

VIOLENCE AGAINST DALITS IN MARATHWADA

-THE CASTE CAULDRON OF MAHARASHTRA

A Report by the fact finding Team
Comprising

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On behalf of

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Introduction

In recent months a series of incidents of killings and violence against Dalits in Marathwada shocked everyone. The issue raked up in the Maharashtra Assembly led to Chief Minister Sushil Kumar Shinde offering to resign. People smelt it to be a reaction to a Dalit becoming the chief Minister of the State for the first time. Some tried to see it as a part of strategies of political parties on the eve of elections. Some analyzed it as a natural result of weakening of Dalits over recent times because of their political fragmentation. The recent Shiv Sena overtures to Dalits, with the slogan of Bhimshakti + Shivshakti = Deshbhakti' was also being linked to these happening.

The foxing aspect of these incidents was that most of the Dalits in this series were from the Matang caste, which is not known to be as politically assertive as Ambedkarite Mahars (Buddhists), so as to have antagonistic contradictions with the Savarna castes. Atrocities on Dalits or their killings are not a new thing in Marathwada. Marathwada earned its dubious distinction by perpetrating numerous atrocities on Dalits and killing hundreds of them during the movement for renaming the Marathwada University after Babasaheb Ambedkar and even thereafter. But all these Dalits happened to be only Mahars or Buddhists as they call themselves. In the entire Maharashtra, the Mahars become the target of the Savarnas as they are the most assertive and politically organized people. As a result, any atrocity on the Dalits in Maharashtra, by default, meant atrocity on the Buddhists. It was for the first time that one heard of Matangs being significantly targeted by the Savarnas. It is well known that Marathwada has a significant population of the Matangs and in recent years they have also begun organizing themselves by variously iconizing a revolutionary poet Shaheer Ananbhau Sathe. But that in it self could not become a reason for such a violent reaction from the Savarna community as to kill people with inhuman ferocity. There was no indication that they had made a common cause with the Buddhists so as to incur the wrath of the Savarnas against themselves.

The incidents were complex enough to warrant a careful analysis. Most of the incidents happened on the issue of water at public hand pumps. Hand pumps are a common source of water in this drought prone region. The placement of these hand pumps, their upkeep therefore, becomes an integral part of these incidents bringing thereby the developmental nuances of the State into question. No attention has been paid to these aspects in this context. Already political parties had started looking at these incidents as their political opportunities. They coloured them as per their convenience. The Sonia Gandhi sponsored fact finding team of the Congress came out with its report that saw one of the goriest incidents as a clash between two anti-social elements. It rightly met with indignation and condemnation by the Dalit organizations. Maratha Mahasangh openly called these incidents as fake and demanded annulment of Atrocity Act itself. Dalit Parties tried to take cudgels for the victims but because of their fragmentation they could not make much

of an impact. As a matter of fact, their calculated concerns could not hide the underneath anxiety of maximizing their respective political gain.

It is then that CPDR decided to take up these cases for fact finding, by a team. The team comprised of the following persons:

1. Dr. Anand Teltumbde
2. Akram Siddiqui
3. Subodh More
4. Hashim Mohammad

The team visited Jalana, Bhutegaon, Dhansawangi Police Station, Sonna Khota and Aurangabad from July 25 to 28, 2003; talked to a number of people and collected facts on the incidents that collectively comprise the subject issue. The main incidents investigated are (1) Attack on a Matang family by a Savarna mob and burning alive of a Matang youth- Dilip Shendge at Bhutegaon village in Jalana district and (2) Attack on a Dalit family by the Savarna mob and consequently the brutal killing of one Dadarao Dongre at Sonna Khota village in Beed district.

1. Attack on a Dalit Family and Burning of Dilip Shendge at Bhutegaon

Socio-Economic Setting of Bhutegaon

Bhutegaon is a small, obscure village with a population of about 1800. It is situated some 30 Km from Dhanasawangi town, which became a Taluka after bifurcation of Ambad taluka of Jalana district in Marathwada region of Maharashtra. Ambad taluka has been infamous for its dominant feudal setting. Caste traditions run deep here and the writ of Maratha Landlords called Patils runs supreme in the entire taluka. Jalana district to which Ambad and Dhhanasawangi talukas belong, has a dubious distinction of having the maximum cases of atrocities on Dalits in the Marathwada region. Among the eight districts of this region in central Maharashtra, Jalana tops with 19 of the total 46 crime cases involving attacks on Dalits registered in the last six months. Last year, in all, 18 cases of atrocities against Dalits were registered in the district but this year during the first five and a half months itself, there have been 14 cases. Out of them, Ambad-Dhansawangi talukas accounts for five cases. It is surprising that this very region had sent Dhondiraj Kamble, a Matang person as its representative to Legislative Assembly way back in 1970s when the caste traditions were far more rigid than now. Most of Marathwada is drought- prone and suffers from acute scarcity of water. This year, about 39 out of a total 76 talukas in the Marathwada region have been declared drought-prone with an average rainfall of 780 mm. The government has put up hand pumps in every village but many of the hand pumps do not work, either because of water table having gone too low or the pumps being out of order. As a result, caste clashes on the issue of water taking place at the hand pumps, have become a usual feature of Marathwada.

Bhutegaon has 75 % Savarna Maratha population. It has 14 households belonging to Buddhists, 18 households to Matangs, and one household each to Bhoi (fisherman), Muslim and Kumbhar (potter) communities. Savarna Maratha community owns most of the land in this village. Dalits are landless labourers, few owning small pieces of fallow (gayaran) land. They depend upon the Savarna landlords for farm jobs for their livelihood. A male farm labourer gets Rs. 40 per day and in the cropping season it is raised to Rs. 50; the female labourer gets Rs. 15-20 as daily wages. In the cotton picking season, the wages are based on piece rate of Re. 1 per Kg.

