar situation where she got abused on her caste. In this case victim is a Christian converted from Mahar caste and working as Anganwadi sevika at Anganwadi run by the Integrated Child Development Scheme in the village. Before getting this job she used work as daily wage laborer in agriculture fields mostly owned by Marathas. Days changed and she became Anganwadi *Madatnis* (helper). At the work she has to share same space with her senior worker working as Anganwadi Sevika who belonged to Maratha caste. The Mahar woman was more educated than her senior. Being Christian she was maintaining her standard of living and was very decent at her job. The Maratha senior never liked the Mahar helper. She was very reluctant to share the working space, and kept taunting her for small things as she used to do when the victim was working in her field as laborer. When vacancies opened for Anganwadi Sevika, the Mahar helper applied for promotion from the post of helper to the post of Anganwadi sevika. This thing didn't go down well with the Maratha sevika. She didn't like that. She said how can a woman from lower caste and who worked in her field few years back as laborer take the same position as that of her? This was the issue with Maratha senior worker. One day she abused the Mahar helper. Her comment was very filthy. It was on her past caste and converted religion. "*Mahara la kai dharma ani kai jaat, paishya sathi navrapan badalttil.*" It means for Mahar, caste doesn't have any value, they neither believe in caste, nor do they believe in dharma (Religion) people of this kind if you offered money they will be ready to change their husbands as well.

The Mahar couldn't ignore her comment, and was greatly disturbed. On reaching home she narrated the incident to her husband. He decided to file a complaint with the police but there it doesn't stand as derogatory because Christians are not considered Scheduled Caste. So no atrocity case can be filed for her comment on religion. Accused with the help of some prominent politically dominant people of the village from Maratha caste managed to tackle the issue with police. Victim as well couldn't force police to file FIR under atrocity because legally they were not Scheduled Caste's. Since victim also needs to work with accused in the same village, and after informally apologized for her behavior they settled for compromise.

In both the incidents Mahars converted to other religions were ill treated and abused on their caste which they have rejected and embraced new religious identity by converting to other religion. Mahars of the village though they have rejected their low caste status, rejected the caste and considered themselves equal to others, but the upper castes continued to look down them as lower caste. The new religious identity they are asserting and identifying themselves with is not equally recognized and identified by others. In both these incidents it's not victim who adhered to their caste privileges, but accused are and they happen to be from upper castes. As Thorat and Negi (2007) argued that since violence against Dalits has been rooted in the social structure and societal relations, there is very less deterrence of all these provisions which condemn them to a life of humiliation and subordination. Mahars irrespective of their religious identity continued to face discrimination and atrocities as well as violent reaction by the higher castes because upper castes still believe and have faith in the sanctity of the institution of caste and in untouchability. Mahars dared to disobey the eternal religion-Hinduism and do the able to elevate their place in social hierarchy. It helped them

gaining self respect and confidence but to the contrary it led to the increase in consternation and anger among upper castes.

Experiences of Mahars from different religious background with respect to atrocity and identity:

It has been seen and pointed out several times that the prolonged process of justice delivery indirectly encourages commission of crime. There is also very low conviction rate of atrocity cases. Majority of the cases ends with acquittal for several reasons including flaws in investigation and public prosecutors not represent case with full efforts and so on. Due to this victims become more vulnerable psychologically and economically and face further humiliation and harassment.

Caste loyalties of those shouldered the responsibility to investigate the case and represent the case in court with those accused who are responsible for the crime is principle reason why investigation officers leaves flaws in collection of evidence during investigation and further public prosecutors fail to prove the case beyond reasonable doubt (Ramaiah, 2011). Dalits experience the caste loyalties of accused and government officials doesn't limit to investigation and prosecution but starts from the time of registering the crime onwards. In the case mentioned above about a Buddhist who got slapped in the village meeting, the local police refused to register the case because the in-charge Police officer was under the influence of local political leaders of same caste as that of the accused. The victim had to visit District Headquarter and meet Superintendent of Police to get the direction from him to register the case. The incident had occurred on 11th July 2007 and FIR got registered on 20th July 2007. After the case got registered in the year 2007, it took 7 more years to get hearing

