

## SCHEDULED CASTES IN MAHARASHTRA: STRUGGLE AND HURDLES IN THEIR SOCIO- ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT

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### ABSTRACT

*The rate of caste atrocities against Scheduled Castes (SCs) is increasing in Maharashtra faster than in any other Indian state. These atrocities have some social, political and economic background; which relates to their marginal socio-economic development. Socio-economic discrimination and exclusion on the basis of caste identities are not new for Maharashtra. Converted Mahars or Buddhists and Matang castes are mostly targeted by upper caste Maratha and OBCs in Maharashtra. Traditionally, SCs have been working as manual workers and agriculture bondage labourers; but they are not easily available for the same work these days. The main objective of the paper is to describe changing caste relations and reasons for atrocities against SCs. The paper also deals with the SC's struggle for socio-economic development and overcoming hurdles in Maharashtra.*

**Keywords:** Atrocities, Caste relations, Maharashtra, Scheduled Castes (SCs), Socio-economic development.

### INTRODUCTION

Maharashtra is considered as one of the most progressive and developed state in India. Society of this state is divided hierarchically into *Varnas* and many castes. Socio-economic discrimination and exclusion on the basis of caste identities are not new in Maharashtra. The Scheduled Castes (SCs) are poorest of the poor section not only in Maharashtra but also across India. Converted Mahars or Buddhists and Matang castes are mostly targeted by upper caste Maratha and OBCs in Maharashtra (Teltumbade, 2007). Caste atrocities against SCs

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are showing an increasing trend in Maharashtra in the current period. These atrocities have social, political and economic background; which relates to their marginal socio-economic development. Anger and misunderstanding of non SCs-STs regarding reservation policy are contributing to these atrocities. The reservation policy has been playing a significant role in SC's development. Many of them are now neither following any Hindu rituals, nor believe in Hindu religion and their gods. They have become target of irate chauvinist people. They are refusing exploitative caste system and raising voice against caste discrimination and exploitation. Although most of the other scheduled castes are not opposed to Hindu religion and their rituals, they have been targeted only marginally by the upper castes. This revolution in dynamics of SCs lead to some salient changes in the caste system and new axis of conflicts in caste relation of Maharashtra.

Traditionally SCs have been working as manual workers and agriculture bondage labourers; but they are not easily available for the same work these days. Increasing caste atrocities, discrimination and suppression of SCs in modern period or globalizing world are leading to reinforcement of caste system. This twist is very harmful for the development of not only SCs but also all sections of the society. Consequently, it is the great barrier to the achievement of social harmony.

Caste is a form of social exclusion or deprivation, because the caste a person is born into is supposed to determine his/her occupation and social status. It is the classification or stratification of the people into four and latter five hierarchically ranked caste-groupss called *Varna*. *Varna* is divided into many *Jati* and classes. It has existed from the ancient period (Deshpande, 2011). Brahmans are a big supporter of the caste system and made it very rigid. They have got privilege, power and social status through it (Ambedkar, 1916). Under *Varna* system, there are five *Varnas*. Each group is predetermined to perform, a particular kind of job. It has been classified according to occupation and determines access to wealth, power and privilege in the *Varna* system. Brahmans are on the top of the system. They are priest and scholars. Next are the Kshatriya, political rulers and soldiers. They are followed by the Vaishya or merchants and fourth are the Shudras who are usually laboures, artisans and servants. And fifth *Varna* is *Atishudra* or Untouchables. These individuals perform occupations that are considered unclean and polluting, such as scavenging and skinning dead animals and are considered outcasts. They are not considered to be part of the *Varna* system. Caste system denies them basic rights to live. They are humiliated and assaulted by the upper castes when they break rules of the caste system.

The caste system is not merely a division of labours which is quite different from the division of labour; it is a hierarchy in which the divisions of labourers are graded one above the other (Ambedkar 1936). This division of labour is not spontaneous; it is not based on natural abilities. Every individual has got occupational freedom after independence of the country. But today opportunities of getting good job are higher for higher caste individuals in comparison with that of lower castes, even if they possess similar qualifications. Caste becomes a direct cause of voluntary unemployment for the higher caste person and involuntary for lower caste person. Lower castes tend to get absorbed into lower paying and less prestigious modern occupations and higher caste get high paying and high prestigious jobs on the basis of social

status, good education, technical skill etc. Job is the major determinant factor of social status in Indian society (Thorat and Newman, 2007).