Bhutegaon has a school up to the seventh standard. As a result, most of the village population including Dalits is literate but it has scarcely gone beyond SSC-level. Even in education, the distribution is skewed in favour of Maratha community. They are better educated, many are graduates and at least one has a post-graduate degree. Nobody needs to tell a stranger which part of the village belongs to them. Their houses are made of stones and bricks and are far bigger than the hovels on the outskirts which belong to Dalit community. Dalits do not have entry into their houses or their temples. Over the years, rigidity of tradition appears to have loosened but not to the extent where its contours are not visible. Untouchability is still practiced in its quintessential form.

Fed up with this feudal oppression and harassed by repeated droughts, some Dalit families from this area fled to Mumbai and dissolved themselves into crowds of slum dwellers. Four years back, the only source of water for Bhutegaon Dalits was the Dudhna River, which was a 40-minute walk away. Though there was a well in the village, it was situated in that part where the upper caste Bhutekars lived. It was not accessible to lower castes. When the government installed 12 hand pumps, none of them were put up in the Dalit colony. The Dalits therefore relied on one pump which was closer to them in the temple area of the village. While the Dalits would not be allowed to approach other hand pumps in Bhutekar area, Bhutekars claimed not only access to all the pumps but also a privilege to be the first on any of them.

Shendge family, which was the victim of the May 14-incident, belongs to Matang caste. Way back in 1972, Shahurao Shendge along with his wife Shantabai and son Ramesh, had migrated to Mumbai during the severe drought that year. They lived in Damupada slum in Kandivali since then. They had two more children at Mumbai- Dilip, who was burnt alive in the incident, was 25 and Lata is 16. Shendge brothers mainly earned their living as plumbers and also operated an auto rickshaw. Shahurao had some five acres of land at Bhutegaon which he had given to his brother for cultivation and a hut at the edge of Bhutegaon. Apart from memories of Bhutegaon as their native place, Shendges had hardly any relation with the place. The family however had come to Bhutegaon for the marriage of Dilip which was to take place on May 27, 2003. The main reason was the demolition of their hut in the Damupada slum by the BMC authorities around the time Dilip's marriage was fixed. Shantabai, Ramesh, his wife Nanda, and Lata arrived in Bhutegaon on April 13, 2003 to make arrangements. Dilip arrived a month later, on the May 13, 2003. The incident happened the very next day, on May 14, that made the to-be bridegroom Dilip, a veritable martyr in the Sanatan caste struggle.

Our Investigations

As we reached Bhutegaon on Saturday, July 26, 2003, we did not have to ask anyone for Dilip Shendge's house. A newly constructed memorial that appeared grossly oversized for the hovels that provide it a backdrop, told us where to stop and whom to talk to. We stopped and read the board. It read "Dalit Mahasangh". It was placed there by Maschindra Satak and Kapil Patil of 'Samajik Nyaya Morcha'

As we entered the courtyard, Ramesh Shahurao Shendge seated us on a cot as his wife washed utensils just a few feet away. Some five to six persons surrounded us within a few minutes, one of whom was Shiwaji Bhoware- husband of Indumati Bhoware who is a Sarpanch of Bhutegaon Gram Panchayat. Ramesh and Shiwaji narrated the entire sequence of events as follows:

It was May 14, 2003. The Bhutekars had a wedding on that day. They were collecting drinking water for the occasion from all possible sources. There are 12 hand pumps in Bhutegaon, all in the Savarn area as the source of water. Only two of them worked. One was deep inside the Savarna area and the other was on the outskirts, near Narayan Bhutekar's farm and closer to Dalit colony. It was mainly this pump that the Dalits fetched their water from. They lived just a lane away from this hand pump.

At the edge of their colony as well as the village, was a cluster of huts where the Shendge family lived. The Shendge brothers and sister in Mumbai had grown up in Mumbai and did not know much of the Bhutegaon customs. They were not rich, but the setting the metropolis of Mumbai had placed them in, was not socially oppressive. They could be first to fetch water on the Municipal tap. It allowed them to intermingle freely with any one in the Basti. Bhutegaon that never let the Dalits recover from the internalization of their inferior social status vis-à-vis Bhutekars was left far behind. Mumbai had cleansed this migrant Matang family of its inferiority and filled it with cosmopolitan sensibility. Bhutegaon however remained fossilized with its caste traditions. It would not change. When the Shendges from Mumbai came to Bhutegaon, it refused to acknowledge them as anything other than the lowly Matangs. It expected them to behave as the Matangs in Bhutegaon did.

Ramesh had brought his scooter from Mumbai for the ease of going around for distributing invitation cards to relatives in the surrounding villages. The wedding was fixed on May 27. Ramesh gave us one invitation card which has now turned useless to him. The Shendge family was looking forward to having a good family event. But for the fateful incident of May 14, Dilip would have been on the top of the world on the day we were talking to Ramesh and other Shendges at Bhutegaon. Dilip was no more. He was punished by Bhutegaon for his defiance of caste code. He disappeared as one plus to the uncountable victims of the caste killings in India. What remains of him is the terror and chilled ire among his kin, shockwaves in the diminishing world of those who hope to see equality and fraternity reign in society, petty struggles of politicians to capitalize his death to their advantage and a big memorial that would soon be forgotten.

