

CHAPTER-IV

POLITICAL LIFE OF THE MENDHE DHANGARS

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CHAPTER-IV

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1) Political Structure of the Mendhe Dhangars :

There is no clear cut political organisation among the Mendhe Dhangars. Although the Caste-Panchayat is there, yet it lacks a definite form and proper structural shape. Elderly persons of the caste decide social and religious matters. The Mendhe Dhangars of Hatkanangale Taluka, have become politically conscious. They know their political rights and do not take things lying down. They may assert their political demands. But they are not interested to take a part in political parties. Some of them support the congress, others support other political parties.

They also know which of the political parties is likely to help them. In fact, they do not believe in one party or one political leader but believe in different political parties and leaders. All of them were well organised with the local leaders of their own castes. But it is also remarkable that they do not support the leaders of even their own caste, blindly.

2) The Traditional Village Panchayat :

The Mendhe Dhangars who have been living in their villages as a dependent caste for centuries, are mostly

influenced by the traditional village-Panchayat. The traditional village-Panchayat is an assembly of the Panchas or the elders of the village, to discuss social affairs and other matters pertaining to the village. The members of the Panchayat were selected according to requirements. There were no provisions for a woman Panch. A woman was summoned by the Gram-Panchayat if she was needed. The selection of the Panch conveyed to the culprit. Generally a rich man who had some influence in the locality was selected as the Panch.

3) The functions of the Panchayat :

Village Panchayats have varied functions to discharge. Various bodies and institutions of the Government have enumerated in different ways these functions. Normally the village Panchayats are expected to perform the following functions :

1. Agricultural jobs and steps for improving the agricultural production.
2. Soil conservation.
3. Irrigation, particularly the small irrigation projects.
4. Encouragement and development of co-operative movement.
5. Village industries, trade etc.

6. Making arrangement for drinking water for village people.
7. It settled all the social matter of the village, particularly the violations of religious and social laws.
8. It settled all the disputes arising within the jurisdiction of the village.

Panchayat has the power to give judgement for both civil and minor criminal offences and to maintain law and order in the village.

9. It was part in the assembly of the inter-village disputes.
10. It was the caretaker of the poor and helpless men and women.
11. Sanitation, health and medical treatment of the Village-Panchayat.
12. Education and recreation.
13. Means of transport, communication and public works.

The office of the Headman was hereditary but in the following cases he could be elected :

1. If the headman was childless.
2. If the son of the headman was characterless.
3. If the son of the headman was not of sound mind.

In the selection of a headman, the following points were kept in mind :

1. The candidate should be a strong man.
2. The candidate should be a respected person.
3. The headman should be a rich person.

The first two were essential qualifications but the third was not essential.

4) The Modern Gram-Panchayat :

The modern Gram-Panchayat is constituted according to the rules and regulations mentioned in Maharashtra State Panchayat Raj Act of 1961. A Gram-Panchayat has three parts.

1. Gram-Panchayat.
2. Executive Body.
3. Gram-Panchayat Office.

A Gram-Panchayat can be established on the basis of one thousand voters. The strength of the village council is now fixed, keeping in view the total village population. No extra member beyond the fixed strength, can be included in this formal body. Most of the castes have been officially represented in the institution. The women are also allowed to become members.

The 'Sarpanch' is still the head of the Panchayat. The term of the Sarpanch and the Panchas is of five years. The members are elected, by a direct election and few members are nominated or co-opted by the Sarpanch also.

5) The qualifications for the posts of Sarpanch and Panchas :

1. The candidate should be of sound mind.
2. The candidate should not be insolvent.
3. The candidate should be a citizen of India.

In every village one Gram-Sevak is appointed by the Governments to execute the policy of the Gram-Panchayat. He holds an important position in the Gram-Panchayat.

6) The Gram-Panchayat Office :

Every Panchayat has a Gram-Panchayat Office, which performs judicial functions. Its head is the Sarpanch, who is also an elected person. The Gram-Panchayat office has the power to hear both the criminal and civil cases. Gram Panchayats try to settle the disputes by compromise.

7) Functions of the Gram-Panchayat :

The Gram-Panchayat is responsible for the following :

1. Sanitation and conservancy.
2. Medical relief and first-aid.

3. Control and Preservation of epidemic and infections diseases.
4. Village development work i.e. construction of roads, digging of wells and ponds, minor irrigation work, primary schools etc.
5. To protect the village from dacoities and robberies and other calamities.