Untouchables are different from the other lower castes. The Indian caste system is very rigid. Higher castes oppress the lower caste socially, politically and economically. Even lower castes oppose the progress of other lower caste. The institution of caste obstructed them from benefiting under the new economic opportunities. But it also benefited the higher caste like Brahmin, Vaishya and Kshatriya in certain other field. Multiple hierarchies have existed in the caste system. Every caste overvalues itself in relation to others (Gupta, 2005). Functions of caste or caste systems are extremely effective method of exclusion and economic exploitation.

The main objective of the paper is to describe the caste structure and – its relationship with upper caste and among scheduled castes. Furthermore, it deals with SC's struggle for socio-economic development and hurdles in Maharashtra state. The study is based on mix methods qualitative as well as quantitative measure to describe phenomenon. Data for the study has been collected from the various Government reports, published and unpublished documents etc.

### CASTE STRUCTURE IN MAHARASHTRA

The caste structure in Maharashtra is different from the other part of India. In Maharashtra it is constituted by several social groups such as Others, Other Backward Castes (OBC), Scheduled Castes (SCs), Scheduled Tribes (STs), Special Backward Class (SBC), Vimukta Jati/ Denotified Tribes (VJ), Nomadic Tribes-B (NT-B), Nomadic Tribes-C (NT-C), and Nomadic Tribes-D (NT-D).

Table1 provides caste- wise population and number of communities coming under particular social group in the state of Maharashtra. 48 per cent population is recorded as upper castes in the state. 'Other' castes are constituted by Maratha, Brahmin and other dominant castes. There are 346 communities recorded as OBCs in the state.

**Table 1: Castes and Communities in Maharashtra**

Castes	Communities	Population in Percent
Other or General	NA	48
OBC	346	19
SC	59	13
ST	47	7
SBC	7	2
VJ	14	3
NT-B	35	2.5
NT-C	1	3.5
NT-D	1	2

(Source: List of Castes and Tribes in Maharashtra) <sup>1</sup>

SCs and STs were playing role as servant of the upper castes. They constitute 20 per cent share in the total population of the state. SCs constitute 13 per cent while STs 7 per cent. SBC (2 per cent), VJ (3 per cent), NT-B (2.5 per cent), NT-C or Dhangar (3.5 per cent) and NT-D (2 per cent) jointly constitute 13 per cent population of the state. These social groups or castes are having hierarchical status in the society of the state.

### CASTE HIERARCHIES, OCCUPATIONS AND RELATIONS

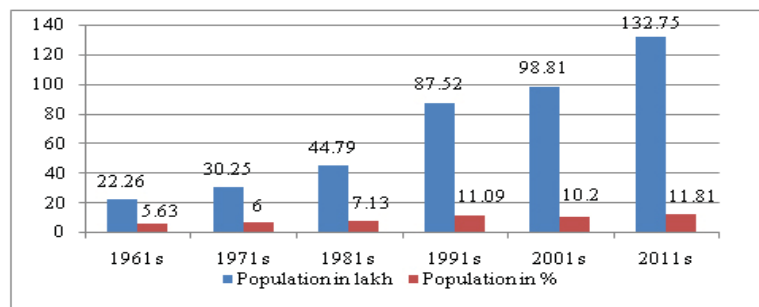
Caste relation depends upon the caste identities or status and their religion. Caste Maratha is the dominant and ruling caste in Maharashtra. This caste is having hold on the means of production in the state. In the caste hierarchy of state Maratha stands at the highest position, followed by Brahmins, and next OBCs and nomadic tribes and at the end of the pedestal are STs and SCs. Maratha caste is dominant in the politics of the state. Maratha and *Kunbi*<sup>2</sup> are the landlords of Maharashtra (Dahiwalé S., 1995). They have majority in all political parties. There is a caste conflict between Maratha or open caste and OBC for political status in the state. In recent period, due to Governmental policy and programs, STs are getting involved in the mainstream of the society. Most of them are following Hindu religion and Christian religion. They also segregate themselves as Brahmin, Kshatriya and Vaishya.