May 14, 2003. That day Lata, a younger sister of Dilip Shendge goes to the hand pump to fetch water. Being mid summer, all the village hand pumps are dry except two. One of them fortunately is the one from where the Dalits usually fetched their water. That day happens to be the day of marriage of one of the daughters of Bhutekars. They require more water and hence come to collect it from this pump too, besides the one in their own area. There is a queue at the hand pump and Lata stands there. When her turn comes, she steps forward to fill her vessel. Two youth from the Bhutekar family, Vitthal and Datta in their early 20s, however stop her and abuse her in the name of her caste. A verbal exchange breaks out between Lata and them. It grows into taunting, teasing and unseemly physical skirmish. This happens around 2.00 to 2.30 pm as per Ramesh who revealed the sequence of events to us.

Lata comes back home and reports the matter to Dilip. He gets infuriated with rage and heads off to the hand pump with Lata. There he abuses Datta and Vitthal Bhutekars and gets into physical fight with them. Several people of Bhutekar rush to the spot and start beating Dilip and Lata. Dilip fights back but Lata gets badly beaten. Some one kicks her in the stomach and she falls unconscious. Ramesh and Nanda who witness the incident desperately plead with the Bhutekars to stop the fight. They beg of them for a cart to take Lata to the doctor. Shantabai touches their feet to no avail. Although, the fight ends with Lata falling unconscious and intervention of some people of Bhoi (fisherman) caste, the Bhutekars have had enough from Dilip. (Ramesh proudly told us that he had really thrashed them). The Shendges return home. The news of a Matang beating up the Maratha Bhutekars spreads like wildfire among the guests who have come for the marriage. The Bhutekars' insult gets multiplied. It is just too much to swallow. They become mad with anger. They wait just to conclude the wedding ceremony and see off the bride.

At around 5 pm, the entire Bhutekar mob of some 20 people with sticks and axes reach Dilip Shedge's house. Dilip's mother shuts him up inside the hut and blocks the door. One Shyam Bhutekar climbs on the top of the hut for entering through the roof and in the process gets his leg broken. The crowd pushes Shantabai aside and around 13 persons thrust into the house and start beating Dilip with sticks. Others hold back Ramesh and other family members. Dilip's mother and sister rush for saving Dilip and get themselves badly beaten. Soon they drag Dilip out of the hut into the courtyard. Ramesh Bhutekar, the most educated person in Bhutegaon, who is a professor in a college in Jalana, pours kerosene on him and sets him ablaze. Dilip's mother and sister rush to save him and also get burnt. Dilip, Lata and their mother all in excruciating pain of burns are put on a bullock cart with the help of Deputy Sarpanch, Bhagawat Gulabrao Kale and then on a bus to a Jalana Hospital. The grueling journey through rough terrain and scorching heat of 41 degree Celsius comes to an end at around 8 pm. Dilip dies in the hospital five days later, on May 19, 2003, with 97 per cent burns. Dilip's mother has 20 per cent burns on her hand and stomach and his father has slight burns on his hands. They, along with Lata are still in the hospital.

At the hospital, the Police register the case. Dilip shouts out the names of his attackers and vows to take revenge. Police from the Dhansawangi Police Station in whose

jurisdiction Bhutegaon falls, appear in Bhutegaon at around 12 pm. No arrests are made. Next day at around 12 am, the police arrest six people- Asaram, Sudam, Karbhari, Shamrao, Kisanrao and Babasaheb, all Bhutekars. Arrests again take place on May 19. In all, 13 people are arrested, the last one on May 23, that of Ramesh Bhutekar.

Shiwaji Bhoware told us that beating up of the Dalits was not an unusual occurrence in Bhutegaon but it never went to the extent of killing. Around two years ago, one Eknath Dagdu Shendge (45) was taken to the flour mill and was badly beaten by Asaram Muktaji Bhutekar, Rama Bhagaji Bhutekar and Shamrao Babasaheb Bhutekar. Eknath tried to report the incident at the police station but was stopped by the Bhutekars. They threatened him of dire consequences if he dared to complain against them.

Shiwaji, who belonged to an OBC caste, enthusiastically narrated how casteism is observed in Bhutegaon. He said that there was virtually no transaction between the Dalits and the Marathas. The Dalits swallow all the insults of the Marathas as they depend on their jobs for livelihood. It was foxing at first sight, to find such a progressive person in a backward village like Bhutegaon but soon we were reminded of his Sarpanch wife who belonged to the Shiv Sena. Shiwaji was representing the political dynamics of Bhutegaon. The Bhutegaon Gram Panchayat had seven members out of which four belonged to the Shiv Sena and three to the NCP. The political affiliations seemed to defy the caste lines. The Shiv Sena had one member from the OBC, one from the Dalits and two from the Marathas. NCP had one member from the OBC and two members from the Marathas. The Dalits and the OBC appeared to be leaning towards the Shiv Sena and Marathas were divided between both, the Shiv Sena and the NCP. As for them, this division did not come in the way of their caste equation.

The dying declaration of Dilip does not have any names. Shantabai's testimony contains contradictory statements. At the time of recording the dying declaration of Dilip, Ramesh was asked to leave the room by the Police. Ramesh, however, could still hear the statements. Dilip had told the police the names of Ramesh Bhutekar as the person who burnt him and others who had beaten him. However, the recorded statement reportedly does not contain any names. There were several eye witnesses to the gory incident including the members of Shendge family but the Police have not recorded statements of any of them.