which resulted in acquittal of the accused due to no sufficient evidences to prove the crime beyond reasonable doubt. The humiliation started with abuses and assault at public place, in front of 50-60 villagers, which eventually led to another humiliation when the crime was not registered at local police station due to caste loyalties to the upper caste accused, it further led to next level of humiliation when it took more than 7 years to hear the matter in court. Ideally State should establish special court and dispose the case as soon as possible. The level of humiliation reaches to its peak when investigation team couldn't collect enough evidences. When there were more than 50 people at the scene of offence and the accused got acquitted from the case for lack of evidence. Accused on acquittal celebrated by organizing fire cracks and distributing sweets in the village. These kinds of situation makes victims more vulnerable and fragile and accused become more stubborn. After their acquittal and celebration in village, when victim approached nearest police station for help with regards to deliberate mocking of him by the accused and her family members, police rejected any intervention on the pretext that the victims are deliberately complaining to trouble the accused because they couldn't digest the acquittal of the case in the court. The victims are being discriminated with the discretionary power government authorities have to decide whether or not they are going to take any action in any case.

Case 3:

Similar kind of experience is shared by a victim of atrocity which has very complex issue regarding their religious identity. The victim is an old person belonging to Hindu Mahar caste. He sold his land to Jeevan Pradhikaran a government of Maharashtra run institution to construct water storage tank for water supply scheme for 19 villages in the vicinity. It is also

agreed by government that two members of the family will be given employment in said water supply scheme. The government authorities bought the land for the said reason from three different owners of adjacent land at that particular locality. The government acquired land from its owners and handed over to the committee constituted to supervise the work. The committee is constituted by village sarpanches of all 19 villages and one of them was elected as chairman and others as members and one gramsevak (Village administrative officer) was also appointed as secretary of the committee to look after administrative work. All the members of committee were non-Scheduled Caste/Scheduled Tribe and belonged to upper castes except the secretary who belonged to Chambhar community which is SC caste.

Though the land was bought from three different owners the water storage tank was actually constructed only on victims land. The actual land acquired and compensation paid to the owner was only for 2.5 guntha¹⁸ land, but actual construction on 10 guntha land belonging to the victim. Remaining 7.5 guntha land was illegally acquired by committee for construction without permission from its owner. They never bought that land nor did they pay any compensation for the same. When this fraud came to the notice of victim and his family members they approached committee for clarification. They denied any such thing has happened and threatened the victim that they will file a case on them. It will result in removal of family members from employment they got in lieu of land they have sold for the project. When they protested against this injustice, committee members of water supply scheme filed a fake case against victim's son. They filed a case that he assaulted a government employee came for inspection of the scheme and obstructed him while performing government duty.

¹⁸ Guntha is measurement unit used in measuring land and 1 guntha is equal to 1000 square feet.

But fortunately on the day, the date and time of the incident they mentioned in their complaint to police station victims son was on duty as security guard at North Star Public School, Vadgaon, Taluka- Rahuri. They produced their attendance register during investigation and it was established that neither the victim nor his son was present at spot where alleged crime reported to have occurred. They got clean chit from the Police since there was no evidence of their involvement in the said crime. It was real fake incidents planned by the chairman of committee and secretary to trouble and threaten the victim's family. They have also created fake witnesses who saw victim's family members assaulting the government Officials. It was this time they decided to file an atrocity case against all of them for filing fake cases against the victim. According to the Atrocity Act filing a fake case against any member of Scheduled Caste category by those of non-Scheduled Caste person to threaten and harass them is the atrocity under the Atrocity Act. Local police refused to file an atrocity case but instead humiliated the victims.

They were helpless and met Raju Adhav, the District President of Republican Sena- a Dalit Organization in Ahmednagar District. With the help of them they had organized protest march at Rahuri Tehsil Office on May 2013. With the help of Raju Adhav, they lodged a complaint with the Scheduled Caste Commission, Mumbai in the same month, seeking help to take action against those who made a false case and intentionally implicating criminal charges against the victim's family. But after almost a year the Scheduled Caste Commission, issued a show cause notice to District Police Administration for not registering atrocity case. With the help of local political leader, the committee chairman and members influenced an enquiry report sent by Superintendent of Police to the commission stating that there are no such circumstances where they can register atrocity case. On the other hand they

informed the commission that there are criminal cases filed by regional water supply committee against victim. But they did not mention about fake case filed by water supply committee against victim's family. Here they had shown double stand against the victim. As per Atrocity Act filing fake cases against Scheduled Caste's is an offence, but in this case by hiding all those facts from the commission the Police are trying to protect the accused.