There was *Balutedari* system that existed for workers or servants in Maharashtra. This system was supportive to the agriculture sector. The servants under this system provided services to the farmer and economic system of village. The base of this system was caste. The servant used to get job, according to their castes. There were 12 kinds of servants, called *Bara Balutedar*; such as *Sonar, Gurav, Nhawi, Parit, Kumbhar, Sutar, Lohar, Chambhar, Dhor, Koli, Chougula, Mang* and *Mahar*. In this list of *Balutedar*; *Dhor, Mang, Mahar* and *Chambhar* were untouchables. They were doing job as watchmen for village, messenger, and would dispose dead animals of upper castes. These castes are considered as lowest castes in the society.

### STATUS OF SCHEDULED CASTES IN MAHARASHTRA

There are 59 communities under the umbrella of Scheduled Castes in Maharashtra, whereas overall 1092 scheduled castes are registered in India. Mahar or New Buddhist, Matang or Mang and Chambhar are the major communities among 59 SCs. Mahar or New Buddhist (57.5 per cent), Matang (20.3 per cent), Bhambi and Chambhar (17.2 per cent) constitute 95 per cent of SC population in the state (Census of India, 2001).

**Figure 1: Scheduled Caste Population in Maharashtra**



(Source: Maharashtra Development Report, 2007, Census of India 2011).

Figure 1 illustrates the trend of SCs population in the state. It is showing an increasing trend during 1961 to 2011 period. It has grown from 22.26 lakh in 1961 to 132.75 lakhs in 2011. Thus, population of SCs in 2011 is six times more than their population in 1961. Population in terms of percentage is also becoming more than double. It was 5.63 per cent in 1961 and now climbed to 11.81 per cent in 2011. SCs are recording higher birth rate than other categories. In this trend, there are two decades, which show higher rates of increases; first being 1981-1991 and then the period between 2001-2011.

### PROFILE OF MAJOR SCs

Conditions of the SCs in Maharashtra have started to change. Their income, educational level, literacy rate are showing increasing trend in recent years.

**Mahar or New Buddhist:** Mahar or New Buddhist is major community from SCs in Maharashtra. They became Buddhist after their conversion to Buddhism in 1956, under the leadership of Dr. B. R. Ambedkar. In the state they are notified as *Mahar, Mehra, Dher, Bhumia* (guide), *Yeskar* (gatekeeper), *Taral* (watchman), *Dharnicheput* (son of soil), *Dhegu* and *Megu*. This community constitutes 57.5 per cent population among SCs in the state. The community work as *Balutedar*, in *Balutedari* rural economic system of Maharashtra. Mahar are more mobilized community among all other SCs in Maharashtra. Their educational status is comparatively higher than other SCs communities (Singh, 1995). Most of them are agriculture labourers. Mainly four subgroups exist among the Mahar or Neo-Buddhists such as *Somas, Andhwan, Tilwan* and *Landwan*.