We could not meet any member of Bhutekar family in the village as most were already behind the bar and others unavailable at that point in time. We talked to some Savarna people who were seating in the school verandah near the hand pump. They regretted the incident as unfortunate happening but claimed that it was of its own kind. On asking about the caste practices, they coolly told us that these customs have continued unobstructed; neither had they tried to change them nor the Dalits wanted otherwise. They said if the Dalits wanted to enter their temples, they would not stop them. Indeed, the Superintendent of Police reportedly led Dalits for the first time into the local temple after the incident. One Matang person retorted that it was all hollow now that they are caught in a trap. Otherwise, they would not treat Dalits as even human beings.

Facts of Bhutegaon: Our Analysis

The incident is simple to comprehend. Over a period of time, stories will get constructed to mutate the truth. Already we have heard rumours about such constructions, that when people came to his hut in large numbers, Dilip shut himself in, poured kerosene and set himself ablaze. He came out of the house and ran to embrace his target so that they also get burnt along with him. Apart from there being scores of witnesses to this gory incident, such stories are getting fabricated. Leave alone the truth; even a fool would consider them puerile. The incident highlights the base caste prejudice of the traditionally powerful castes against the Dalits. The observance of traditions lends them a sense of security that their dominance is unchallenged. In corollary, the increasing Dalit assertion is taken as the challenge to their traditional rule. Here, the Bhutekars wanted Lata to concede to their right, to take water first. A girl grown up in Mumbai could not take it. Her protest was reason enough for them to do whatever they did. They put soil into her pitcher. Not only did they taunt and tease her but they also indulged in physical assault. She fought back but could not match the village bully. She reported the matter to her brother who naturally reacted in rushing to the spot and thrashing the fellows. After all, he was not a Matang of Bhutegaon to swallow it. How he did it is not consequential. As per one account, published in *Saptahik Maharashtra* (June 9, 2003) by Prof. Raisaheb Dhavale, Dilip went with a cold drink bottle in his hand and attacked Datta and Vitthal Bhutekars with it. Ramesh for instance, did not tell us these details but he did say that Dilip had thrashed them. It was too much for the Bhutekars to take. A son of a lowly Matang who did their *Siledarki* not many years ago, had temerity of raising his hands on the Bhutekars! It was a rebellion against their lordship over the village. It had to be nipped in the bud with exemplary terror. And they did it by setting Dilip ablaze.

In such a widely witnessed incident, a question mark is placed as to whether Dilip was burnt or he got himself burnt. Organizations like Akhil Bharatiya Chhava and Maratha Mahasangh have taken processions and did demonstrations claiming that the incident was fake. They are trying to project that Dilip had Aids and hence he got himself burnt. Their representative Pritamkumar Shegaonkar demanded that the Atrocity Act should be annulled (*Dainik Mahanayak*, Aurangabad, 11.06.03). In this way, confusion is being created to diffuse the issue. Already, there are differing versions of the incident which would come in handy to hushing up the matter.

Certain things are highlighted by this incident:

- First, it is a case of ferocious atrocity against a Matang boy. Usually, the Dalit assertion is identified always with the Mahars (Buddhists) in Maharashtra who carry a legacy of the glorious anti-caste struggle launched by Babasaheb Ambedkar. The other Dalit castes had not yet identified with this struggle. The series of incidents of atrocities against Matangs in this belt perhaps points towards rising consciousness among the Matangs who are getting galvanized around a revolutionary Communist poet- Shahir Annabhau Sathe who happened to belong to their caste. Annabhau Sathe had written a famous song attributing his revolutionary consciousness to Babasaheb Ambedkar and thus can be a conduit for the Dalit consciousness among these

populous Dalit castes. If true, this should be considered as a very positive development towards Dalit unity.

- Second, the incident highlights the contradiction between the cosmopolitan sensibility of a Dalit and the traditional caste prejudice of the Savarna castes. Lata and Dilip Shendge represent the former and the Bhutekars of Bhutegaon, the latter. The former tends to dissolve sub-caste identity and strengthens democratic consciousness whereas the latter looks backwards in desperation to safeguard its traditional hegemony. With the increasing crisis faced by the rural areas, with increasing globalization, the relative insecurity of the Savarna castes is bound to increase and with it, the incidence of atrocities.
- Third, it signifies the fact that our education system is incapable of inducing either modernity or human values. The highest educated person of Bhutegaon -Ramesh Bhutekar, who is a professor in a Jalana college, was in forefront in beating up Dilip and he distinguished himself in inhumanity, by pouring kerosene over Dilip and setting him ablaze. The source of his temerity can well be found in his traditional caste-positioning in the village as well as in contemporary political patronage (He is said to have support of a NCP bigwig Shri Tope of Jalana in whose college he is a professor).
- Fourth, howsoever naked may be the incident of atrocity, it can still be suppressed if you have the right connections. Despite the political and press exposure to this gory incident, the case documentation appears already doctored to dilute the crime. Dilip's dying declaration reportedly does not have any names although everybody knows that he had been shouting out their names and swearing to avenge their crime over four days that he struggled to survive his 97 per cent burns. Likewise, the statement of his mother also has been reportedly distorted. If the conviction rate for the atrocity cases against Dalits bears any indication, the Bhutekars of Bhutegaon may be already relaxed.
- Fifth, some people link it to the party politics. As it appears, the Marathas are more aligned towards NCP whereas the Dalits are leaning towards Shiv Sena. While most of the party leaders have visited Bhutegaon after this incident, none from the Shiv Sena has done it despite its heightened propaganda on the unity of Bhimshakti and Shivshakti. It exposes the true content of this slogan that while the Shiv Sena wants Dalit votes, it will never touch the basic contradictions between the Dalits and Savarnas and antagonize the latter. Even in the heat of this move, it has not hesitated in showing its anti-Dalit fangs by taking out a big procession in Vadvani town of Beed district against the Dalits (detailed later in the case of Sonna Khota).