There was no reason why police should hide those facts from the commission in their report. They should not be partial in their approach. But due to caste loyalties they are favoring accused. For victim this is not an end, they are pursuing the case and have lodged another complaint attaching the court order copy squashing fake case against victim for further clarification in the case. But it is the struggle and waste of lot of time, money and energy of victims makes it difficult to pursue justice. The whole agenda of accused are to harass victim and make them lose interest in claiming their land and job.

Atrocity and Social Relations:

In the villages, in India castes are interdependent on each other as known and greatly discussed by anthropologists and sociologists. In this particular village Mahars are dependent on other castes for their livelihood and socio-political support. The interdependency of castes and community sometimes governs individuals and their radical stands on particular issues. Since *bhauki* governs the social relations within the caste. If one is not having good relations with *bhauki* the life in the village becomes miserable. From birth to death every individual has to depend upon *bhauki*. Religious beliefs and practices are personal and limited to individual and his choice but *bhauki* remains at core of the social life. It keeps governing the social relations with individual during crisis time as well. Even if an individual is not related

to conflict between other two individuals but as a member of the *bhauki* he has to involve along with other. Thus *bhauki* relationships extend *bhauki* to caste and in a conflict situation they become very important. Therefore atrocity is one such an issue which affects social relations between victim and accused in both ways. It works as deterrent tool to give protective feeling among Dalits and binds them together during crisis. In some cases use of Atrocity Act against other castes works negatively with respect to social relations of Dalits with other caste as well as their own caste.

When an incident of atrocity occurs it gets spread across the caste through *bhauki* and it becomes very sensitive situation in the village. It affects their day to day affairs in village. In the Anganwadi worker's case apart from the victim, her family members and their small business in village also got affected. Villagers are the main customers for fruit shop, photo studio and mobile repairing shop etc., in the village so if the Maratha upper caste which is numerically dominant in the village is affected it is obvious that it will affect the business of the shops in the village. When victim was pressing to register the case under atrocity against the accused belonging to upper caste Maratha community, people from her community took it as an attack on entire Maratha dominancy in village. The issue didn't remain between individuals but issue of differences between two the communities.

In the case of Buddhist family the person who got assaulted in public meeting in village in which accused got acquitted had its impact on social relations of the victim's family with other castes. The accused woman is from Gagare clan of Maratha community and there is another clan among Maratha's that is Jadhav clan. They are political rivals in that village. Politically village is divided in to two groups led by these two different clans that dominant

and holds most of the land in the village. All the village politics are dominated by them. Personally the victim and his community didn't have any problem with all the family of Marathas except the accused and her family only. But not only the accused family but also their clan members that showed loyalty to their clan members and own caste stopped communicating with the victim. It affected the life of the victim and maharwada to some extent. Especially the daily routine life of the Mahar became tougher. The villagers of Gagare's clan though not involved directly in conflict, they preferred to stay away from the victim and show solidarity with their clan members. Though the communication with them was not stopped completely it has got strained. The relation between them was not same as it they before the occurrence of the incident. Though there was a gathering of about 50- 60 people on that day when the accused assaulted the victim in public meeting, but only three to four people gave their witness to the police, two of them were from Dalit community and two people from the village finally gave witness in the court; one is Sarpanch of the village and other one is from Thakar tribe. The government servants like Gramsevaka (Village Administrative Officer) and Talathi (Village revenue Officer) who were on official duty could not escape but had to give their statements. Others didn't come forward since they had to maintain their relations with their own community members. They showed their sympathy towards victim and his family but not openly.