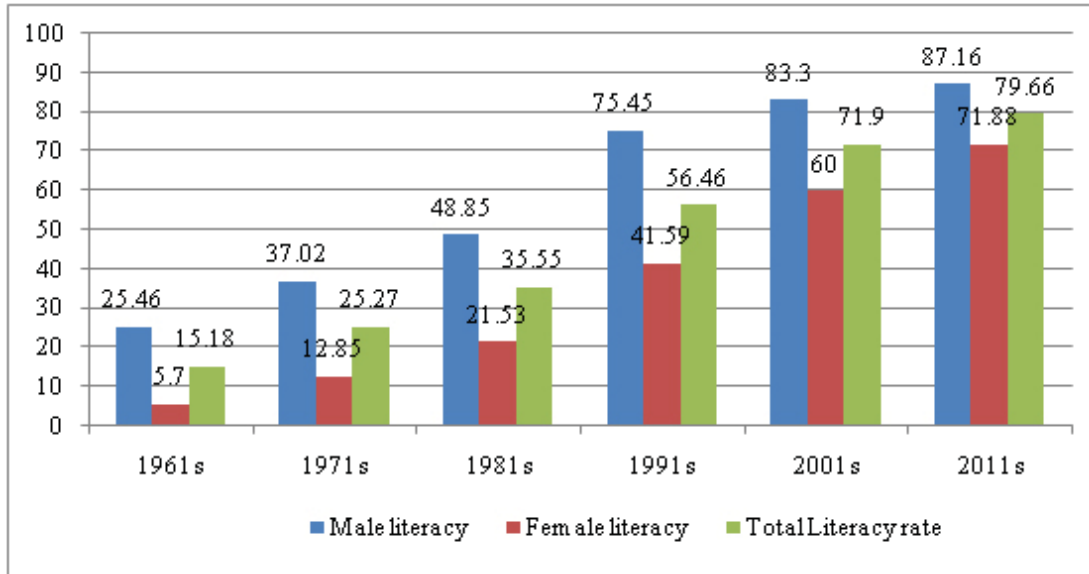
**Matang or Mang:** Usually known as Mang, they are the second largest SCs community with 20.3 per cent share in total population of the SCs. This community was also *Balutedar*. Community occupation is leather work. Their other job is to beat drum in any ceremony of upper caste Hindu, preparing ropes from hemp/kekati and making brooms from date palms. They use to make announcement (government or personal) in whole village using drum (*Halgi*). They also do job as agriculture laboureres, cleaner of cowsheds in farms or in home of upper castes farmers. They work to dispose off body of dead animals. They collect skin of dead animals and sell it to nearby urban market or contractor. For their immense work, they get some amount food grain during agriculture season.

This community has four subgroups namely i) *Mang Garodi*, ii) *Mang Garudi*, iii) *Dhankani Mang* and iv) *Somvanshi Mang*. They accept exchange of food among themselves, but hardly allow marriage between these subgroups.

**Bhambi and Chambar:** Their main occupation is production of shoes and chappals from the finished leather. Most of them are still continuing their caste occupation viz. shoe making and repairing. Some of them engage with leather work in companies. The community follows Hindu religion, and its rituals and even practice untouchability against other SCs. They do not accept water and food from the Mangs and Mahars or New Buddhist.

There are some subgroups within this community, such as *Ahir* or *Dhor*, *Chevli* or *Chouly* or *Rohidas*, *Malvanior Konkani*, *Daboli*, *Hardi*, *Ghati*, *Harali*, *Waideshi*, *Chamria*, *Chambhar*, *Changar*, *Haralayya*, *Asudary* and *Asodi*.

**Figure 2: Literacy Rate among SCs in Maharashtra**



(Source: Maharashtra Development Report, 2007, Census of India, 2011).

The rate of literacy is the developmental barometer of the society. Figure 2 shows literacy rate among SCs in Maharashtra. It is the mark of the educational development of the SCs in Maharashtra. The literacy rate among SCs is showing an increasing trend and leaped from 15.18 percent in 1961s to 79.66 per cent in 2011.

**Table 2: Educational Levels among Major SCs of Maharashtra**

Name of SC caste	Literate without educational level	Below Primary	Primary	Middle	Matric/ Intermediate	Technical and non-technical diploma	Graduate & above
Mahar	2.0	28.2	24.9	17.2	22.1	0.3	5.3
Mang	2.8	37.0	29.	14.1	14.2	0.2	2.4
Bhambi	1.8	26.3	26.7	16.5	22.2	0.7	5.6
All	2.1	29.4	26.3	16.6	20.5	0.4	4.8

(Source: Census of India 2001).