In essence, these incidents happen day in and day out everywhere in India. It is a case of enforcement of caste superiority with terror against the emerging Dalit assertion. Dalits are inured to it in villages. But it is not unusual even in towns and cities. It happens in modern offices where the Dalits are just tolerated so long as they reflect subservience to their upper caste bosses. No sooner its lack is perceived, they are variously harassed. It is a matter of scale that differs. The flames engulfing and killing Dilip Shendge were seen and therefore made news but there are innumerable Shendges in India who are being roasted silently in conflagration of caste culture!

Dhansawangi Police Station

We went to get the police version from the Dhansawangi Police Station. We were surprised to see all kinds of people sitting anywhere and none like police. On our asking for the police in-charge, some one brought one person in uniform. He was Devidas Birhade, Police Constable in charge of the police station in the absence of Nikam, the API. PI was supposed to be heading the Police Station. In no way did the Police Station reflect the anxiety associated with the unprecedented law and order problem that had arisen in its jurisdiction in the form of two gruesome Dalit killings barely within two months and the numerous other incidents of atrocities. Everything appeared normal and relaxed. As per Birhade, Dhansawangi taluka has 95 villages and only 36 policemen. There was only one lady police attached to the Taluka police station. We enquired about the incidents of Bhutegaon and Murti. He picked up the FIR register and read out the FIR for Murti-incident that took place on July 9, 2003. The FIR was registered on July 10, 2003 under IPC Arts. 302, 307, 324, 323, 504, 506, 34 etc. and 3 91) (10) Atrocity Act. The complainant was Lakhan Ankush Thorat (14) and the accused were Bapurao Deorao Surashe, Sandipan Bapurao Surashe, Vatsalabai Bapurao Surashe, and Prayagbai Madan Surashe, all residents of Murti village.

Birhade could not find the register for Bhutegaon. He told us that police bandobust had been made at both the villages. When we told him that we had been to Bhutegaon and we did not find any police in the village, he was puzzled. He said, the team comprised of one head constable and three constables and they were supposed to be there. Both the incidents were being investigated by CID Crime Branch and Birhade gave us contacts of Murli Bhosle, Hingoli who is investigating into the Murti incident and Salunke, Nanded for the Bhutegaon incident. There was nothing much that could be obtained in terms of the facts of the case from the CID and hence we did not attempt to meet them.

2. Murti Incident

Murti is a relatively bigger village with a population of about 3000. The incident happened on July 9, 2003 as a result of a clash between two minor girls- Kalpana Ankush Thorat belonging to Matang community and Ayodhhya Sandipan Surashe belonging to Sawarna community, at the hand pump at around 3 pm. When the elders returned in the evening, these girls reported the matter to them. Both sides came out in the open along with their supporters, armed with sticks and axes. The fight started with verbal abuses soon culminated into a physical battle. Kalpana's mother Janabai (40), who was pregnant for the 10th time, rushed to save her husband Ankush Thorat and got axed by the Surashe side. Janabai succumbed to her wounds while being taken to the hospital at Kumbhar Pimpalgaon.

According to Dhansawangi Police Station, the complaint was lodged by Lakhan Thorat against Baburao Surashe (Ayoddhya's grandfather), Sandipan Surashe (Ayoddhya's father), Vatsalabai Surashe and Prayagbai Surashe. Police registered the crime under IPC's Art. 302, 307, 324, 323, 504, 506, 34 etc. and 3 91) (10) Atrocity Act and arrested

all the accused. The complaint said that Kalpana was abused in the caste name- '*Mangate majale*'. On the other side on the complaint of Sandipan Surashe Police had registered the crime against Baban Aadhve, Santosh Aadhve, Laxman Aadhve and Janabai Aadhve under IPC Art. 324, 504, 506, and 34. According to the police, there is no caste issue in this incident. Probably, the same can be said of any other incident. A simple question that can be asked in this regard is to why the fights between Dalits and Savarnas wax out of proportion. The fights can ensue on any issue but when it happens between the Dalits and Savarnas, they immediately get coloured with caste prejudices and explode out of proportion. As such there is no clash that is sans-caste between the Dalits and Savarnas.

We wanted to go to Murti but logistically it was not possible to do that. It was some 30 km from Dhansawangi and reportedly the road was not good. Hence we decided to go to Sonna Khota in Beed district where a major incident of killing of a Dalit had taken place.

3. Sonna Khota: A Scar that Shames Humanity

We reached Sonna Khota in the evening at around 5 pm. Like Bhutegaon, the colony in which the incident took place was situated at the entrance to the village itself. A cluster of hutments gave an abandoned look but we found some people coming to us as we got down. As we guessed, it was a Dalit colony where Dadarao Dongre, a Dalit who was brutally killed on July 14, lived. The main village was across down the road.

We were conducted by Sundarrao Sukhdeo Dongre, Dadarao Dongre's brother his son-Dilip Dongre and many other from the Dongre family, along the pathway. The Dadarao's house did not fit the description that we had in mind so far. He was supposed to be a well to do Dalit, owning a ration shop for years, not an ordinary possession in the village setting. The house can only be described as a hut. The thatched panels bound it in place of walls and also covered it as a roof. A door relatively better done looked out of place there. It was shut and locked. There was absolutely no sign of any kind of prosperity, even though all the accounts described Dadarao as a well to do (*Sadhan*) Dalit. It was only much later during our interviews that we learnt that his old house was at the other end of the village and he had shifted to this new plot, purchased for Rs. 15,000, just two years ago. He perhaps had the intention of building a better house on this plot.