The Mahars irrespective of their religious faith came together to support and fight back the injustice done to the individual and the family of maharwada. They did so because they considered that the humiliation and injustice done to the person on the basis of caste discrimination it amounted to have been done to whole community. People came in support not only from this village but from outside as well. In land cheating case also Mahars from

outside villages stood with them in the struggle for justice. Person like Raju Adhav, who is from other village, gave all the support to the family. They didn't have any prior relation with him but what brought him closer to victim's family is the caste, that is Mahar, and new religion that is Buddhism.

But as the time passed, the hostility among community members increased. With the strained relations with one of the dominant village community the Dalits who are in minority could not sustain the burden of strained relations for long time with them. They became submissive. Not that everyone became submissive but at same time not everyone remained adamant to remain uncompromising in their stand as well. In the case of Buddhist person assaulted in public meeting, the accused woman was running a fair price shop of public distribution scheme used to give left over grains to some poor Mahars for free. Some time she used to give grains and other material on credit basis to needy Mahars. Therefore, some Mahar had soft corner for the accused woman. By any chance if they would have continued to support the victim they would have lost the material benefits.

The hostility did not remain with Dalits only; some of the upper castes also came out of their clan and come forward to support the victims. The Jadhav clan though they are Marathas did not approve the assault on the victim in a public meeting. Of course there is a hidden agenda behind the support extended by the Maratha clan for the victim's family and the Mahar community in opposition to their political opponents of other clan.

Correlations between Atrocity and Religious Identity:

Initially Mahars of Hindu religion were alone recognized as Scheduled Caste, and they could avail the protection and rehabilitation in case of atrocity under The Scheduled Caste and. However The Scheduled Tribe (Prevention of Atrocities) Act 1989 it got extended to those who were converted to Buddhism since 1990. But on other hand the Mahars converted to Christianity are excluded from it. The rationale for such an exclusion of Christians of Dalit origin is that Christianity does not recognize caste and practice of untouchability. Actually Mahars do not remain as low caste since caste is not practiced in that religion and they become equal to those of other non-Scheduled Caste/Scheduled Tribe. It has been discussed above that Mahars of the village have rejected their low caste status, rejected the caste and considered themselves equal to others, but upper castes continued to look down upon them as lower caste. The new religious identity they are asserting and identifying themselves with it is not equally recognized and identified by others.

It is upper castes and their continuation in belief and faith in their caste privileges are responsible for continuation of violence against Dalits and it has been rooted in the social structure and societal relations. Mahars irrespective of their religious identity continued to face discrimination and atrocities as well as violent reaction by the upper castes. As per the assumption that after conversion Mahars have become equal to upper castes and less vulnerable to atrocity, doesn't stand valid. Contrary to the assumption that Mahars have become equal after conversion, they have become more vulnerable because they dared to disobey the eternal religion-Hinduism and no longer accepted their place in the social hierarchy. It led to the increased in consternation and anger among upper castes (Gokhale,

1986) and the hatred spanned between castes with religious sanctity is the root cause for infliction of atrocities on lower castes.

It has its influence on Mahars with respect to their religious identity. Exclusion of particular religious faith from extending SC status ultimately resulted in to exclusion of them from protection and rehabilitation assured for atrocity victims under Atrocity Act. It led to converted Mahars fall back on Hindu identity to avail the protection ensured under the Atrocity Act. For some non availability of protection under Atrocity Act works as deterrent measure on their right to practice the religion of their choice. In some cases in which persons dared to leave protection and do not pay any heed to deterrence of it continue to fall prey to discriminatory treatment from villagers with no remedy. As the conversion to other religion is not a protective from atrocity they are compelled to compromise. It is this sacrifice they have to make to retain their religious identity. Falling back on Hindu identity attracts accusations of being opportunistic after being thrown to defenseless situation. It leads too humiliation, shame and guilt among the people who converted to other religions. It is the mechanism by which conflicts could be generated; the social fabric could be destroyed among the people of the same caste.

Conclusion

Today we find Mahars indentifying themselves with different world religions: Buddhism, Christianity and Hinduism. The relevance of these religious identifications can be found in what Dr. Ambedkar said “Strength” is essential to fight against the social inequalities in India and to gain self-respect and dignity, and strength can only be gained from outside the Hindu religion (Ambedkar, 2004). Establishing close relation with other community by joining their religion through conversion was the best way he found to gain the strength. The Mahars of the village used this way of gaining strength from outside and some converted to Christianity even before Dr. Ambedkar’s clarion call for conversion to Buddhism.