Table 2 indicates the educational status or levels among major SCs of Maharashtra. 72.2 per cent population of SCs is educated up to the middle level. Just 20.5 per cent are appearing for the Matric and Intermediate courses. The dropout rate among SCs is high after

intermediate. Only 4.8 per cent students are having an educational level of graduation and above. All communities from SCs are not standing at equal level of higher education. Bhambi or Chambhar occupy higher position with 5.6 per cent, followed by Mahar at 5.3 per cent. The *Mang* community is deprived than Mahar and Bhambi in terms of overall educational level. But in case of actual number, Mahar or New Buddhist are standing at a higher position than the Bhambi, because their population is comparatively higher than them. Educational level and better job opportunities are positively associated with each other. Therefore, Mahar are getting more government jobs compared with other SC communities.

### OCCUPATION OF SCs IN MAHARASHTRA

Mostly SCs in Maharashtra are working as manual or casual labourers in the state economy. Landlessness is the main cause, which keep them as mere rural poor. Work participation rate is recorded at 43.9 percent in 2011. It is slight improvement from 41.9 per cent in 2001. At many places, landless labourers work as bondage labour in agricultural farms of upper caste farmers. Those who have marginal farms, work seasonally in their farms, and go out of village for work during off agriculture season. Discrimination in wages and work is a common thing in their daily life. With economic development, especially industrial growth and tertiary sector growth in urban centres, many SCs migrated from rural to urban areas for searching better job and better livelihood. During this period of transition, many of SCs have left their traditional jobs or castes jobs. But mostly are getting employed merely as manual or casual labour in the urban economy.

Reservation for SCs in education and government (State and Central) services, has improved their share in public service. SCs, STs and OBCs are getting 13 per cent, 7 per cent and 19 per cent reservation in state government jobs respectively<sup>3</sup>.

### CASTE IDENTITIES AND PROPERTY RELATIONS

Indian economy is still agriculture- based, not in terms of the production but in terms of dependency of the population for livelihood. In rural society, agricultural land holding is the most crucial source of livelihood and social status in society.

**Table 3: Land Holding by SCs of Maharashtra (in percent)**

Year	Land Holding by SCs (per cent of total land)	Population having land (in lakh)
1981	4.48	3.05
1991	6.00	7.00
2001	6.64	9.35
2011	7.10	9.53

(Source: Mohanty, 2001 and Agriculture Census Data Base 2001 & 2011)<sup>4</sup>

Table 3 illustrates the agricultural land holding among SCs of Maharashtra. It shows that the percentage land holding has increased from 4.48 per cent in 1981 to 7.10 per cent in 2011. The number of land holders also increased with land holding. The population of SCs who owned the land was 3.05 lakhs in 1981. This has increased to 9.53 lakh in 2011. In 2001,

9.35 lakhs SCs were having agricultural land. Share of marginal, small and semi-medium SC farmers is recorded at 95 per cent out of total *land holders* among SCs. Just 5 per cent land holder come under the category of medium and large.

**Table 4: Land Holdings for SCs in Maharashtra**  
(Number in '000' and Area in '000' ha.)

S No.	Size of Land holdings	2005-06		2010-11	
		Number	Area	Number	Area
1	Marginal Size	414	231	539	259
2	Small Size	323	422	311	436
3	Semi-medium size	140	367	139	365
4	Medium size	27	150	37	204
5	Large size	3	33	3	40
6	<b>All size</b>	907	1235	1029	1303

(Source: Agriculture Census, Government of India, 2014)

Table 4 shows the size of land holdings among SCs. Share of marginal and small-size holding farmers is 82.60 per cent. Number of land holders has increased from 9,07,000 to 10,29,000 between 2005-06 and 2010-11; and during same period area that SCs owned has increased from 12,35,000 ha to 13,03,000 ha.

#### **PARTICIPATION IN LOCAL POLITICS**

The participation of SCs in local and state politics has dramatically increased. There are several state and national level political parties which raise up the issue of their political representation and deal with problems of the socially deprived section of the state. Some of the established parties are *Republican Party of India* (RPI), and different forms of RPI like *Bhartiya Republican Party Bahujan Mahasangh*. Due reservation in the Panchayati Raj system for SCs, STs and women have increased their share in local politics (Tiwari, 2009). Presence of SCs in politics is becoming unpalatable thing for some of the caste hegemonists.