In addition to these, there are other supplementary works to be done with the help of Government. In this way the modern Gram-Panchayat has many powers. A village can develop through a Gram-Panchayat. Caste free judgement can save time and money of the people. The important role which a Panchayat plays is to maintain unity in the village.

8) Gram-Panchayat and a Caste-Panchayat :

In villages, alongwith the Gram-Panchayats established under law, Panchayats of various castes also exist. These caste Panchayats have their own significance. They are also an agency of social control. Although they are effective institutions of the rural society, yet they are different from the village Panchayats. The similarities and the differences between the two institutions are given below :

9) Similarities :

1. Both the Panchayats have an assembly of members who are called the Panchas.
2. Both the Panchayats have the right to settle the disputes within their jurisdiction.
3. The Caste-Panchayat tries to save and develop the socio-economic condition of the members of the same caste. The Gram Panchayat also tries to develop the socio-economic condition of the villagers.

10) Differences :

1. Village Panchayats or Gram-Panchayats are the creation of the constitution. They are the institutions of democratic decentralization. Caste Panchayats have developed in their own manner in various castes.
2. The membership of Gram Panchayat is based on residence in the village. The membership of the Caste Panchayat is based on the birth in a particular caste.
3. The object of the Gram Panchayat is to bring about economic, social, cultural and political development of the village life. The object of the Caste Panchayat is limited to members of

a particular caste. It aims at the improvements of the members of that particular caste only.

4. Village Panchayats intends at helping the healthy development of democracy. Caste Panchayats are responsible for development of castism and narrow feelings.
5. Gram Panchayats have come into being as a result of the legislations based by the State Governments and their main objective is to bring about the development of the entire village or rural life. Caste Panchayats have a limited function of settling the dispute between various members of a particular caste or bringing about the welfare of the particular caste. They do not have any legal or constitutional status.
6. The term of the village council or a Gram Panchayat is only for the five years. But this process is not there in the Caste Panchayat.

11) Dominant Castes and Local Politics :

The local politics is guided by the dominant castes.

M.N. Brinivas through the concept of "Dominant Caste" (1959) has made a study of power relations at the village level. Recently Dube (1959) has written a critically on the difficulties of using the concept in a concrete field

situation. In R.W. Retzlaff's village Government in India (1962) there is a detailed analysis of the operation of caste based village politics and Panchayat Raj in Rajasthan. Ralph Nichola has written a series of important articles on caste and pactional politics at the village level."¹ The election requires the support of the majority of the people. So the election is dominated by the people who are the majority in a particular constituency.

In Ghunaki village, the Mendhe Dhangars are the single largest caste. In Ghunaki village, there is 38% population of the Mendhe Dhangars. The Marathas are the second largest caste. Both the castes are found dominating in all the local politics. But other factors, like money are also important for winning an elections. Because, the Marathas, richer than the Mendhe Dhangars, can spend more money and they have won all seats of Gram Panchayat. Thus a candidate of the Maratha caste can win there election provided he gets full support of all the Mendhe Dhangars.

In Pattankodoli village the Mendhe Dhangars are the single largest caste. There is a 41% population of the Mendhe Dhangars.

1. ICSSR 1901 - A Survey of Research in Sociology and Social Anthropology, Volume-I.

Thus, the support of the Mendhe Dhangars is essential for winning the election either for MLA, M.P. or of the Gram Panchayat. Thus it is evident that dominant caste dominates or regulates the local politics.

'Elections are false' is the opinion of the Mendhe Dhangars. They think that elections are not justified and it is useless to spend money on them. Their opinion is that, present elections are completely based on casteism, money and might. The voter does not see the candidates quality but sees his 'Jati' and the next point is 'Paisha'. The third point is 'Lathi' (Goondaism). A candidate wins, only on the strength of Jati, Paisha and Lathi. Therefore, according to them, elections are neither justified nor the candidate who wins, is the real representative of the people.