The present study there is concerned with the multiple religious identities and implication for Atrocity Act of 1989. The policy of positive discrimination that made the provision of reservation system for the scheduled caste has made it clear that the scheduled castes who have embraced religions other than Hinduism and Buddhism cannot be considered as scheduled castes. Therefore several state governments have included them under the Other Backward Class category. However, ironically, this rule is not applicable in case of scheduled tribes. This policy has serious implication with reference to Atrocity Act that is meant for protection of scheduled castes against the crimes committed on them by non-scheduled castes. When on the basis of conversion to particular religion the Scheduled Caste status and protection under special laws such as Atrocity Act is denied to converts from Scheduled Caste communities how do we understand the religious identity construction among Dalits in such circumstances is the crux of the study? It has been carried out through examining the socio-economic, cultural uniqueness of Mahars and their relationships among

the Mahars themselves, Mahars converted to different religions and non-Mahars. The study has focused on how do Mahars construct their undivided caste identity despite their identification with different religions? Similarly how do the converted Mahars construct their new religious identity different from their previous caste identity? Are there any differences in experiences of Hindu Mahars and those converted to Buddhism and Christianity in their day to day life? Did conversion to other religion contributed in lessening the chances of infliction of atrocities on the Mahars? What are the differences and similarities of experiences between Mahars converted to different religions and assertion of new identities with reference to caste atrocities?

The study has been undertaken in a village called Kangar Bk. Located in Ahmednagar district. The district is known for occurrence of first conversion of Mahars into Christianity way before Ambedkar's conversion movement in 1956. Further in this village there are Mahars and also those who have converted to Christianity and Buddhism. In addition to that recently some cases of atrocities on Dalits are reported. Three cases of atrocity are selected from different villages including this village to develop much nuanced interpretation of phenomenon and one of the villages where atrocity occurred is selected for detailed study.

Mahar is the one of the important castes in the village after Maratha as they constitute 9.8% of total population of the village and constitutes more than 52% of the total Scheduled caste population of the village. Though Mahar is one of the important castes of the village, irrespective of their religious affiliation they possess very minimal resources in the village. Half of the Mahar caste households irrespective of their religious affiliation are landless and engaged in agriculture and non-agricultural manual labor within and outside the village. They

are highly dependent on other castes mostly upper castes of the village for their livelihood. Educationally as well they are backward, nearly about 25% population is illiterate and only 10% could achieve maximum education qualification up to 10th Standard and only seven and three people could to complete their graduation and post graduation respectively. Mahars are placed at the lowest level in the caste hierarchy of the village. Though the system is changing it remains still rigid and social interactions takes place on the principle of caste and untouchability in the village.

Similarly Mahar caste is changing but retains its identity with reference to other castes of the village. One of the important factors for separate existence of Mahar caste is the practice of endogamy and exogamy within caste. Further continuation of particular food habits such as eating beef, separate locality, funeral ground, and agricultural land are other factors for distinct caste identity and its perpetuation. Those Mahar families converted to Buddhism and Christianity reject the imposed Hindu caste identity and formed new religious identity. Rejection of their past caste identity is the integral part of construction of new religious identity in both the religions. The basis of newly constructed religious identity as Buddhist and Christian is in departure from Hindu traditions and practices and establishing new practices different from their previous caste tradition and practices.

First and the fore most important aspect of construction of new religious identity for converted Mahars is, total rejection of belief and faith in Hindu traditions, gods and goddesses. Traditionally Mahars are not allowed in temples and sacred places of caste Hindus. Mahars had their own deities and *kuladevata* separately from other caste Hindus. Goddesses *Mariai*, *Satvai*, *Mhasoba*, and other gods are worshipped by them. Even today the

Hindu Mahars continued to have faith in these gods and goddesses and Mahar priests (see plate no. 16) have been performing all the rituals in those temples. On the other hand praying and worshipping Hindu gods were replaced by paying homage to Lord Buddha and Dr. Ambedkar for Buddhist in village and in Christianity there is only one god and that is Jesus (Yeshu) and there is no idol worship.