We were shown the damages to the houses in that cluster as we were led to the last house. It looked relatively better, having unplastered brick wall and corrugated sheets over them retained with the weight of stone boulders. It was explained to be the extension of the originally small house given by the government. Dadarao and his kins, in all 14 people, had hidden in this house when the attack was launched by the entire Savarna mob. We entered the house. The Dongre's, mainly Vijaymala (35), Babasaheb, Dilip, Bhimrao showed us the blood stains over the walls and particularly on the pictures of Buddha and Ambedkar that were pasted onto the wall. Many corrugated sheets at the roof were missing and there were big stones on the floor. It appeared the Dongre's wanted to preserve the devastation that visited them on July 14, 2003. The house gave an abandoned look with all that it contained in still life. There were some stainless steel

utensils placed on a wooden plank bracketed to the wall and a wooden trunk. No one lived in that house after the fateful incident.

Socio-Economic Setting of Sonna Khota

Sonna Khota is a small village in Dharur Taluka of Beed district of the Marathwada region. It is situated at the base of the Balaghat Mountains, about six km from Vadavani taluka town which is at the distance of 32 km from Beed. The Balaghat Mountains bind the village on two sides. The spread of agricultural land in this village is total 918 hectares. Out of this, about 40 hectare land is under winter irrigation. The balance land is under dry land cultivation. Farming and sugarcane cutting jobs are the main occupations of the people of Sonna Khota. The village is divided in the middle by a road running from Vadvani to Parali. Most of the village including the Gram Panchayat office, is based on the eastern side of this road whereas the Dalit basti is on the West.

The population of Sonna Khota is about 1300 out of which approximately 1000 are in the voters list. The Marathas constitute an overriding majority with a population of about 800. The balance population belongs Koshtis, Jogis (Gosavis), Muslims and Dalits. Koshtis and Jogis (Gosavis) have about 18-20 houses each; Muslims 20-22 houses whereas Dalits have 30-35. Except for two houses belonging to Matang community among the Dalits, the balance population is Buddhist. The village has a visible Maratha domination. They own most of the land, shops, flour mill etc. Dalits on the other hand largely depended on the farms of the Maratha landlords for their jobs. Some 20 Dalit households did have the Gayaran land admeasuring 10-12 acres which lay on the slope of the mountains running at a distance of approximately one km. These lands visibly were uncultivable; firstly because they contained boulders and secondly, they were difficult to approach. As a result these lands remained of no use to the Dalits. They might have served only statistical objective of the State in claiming achievement in land reform. Majority of the Dalit couples of Sonna Khota, therefore, migrated to Kolhapur and Karnataka border as migrant labourers, for cutting sugar canes for sugar mills around the winter season, for five to six months. During this period, most of the households had only old people and school going children. They received Rs. 40 per male and Rs. 20 per female, in daily wages in cane cutting. Some worked on a piece rate of cutting which was about Rs. 65-66 per tonne. 8-9 couples would collectively undertake the cutting contract at this piece rate and distribute the earnings among them. On an average, a couple cut 1.5 to 2 tonnes of sugarcane and hence earn Rs. 100 to 130 per day which was significantly higher than the prevailing daily wages. After this season, they had to come back and depend on Maratha landlords for getting wage employment on their farms.

Sonna Khota appeared quite politically alive. Being on the district road, perhaps, there were several sign boards of various political parties around the Bus Stop. Out of the five signboards that we noticed, four belonged to the political parties, one being about some road work project. Out of the four sign boards of political parties, two belonged to RPI, and one each to Shiv Sena and BJP- Yuwa Morcha. Marathas are the dominant caste and have political allegiance with Shiv Sena. The majority of the Buddhist Dalits belong to

RPI (Athavale). There are, however, two factions of this party, one under Baburao Potbhare of Majalgaon and another under Pappu Kagade, who is the district president of RPI. Beyond taking it as local dynamics, the operational aspects of these factions were beyond our comprehension. The Dalit community was badly divided in the village. All the Buddhist Dalits bear the surname 'Dongre' but far from being together they appeared antagonistically divided.

The Gram Panchayat of Sonna Khota has seven members. It covers three hamlets-Dongrewadi, Khandewadi and Landewadi, mainly inhabited by people of Banjara and Laman Tribes. The post of the Sarpanch is reserved for the OBC and hence the current incumbent belongs to Koshti community.

There is a Math and a small temple of Bharatibuwa in Sonna Khota. There is also a Hanuman temple. There is no entry to Dalits in these temples. Caste traditions are observed fairly zealously. Although no one admits observance of untouchability, the fact remains that the Dalits are not allowed beyond the steps of the caste Hindu houses.

There is a Zilla Parishad school up to seventh standard in the village. With the exception of a couple of fellows no one has reached graduation level. Incidence of education was still poorer among Dalits. There was none from the village in any government service.

Like many villages in this part of Marathwada, there is an acute shortage of water. It needs to be brought in tankers which come in, two to three times a week. All the people collect water from this tanker. They carry their own pipe and collect their water simultaneously. An occasional skirmish between Dalits and others is not unusual at the water tanker.

Unlike Bhutegaon, the Dalits in Sonna Khota appeared organized. Although their economic condition did not permit them to directly rebel against the caste domination of Marathas, they did reflect some amount of assertiveness. The village ration shop belonging to one of them itself revealed that the Dalits of Sonna Khota mattered in the village scheme. The caste traditions however were not significantly weakened. Marathas grudged the emerging assertion of the Dalits.