12) Political Consciousness among
the Mendhe Dhangars :

The basic unit of the political strength of the people is the Gram Panchayat. Under one Gram Panchayat different types of Caste groups come. The Mendhe Dhangars have also the right to field candidates in the Gram Panchayat election. In Ghunaki village Shri Mayapa Dhangar has been elected as Sarpanch of the Ghunaki Gram Panchayat. In this way Gram Panchayat has brought some sort of political consciousness, among the Mendhe Dhangars. But they are

sought after by the upper caste candidates during the time of election. This is one form of political exploitation. The main cause of this is their poverty and illiteracy.

There are leaders belonging to Mendhe Dhangars own caste, at the Kolhapur District level. Shri Bhagawan-rao Shelake, Prof. Vithal Banne, Shri Siddapa Mayapa Ranage, Shri Ishwarchandra Dalwai, Dr. P.S. Solankar, Shri Birappa Musai, Shri L.R. Hajare, are the leaders of the Mendhe Dhangars in Kolhapur District.

Regarding the objectives of the different political parties the Mendhe Dhangars are not certain. Though most of them are in favour of the Congress Party, yet it is also vague, because they could not express their clear-cut desire and were ready to vote for any other united party.

There is no political or social organisation among the Mendhe Dhangars and that is why during the time of election they tend to listen to the blandishments of the upper caste people.

One thing more, during the time of elections at all levels generally feelings of superiority and inferiority are rife among the people. If in the Gram Panchayat election a Mendhe Dhangar candidate is contesting, he will not, be supported by the dominant castes, and because he belongs to

a Dhangars caste, they do not like to elect him as their Sarpanch.

13) Economic Limitations of the Mendhe Dhangars :

The Mendhe Dhangars are engaged in their traditional occupations which are not the only ones for their livelihood. Besides their traditional occupations they depend upon many subsidiary occupations. The Mendhe Dhangars are mostly dependent on the high caste people. For instance, in village Ghunaki and Pattankodoli the majority of the Mendhe Dhangars do their traditional occupations. Some of them increase their traditional occupations, their income by working in the fields of the Marathas, Jains and Brahmins. Mostly the Mendhe Dhangars of the village, are engaged as 'Mendhapal', but some time they work in the fields as agriculture labourers as well.

In village Ghunaki, and Pattankodoli, it was a found that the Mendhe Dhangars are dependent on the Marathas, Jainas, Brahmins and the Muslims for their living. They continue their traditional occupations and as a result they are forced to reconcile themselves in their lowly and demeaning status in the village life.

Thus, we see that the Mendhe Dhangars are economically dependent mostly upon the other upper caste

people. To sum up, it could be said that as the Mendhe Dhangars are economically poor, educationally Backward, politically disorganised and socially disabled, it is very difficult for them to compete with the persons of the so-called upper castes whom they serve as casual agricultural labourers. Most of them have not felt the need to improve their lot.

14) The Caste-Panchayat among the Mendhe Dhangars :

The Caste-Panchayat among the Mendhe Dhangars of Hatkanangale Taluka, is well organised. The members of the Caste Panchayat solved all the social problems of the Mendhe Dhangars who have some prestige, some experience and impressive personality. The members of this Panchayat are generally selected by the community.

The Headman of the Caste Panchayat is elected. But this election is not like the popular election system. It is a type of selection.

15) The Qualification for a Headman :

1. The candidate must be a member of the same caste.
2. The candidate should be an active and experienced member.
3. The candidate should be a male member.

16) Functions of the Caste Panchayat :

The Caste Panchayat occupies the dominating position in the social and religious fields. Following are the functions of the Caste Panchayat :

1. It is a guardian of the Community.
2. It settles the disputes within the Caste.
3. It settles inter-caste disputes also.
4. It also tries to develop the socio-economic conditions of the caste.

The Caste Panchayat tries to solve the problems of the Mendhe Dhangars. They come together in their temple and discuss about their problems. Caste Panchayat is called 'Daiva' or 'Daiki' and where they come together that is called a 'Devkali', 'Daiva' or 'Daiki'. It tries to affect a compromise between two disputing groups.

Festivals and village worships are held all over the year are found among the Mendhe Dhangars. The 'Daiva' or 'Daiki' settles the date for celebrating the festival and also the nature and extent of worship to be offered to a particular deity.

Thus, 'Daiva' or 'Daiki' organises in a systematic manner, the social and religious performances of the caste. The caste, thus exercises strong influence upon the casteman.