With the exit of idols and gods there comes the organization of worship. To assert their new religious identity in village, Buddhists constructed Buddha *Vihar*. Unlike Hindu temple, Buddhist *Vihar* in village is not a place of worship; no specific religious sanctity is attached to this. Only on specific days they perform Buddha *puja* in the *Vihar*. They use this place for the purpose of community gathering on any social and religious function and program. The term *Vihar* itself is an attempt to part away with term temple referred for the place of worship of the god in Hindu religion. On the other hand church in the villages is one of the important physical structures that give religious identity to Christians. Attending prayers in the church is another change that has occurred in the life of a converted person which is a visible singularity which can be considered as important point of assertion of one's identity as Christian.

The Hindu Mahars celebrate religious festivals such as *Dasra*, *Diwali*, *Bail pola*, *Gudi Padawa*, *Nagpanchami*, *Sankranti* etc. Buddhist on the other hand invented their own festivals different from those of Hindu festivals. They celebrate *Ambedkar Jayanti*, *Buddha Purnima*, *Dhammachakra Pravartan Divas*, and *Mahaparinirvan Din* as their major festivals in the village. Similarly celebrating the Christian festivals is one of the important forms of

construction of religious identity as Christians in the village. They celebrate Christmas, Good Friday, Easter, and Church Foundation anniversaries in the village.

The Hindu Mahars, Buddhists and Christians all perform certain life cycle rituals and ceremonies and they constitute major part of construction of new religious identity as Buddhist and Christians separate from Hindu Mahar. Mahars follow Vedic ways to perform their birth, death and marriage rituals. The Brahmin priest is mandatory to perform all the rituals for the Hindu Mahars, whereas the Buddhist and the Christians do not require the Brahmin priest to perform their rituals, and they have their own priests respectively to perform the rituals. The verses recited in performing life cycle rituals are different in each case. For Hindu Mahar rituals priest recites Sanskrit verses, the Buddhist priest recites *pali* verses and Christian priest recites verses from the Bible. Though dead of all the religious faith are buried, the procedure followed is different from each other. The grave of the Hindu Mahars usually does not carry any symbol, but the graves of Buddhists bear Ashok Chakra whereas Christians erect cross on it. White clothes are used for marriage ceremonies in Buddhism and Christianity but Hindu Mahar women are not allowed to wear white sari on auspicious day such as wedding but they will have to put on white sari only after the husband's death. Hindus observe *varshashradha* ceremony on the occasion of first death anniversary and observe *pitru paksha* in the memory of their dead ancestors. Buddhist and Christian never observe *pitru paksha* and observe death anniversaries instead.

The newly constructed religious identities of Buddhists and Christians are required to be recognized and identified equally by self and others then only the process of identity formation gets completed. But the problem becomes complex when the perception among the

community of caste Hindus which happens to be a dominant in the village and that does not acknowledge the mobility among the caste. There is no scope for change in caste and religion as it is based on birth which is the only criteria to acquire caste status. This popular perception of caste Hindus that caste comes to one by birth, denies claim of Mahars assertion of new religious identity as Buddhist and Christian separately. In addition to this the converted family or an individual cannot wipe away the blood relations with their fellow relatives those not converted or have different religious faiths. Those relations and bondage between the families continue to persist irrespective of change in their religious faith. Their caste of origin remains as common factor which holds and binds them together. Through this their caste remains attached to their new religious identity and this new identity in fact also provides new network.

The marriage preference within the religion can place the caste behind. Theoretically it can happen so but reality is different. Rarely do we find Buddhist or Christian outside the Mahar caste. Therefore such preference of marriages within the same religion has resulted in decrease in marriage choices that they can make within the families of same faith. This led them to marry within Mahar as their caste of origin irrespective of their religious belief. Inter religious marriages among the Hindu Mahar, Buddhist and Christians of the same caste have contributed further in the confusion pertaining to the separate religious identity of converted Mahars. In addition to this separate locality of untouchables at the outskirts of the village is another contributory factor to the persistence of caste identity in village. The Mahars who converted to different religion continued to stay in and share the same locality within Mahars' locality and at the same time asserted new religious identity, and also claimed being different from the Hindu Mahar caste.