Dadarao Sukhdeo Dongre, a key figure in the Sonna Khota incident was the most wealthy among the Dalits who were basically landless labourers. Wealthy here is a mere relative term that however marks him out in the village as a symbol of rising Dalit. He had three brothers, first Laxman, second Sundarrao, third Rajendra. He had four sons and two daughters. Two sons and one daughter were married. First Shivaji, second Popat, third Sukhdeo, fourth Balasaheb and thereafter Mandakini and the last Seema. Shivaji, Popat and Mandakini are married. In all, there are a total of 12 people in Dadarao's family. Dadarao wealth comprised of his ration shop, 25- 30 sheep, 5-7 acre of mountainous land and 2 acre land that he had bought in the nearby Sali village. In addition he had four sons and two daughters-in-law as earning members. Resultantly, he did not depend on anybody in Sonna Khota. His elder son Shivaji grew up as audacious young man. He would no more tolerate traditional excesses from any Savarna. Soon he started

committing excesses himself. He would let his sheep in others fields. He soon emerged as the most disliked fellow to the Savarnas. Shivaji prominently figured in our talk with the Savarna people, although he did not have any role in the July 14-incident. The Savarna people strove to paint Dadarao as bad with references to Shivaji as though that would justify their crime. Dadarao however was a respectable person. He was elected unopposed as a member of the Gram Panchayat. He was a virtual leader of Sonna Khota Dalits. It was he who had organized the first ever Ambedkar-Jayanti in the village.

Version of the Victims

On that fateful day, the daughter of Dadarao Dongre went to fetch water from a tanker in the morning at about 9 or 10 am. At that time, she was asked by some youth from the Savarna community to go away. They said that they got polluted with the Dalit presence and hence she should come after they finish. Seema went home and reported the matter to all. The Dongre family was quite enraged by this incident. Nothing however happened until that afternoon.

Sundarrao Dongre who came back from his sheep grazing said that he saw some skirmish at the tanker. Sanjivani Dongre, wife of Arun Dongre was assaulted just before by some Savarna people. Shrihari Ganapati Dongre (Sundarrao's cousin), Rajendra Sukhdeo Dongre, (elder brother of Sundarrao) and Babasaheb Dongre (Sundarrao's son) narrated the incident as it happened. After the morning incident with Seema, there was some anger in the family but they did not expect it to develop into such a gory affair. Such clashes were not new to them. The Savarnas always tried to enforce their caste superiority and the Dalits resisted it to the extent they could. The Dongre's told us in chorus that the Savarnas were always harassing them for last several years. "Teasing our ladies, getting into quarrels over trifle issues, taunting us without reason, and fighting at the water tanker has been a regular feature for us". However, again in the evening something happened at the tanker. Sanjeevani came home complaining that she was assaulted by some Savarna people.

Before they could digest these developments, they were caught in heavy stone pelting by a huge mob. Some people rushed into houses and started beating the inmates indiscriminately. Jayashree Dongre, wife of Popat Dongre, who was pregnant of 8 month, was beaten in the belly and she is in Aurangabad hospital. Dadarao and his family ran into Sundarrao's house. Both the families, Dadarao's and Sundarrao's took shelter in the latter's house and latched the door. There was heavy stone throwing and then some people climbed up the house and started throwing the corrugated sheets which were secured at the roof with stone weight. The heavy stones crashed into the house but luckily did not fall on anyone. The people were stoning us from the roof openings, hitting us with sticks. Everyone of us was already drenched in blood. We felt we would all be dead. They were shouting and abusing us in caste names. Dadarao appeared to be their target. At that point Dadarao slipped out of the house. It was already dark. He thought he would escape under the cover of darkness and ran through the fields behind the house towards in the direction of Khadki village. However, he could not escape the attention of the mob. Some people must have run after him. But it was dark; they could not follow him far.

Others took a jeep and followed from other directions and spotted him with the help of their headlights. They must have used sticks, axes and stones to kill Dadarao. When he was brought out, he had deep cuts at his shoulder, head and legs. His legs were almost cut. He was fully drenched in blood.

The police carried him to the Primary Health Center at Chinchvan where he breathed his last. The post mortem on his body was carried out there itself. By that time, a mob of 400 to 500 people had gathered which demanded the immediate arrest of the criminals. They refused to take over the body until it was done. Only after the assurance from the District Collector Nandkumar Jantre and Superintendent of Police Pradip Deshpande, the body was accepted. Baban Vadmare, a Bharip-Bahujan Mahasangh leader, who was present there told us that Dadarao was almost dead at the spot he was located but breathed his last at Chinchvan hospital.

The attack had been on from 6-30 pm to 9-30 pm. At around 10 pm 7-8 the police came. In this attack Dilip Sundarrao Dongre (40), Vikas Dadarao Dongre (16), Arun Dongre (32), Babasaheb Sundarrao Dongre (25), Popat dadarao Dongre (30), Sukhdeo Dadarao Dongre (32), Sunita Babasaheb Dongre (20), Sanjivani Arun Dongre (28), Panchsheela Dongre, Jayashree Popat Dongre (25), Vijayamala Dlip Dongre (35) alongwith Arun Sundarrao Dongre, got injured. Dilip Dongre named 60 people in his complaint. But as of now, only 13 people have been arrested. They say another 10 people are absconding although all the named people are seen in the villages. The police have always been partial to the Savarnas and even in this case they will just hush up the matter, Babasaheb Dongre apprehended. Once the intervention of outsiders came to an end, they will make life hell for us. Dongre's pleaded with us that we should help them get rehabilitated elsewhere, not in Sonna Khota.