#### **HIERARCHIES AMONG SCHEDULED CASTES**

There are hierarchies practiced by SCs among themselves. These hierarchies are based on the ground of castes, occupation and religion. Bhangi, Chambar, Bhambi have considerably improved their social status in the caste system, due to *Sanskritisation*. These castes consider themselves as middle caste in the caste system of Maharashtra (Patwardhan, 1968 and Wankhede, 2001). Ideological differences among the Dalits, like Mahar or Neo Buddhist, Matang and Chamar is a new phenomenon. Mahar continue to struggle and unite against caste system in the name of the Dalit, but caste Matang and Chamar are not participating in movement.

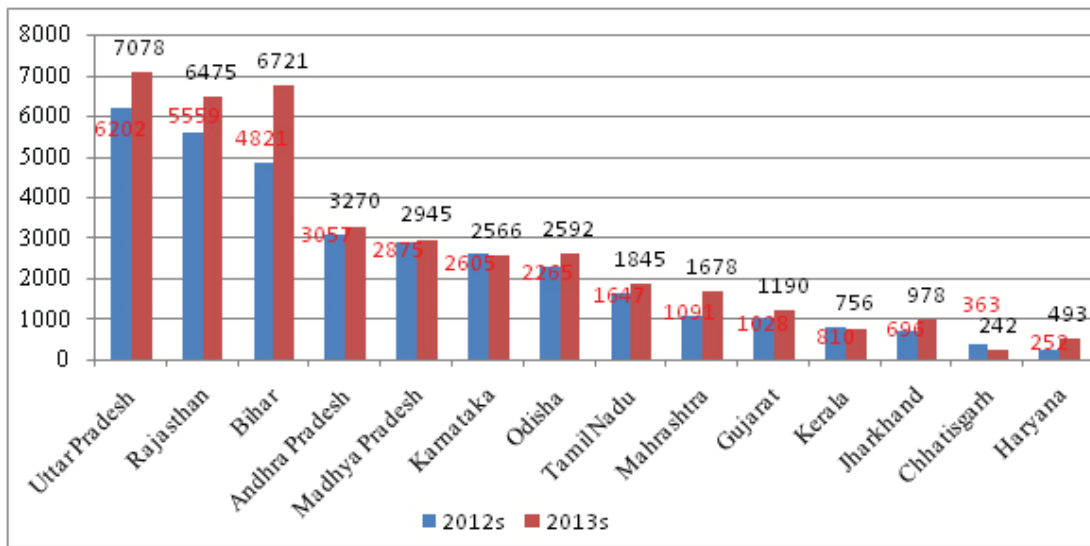


**CASTE ATROCITIES AGAINST DALITS**

Caste atrocities are not new for the SCs in Maharashtra. They have been experiencing it since very long. During 1970s and 80s, it grew all over India. Especially in Marathwada a region of Maharashtra, brutal onslaught was launched against Dalits. Among Dalits, Mahar community is mostly targeted because they are relatively better off than other Dalit communities in terms of social consciousness, literacy, self-assertion and self-consciousness that increased among new Buddhist due to ideology of Ambedkar.

Figure 3 sums up the atrocity incidents against SCs all over India during the year 2012 to 2013. Incidents of atrocities against SCs have increased during this year in all states with the exception of Chhattisgarh. It reduced from 363 incidents in 2012 to 242 in 2013 in Chhattisgarh as scheduled tribes have a major share in this state. Uttar Pradesh is showing the highest incidents of atrocities against SCs. It increased from 6202 incidents in 2012 to 7078 incidents in 2013.

**Figure 3: Atrocities against SCs in India (In numbers)**



(Source: National Crime Record Bureau, India 2012 and 2013).

Maharashtra is standing at the 9th rank in term of incidents of atrocities against SCs. Atrocity incidents increased from 1091 in 2012 to 1678 in 2013. This is 53 per cent growth. It is higher than most of the states. Highest increment is recorded in state of Haryana, and second highest in Maharashtra.