The present study supports the views of several scholars (Thorat, Ramaiah, Teltumbde) that the popular notion of caste and their continuation in belief and faith in Hinduism and their caste privileges are responsible for continuation of violence against Dalits by the upper caste Hindus and such behavior has root in the social structure and societal relations. Mahars irrespective of their religious identity continued to face discrimination and atrocities as well as violent reaction by the higher castes. Contrary to the rationale given for exclusion of Christians of Dalit origin that Christianity doesn't recognize caste and practice of untouchability, they have become more vulnerable because they dared to disobey the eternal religion-Hinduism and rejected their place in the social hierarchy. It led to the increase in consternation and anger among upper caste and hatred between the upper castes whose religious sanctity is the root cause for infliction of atrocities on lower caste. The present study confirms the observation of Gokhale (1986) in this regard. The denial and rejection of the claim made by the Mahars that converted to other religions by the upper castes has its influence on Mahars with respect to their religious identity. It led converted Mahars to fall back on their previous caste identity to avail the protection ensured under the Atrocity Act. For some Mahars non-availability of protection under Atrocity Act works as deterrent factor on exercising their right to practice the religion of their choice. The Dalits who converted to the religion, Christians in this case, who have not extended the Scheduled Caste status continued experience the discriminatory treatment at the hands of upper castes from villagers with no remedy available in religion or the provisions made to other scheduled castes. Collectively all these circumstances and factors are responsible for culmination in to multiple religious identities among the Mahars. In one context they claim Mahar status and the same person at another context claims a Buddhist or Christian. The phenomenon of multiple

identities has emerged in two different ways; first, existence of more than one religious faith among Mahar of the same village and Mahar as their caste of origin, and second aspect individuals are caught in a trap of imposed confusion about his religious identity which depicts the religious status divided in more than one religion.

The study agrees with Joshi (1980) and Ambedkar (2004) with respect to religion that religious change is not only used for changing self image and attitude but it also gives an identity of self-respect and dignity as well. Kurane (1999) rightly pointed out how conversion to Buddhism provided new religious identity to the Mahars that decries the degrading status to them by the upper castes. They have learnt and are practicing new customs, rites, and rituals of Buddhism. Similarly Christian converts as well have gained new religious identity through practice of new customs, rites and rituals of Christianity in the village. But this never ends here. Since identity constructed on the basis of practicing new customs and practices of particular religion need to be identified equally by self and others. In the case of Mahars of the village, as rightly stated by Antony (2006) that conversion granted them new religious status but left them in their own caste groups within that particular caste from where they converted to. It is also true that government has forced Christian Dalits to conversion and reversion phenomena based on opportunistic context. Lobo (2001) points out the role of the state in this particular phenomenon. Similarly not compelling Buddhist Mahar to produce conversion certificate or proof is also tactic used by government through such policies to dilute the assertion of Buddhists' separate identity from the Mahar.

Gokhale's (1986) and Thorat's (2002) argument that upper castes have not changed their perceptions about Buddhist and still they look upon them as Mahars and lower caste has been

proved in the case of Mahars converted to different religions. The Maratha and others of the village still practice untouchability and discriminate the Mahars because they continue their belief and faith in the sanctity of the institution of caste. Mahars of the village are equally vulnerable to the atrocities by upper caste irrespective of their religious beliefs. From this study it is difficult to accept the assertions made by Michael (2005) and Webster (2002) that religious change has achieved freedom for the Dalits from caste oppression and liberation them from the religion that sanctioned discrimination. It is true that religion has offered Dalits in general and Mahars in particular the healing mechanism for psychological consequences of caste oppressions, but it remains one side story of converted Dalits. When it comes to the Dalits from rural areas the arguments of Kurane (1999) doesn't fit. In the village under study educational, economic, occupational conditions of Mahars are not changed much inspite of their change in religious faith. Unlike in cities and towns where people are not segregate on the basis of religion separate locality of converted Mahars doesn't assure recognition from others as Buddhist or Christian locality, since it continued to be recognized as the locality of Mahar caste.

The world view of people on their religious affiliations, geographic location, and region and language etc.; do vary. So also is the case of Mahars and other castes. In this particular situation of the village though Dalits are separated in different castes and religion they still form one category on the basis of some common disabilities. Most of the studies concerning Dalits and atrocities on them have focused on scheduled caste as one category. There are very few studies that focused on a particular caste. No study has so far found that Dalits are discriminated by the upper castes so far atrocity is concerned on the basis of the religion of the Dalit. Though this study reiterate same fact it has focused on religious identity of Mahars

within Hindu fold and Mahars converted to different religions and has comprehensively addressed the issue of atrocity on the basis of religious affiliation of the Dalits. The unique phenomena that has been highlighted through this study is correlation between multiple religious identities among one particular caste belonging to scheduled caste category and the implications the Atrocity Act has with respect to new religious identities of Mahars'. The village under study has its own static structure and the circumstances are such that Mahars are struggling to maintain their newly constructed religious identity separate from their previous caste. When people are struggling to assert their religious identity, it is very unjustifiable to exclude particular religious group from extending protection under special laws meant for Dalit.

The case studies provided in the foregone pages validates the point. The case 1 suggests that though Mahars got converted to Buddhism they are being treated as Mahars. When Buddhist person questioned about the irregularities in public distribution scheme of fair price shop in the village the dealer who belonged to the Maratha community felt insulted and got furious. She assaulted the Buddhist in public meeting and abused him. She considered that Buddhist person as Mahar and lower caste has no right to question the upper castes and since she continues to have faith in her caste privileges she has the right to insult lower caste persons. The stigma of lower caste is still haunting the neo-Buddhists. In case 2, a converted Christian woman of Mahar origin working in Anganwadi got abused by fellow co-worker belonging to Maratha caste on her religion and caste. Since Christians of the scheduled caste origins are not considered as scheduled caste, no atrocity case can be filed. In this context it is argued that the identity must be understood by self and others equally. But in both the cases only victim identifies self as Buddhist or Christian whereas others keep treating them as lower

caste Mahar only. In both the incidents Mahars converted to other religions were ill treated and abused on their caste which they have rejected and assumed new religious identity by converting to other religions. Mahars of the village though have rejected their low caste status and considered themselves equal to others, the upper castes continued to look down them only as lower castes.

The study compels one to look into the reasons for conversion to other religion is to gain strength from others by joining their religion? The Mahars in the village have converted to two different religion and few remain in Hindu. This has divided them in different religions. Rather than gaining strength they became minority within minority. It will be very interesting to look in to this phenomenon in pursuit of strength they have become weak and more vulnerable. How does community look at this phenomenon among them is a question need to be answered? In relation to this it is also important to understand how the religious institution of a particular religion works on the institutionalization of religion in villages and how does it provide the institutional support and protection to the believer in the rural areas? Another issue which needs to be examined further is about Dalit Women and their religion. It has been found that Mahar women irrespective of their religious affiliation are more vulnerable in the village. They have to compromise with their personal beliefs and religious faith. Therefore, they are being instrumental in overtly claiming new religious identity and covertly continuing Mahar castes old religious traditions and practices. This is an important aspect as it some adds to the double discrimination that they face in the society. The above issues that emerged from the present study do require a thorough examination in future.

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Plates

Plate 1. Kangar Village- An overview



Plate 2. Housing pattern of Mahars- Pukka and Kutcha House



Plate 3. Housing pattern of Mahars- Huts



Plate 4. Religious Structures- Church in the village



Plate 5. Buddha Vihar- Temporarily given as shelter house for a family



Plate 6. Village Deity- Hindu Goddess Kankavati



Plate 7. Mahar God and Goddess- Mhasoba and Laxmi Aai



Plate 8. Religious Images in Household- Christian, and Buddhist



Plate 9. Religious Images in Household- Hindu Mahar



Plate 10. Separate funeral grounds of Hindus and Mahars



Plate 11. Differences in Graves of different religions- Buddhist and Christian



Plate 12. Un-constructed grave of caste Mahar



Plate 13. Marriage Ritual in Christianity



Plate 14. Marriage ritual in Buddhism



Plate 15. Marriage ritual in Hindu Mahar



Plate 16. Priests of Christian and Hindu Mahar in the village



Plate 17. Celebration of Ambedkar Jayanti in the village