**MOVEMENT OF NAMANTAR**

In 1978, there were several atrocity incidents reported against SCs in rural as well as in urban Maharashtra. The main reason was that the upper caste people resented the change of

name (*Namantar*) of Marathwada University, Aurangabad. There were registered cases of 7 murders and 14 rapes of SCs women. Mostly Mahar and Mang got targeted.

### **MOVEMENTS OF LOWER CASTES AGAINST CASTE SYSTEM AND DISCRIMINATION**

Movement against discrimination started very early in Maharashtra, which is known by *Bhakti Chalval*. This movement was started by the saints. It was further continued by Mahatma Phule, Chhatrapati Shahu and Dr. Ambedkar. Mahatma Phule stated that the education is the most important instrument for development of Shudras. Illiteracy is the main cause of the deprivation of lower caste people. Chhatrapati Shahu started reservation for lower castes student in education, and offered them low fee as well as hostel facility. The efforts of Dr. Ambedkar to create constitutional safeguard for not only SCs of Maharashtra but also for SCs of all over India is remarkable. Constitutional safeguard like reservation for SCs and STs in education and employment in government sector is helping to improve their socio economic condition.

### **CONVERSION OF MAHAR TO BUDDHIST**

Conversion of the Mahars to Buddhist in Maharashtra is a major emancipation movement among the SCs. On October 14,1956, Dr. Ambedkar changed his religion from Hinduism to Buddhism, along with his lakhs of follower, mostly his community people. This conversation of Mahar was a fight against Hindu ideology and the very basis of discrimination viz. caste identities. After conversion, neo- Buddhist or ex-Mahar stopped believing in Hindu religion, their gods and also forsake any rituals and Hindu festivals. They now follow Buddhism, which encourages scientific temperament. Ex-Mahar were outcasts in Maharashtra, and they decided to shed their Hindu identity for ever. The movement of conversation of the Mahar has come as a challenge to the high-caste Hindu and their followers not only in the state of Maharashtra but also all over India. Post-conversion, standard of living and self- dignity of the ex-Mahars has tremendously increased.

### **SELF ASSERTION**

Self-assertion of the SCs came as a part of the movement of the Dalits under the leadership of Dr. B. R. Ambedkar. He gave the message, "*educate, organize and agitate*", to every scheduled caste person. He wanted to make them conscious about their social and political rights. The outcome of these movements has been an increased awareness about education among SCs and they have become more assertive (Wankhede, 2001). Educated group of this community, especially from the Neo- Buddhist are more self-conscious and self-assertive. They have been influenced by Ambedkar's ideology.

### **CONCLUSION**

Instances of discrimination on the basis of caste identities are still reported from every section and every sector of the Indian society. Atrocities against SCs in the state has become an important issue. Rape and murder of SCs women and men are increasing day by day while the state of Maharashtra is getting the tag of the developed state. It appears that some amount of educational and economic achievements of this community is leading to growing atrocities

against them. On the other hand, some SCs are shedding Hindu religion and radicalism of a neo-Buddhism make them identify differently from other scheduled castes. Every community has different interest. Mostly Mahar or neo- Buddhist are major target of ire of caste conflict.

Indian society or economy cannot be developed without development of these marginal sections. Atrocities and discrimination against SCs is the major barrier in their development. These caste identities and atrocities against SCs are also major hurdles in attaining social harmony social development.

#### ENDNOTES

1. List of Castes and Tribes in Maharashtra, available at URL [http://www.mumbaicitysetu.org/Castelist\\_Maha.html](http://www.mumbaicitysetu.org/Castelist_Maha.html), accessed on 30/12/2014.
2. *Kunbi* are predominantly agriculture caste from Maharashtra, working in their own land. They consider their social status as equal to Maratha, an upper caste and follows Maratha's rituals and practices.
3. List of Castes and Tribes in Maharashtra, available at following link: [http://www.mumbaicitysetu.org/Castelist\\_Maha.html](http://www.mumbaicitysetu.org/Castelist_Maha.html), accessed on 30/12/2014.
4. Agricultural land holding of SCs in Maharashtra has been calculated from the Agriculture Census Data Base, Available at following link: <http://agcensus.dacnet.nic.in/stateholdingsizeclass.aspx>.

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