We questioned the Dongre's as to what provoked the Savarnas to launch such a violent attack. Sundarrao Dongre replied that it was a built up anger against them; they were planning to something like this for long. Sundarrao could not give us any specific provocation that sparked off this fierce reaction. Babasaheb Dongre and the Dongre ladies added that the district chief of Shiv Sena Shri Sunil Dhande had a meeting that after noon and something must have transpired there. Sunil Dhande has been frequenting the village and making provocative statements against us. He openly talked about beating and killings in his speeches. Sundarrao said that they projected some two people on the Savarna side as beaten by Dalits in order to provoke the Savarna masses against the Dalits. It might have been so planned in their meeting. He said he did not know about any clash in the Dalit Basti that day with any Savarna youth and hence the question of their getting injured did not arise. However, this alibi was certainly used to mobilize people to attack the Dongre family.

Vijaymala, Dadarao's daughter-in-law showed her wound on the head. She said that they were so scared that they did not like to live in the village. Babasaheb's wife- another daughter-in-law of Sundarrao was in hospital for a broken hand. Babasaheb who worked in a hospital in Beed said that the caste problem always existed as it did perhaps in many surrounding villages but it has become particularly serious since the last three years after

the entry of the Shiv Sena. There have been always some quarrel of the other, since then. These cases were reported to Dharur Police but the latter took it as an opportunity to extract money from both the sides. The police and the RPI leaders had meetings of the villagers for restoring peace, three to four times but in vain. The Sawarnas always showed outward reconciliation but appeared more vehement in suppressing the Dalit assertion. The caste tension thus simmered underneath the quietude Sonna Khota wore. Last year Popat Dongre was beaten up by the Sawarnas. Popat Dongre was the president of Babu Potbhare's Shakha of the RPI in Sonna Khota. Babu Potbhare made a case against four people. PSI, Prabhakar Giri suppressed the case and annulled the atrocity case.

The Savarna people also divided the Dalit community. In particular, the families of Maroti Kisan Dongre, Sopan Kisan Dongre, Dasharath Bajirao Dongre and Subbarao Mogaji Dongre have been on their side. Sopan Dongre who owns a jeep, lives in Pune. On asking about their motivation to be on the side of the Sawarnas, they said that all the Dalits heavily depended on the Sawarnas for their livelihood and hence it was natural to be on the side that offers you material gain. If you had some contradiction with your own people, it provides you with a strong excuse for being against them and for the Sawarnas. For instance, while the members of Dadarao and Sundarrao families and most other Buddhist Dalits did not get any work on the Savarna farms, the families of the above Dalits get work all the time, Bhimrao Chokhoba Dongre told us.

About Dadarao Dongre, they told us that he was the most intelligent person among the Dalits and always fought against discrimination and caste domination of the Sawarnas. With sheer hard work, he established himself economically in the village. He got the ration shop but the Sawarnas always grudged to pick up their ration from his shop. They always wished that somehow it should be closed. For almost a decade, however, the shop ran well. It appeared that the Sawarnas had reconciled. But for the last three years, they appeared particularly emboldened with the entry of the Shiv Sena. They stopped lifting the ration from his shop and as a result, the shop was closed. They ultimately succeeded in attaching their cards to a nearby village, Pimpaltakka. Dadarao's ration shop had just 30-40 ration cards, mostly of the Dalits, left with.

The version of the Other Side

After hearing the version of Dalits, we wanted to hear the other side, as well as the police. As we walked down the road, we were surprised to find a sizable collection of people just waiting for us on the road itself. We met even policemen who were supposedly doing a bandobust duty. It suddenly reminded us of the Dongre women who had said that they were so terrorized that they felt that at anytime they could be attacked. The police needed to protect them, reassure them with their presence but instead police chose to rest in the Savarna village away from the Dalit basti. Later, as we started interviewing them, they were found to be clearly oriented against the Dalit case. Entire gathering started talking to us in unison narrating what happened on that day.

Arun Sundarao Dongre and his friend Vikram Ganapat Dongre from another village Pimpaltakka came riding a motorbike. They were fully drunk. Their motorbike dashed against some Savarna person- Yogiraj Nanabhau Khote. Pradip Prabhakar Khote, Nanasaheb Vitthal Khote, Vitthal Vasudeo Lande and Dadasaheb Sadhu Pawar went to the Dalit basti with the intention of asking Arun about his misdemeanor and possibly take him to a medical centre, for alcohol testing. But, they were attacked by Arun with an axe and Lathis. These people sustained injuries and had to be hospitalized. Sarpanch, Dnyaneshwar Sudam Lokre who belonged to Koshti community, reinforced this version when we asked him. Police Patil- Mahadeo Vashistha Khote excused himself by saying that he was not in Sonna Khota when this incident took place. Enraged by this act, they said, 'entire village' rushed to the Dalit Basti to teach a lesson to the 'Dalit Goons'. The intention however, was not to kill anyone. They could not explain the bloody scene they created in Sundararao's house. It was not only Dadarao but any and every of the inmates of house could have been killed in the attack. The entire crowd had a pause that was broken by some one saying that after all, the crowd was angry and there was no way of controlling the consequences. On the killing of Dadarao, they said that he might have been killed by some of his own people because "they alone have weapons". They said that it was dark and hence possibly, the Dalit boys killed Dadarao. Police constable Doiphode was vociferous in reinforcing this story. He said that it was a lie that his legs were cut or he had axe cuts on his body. He said that he, along with Hanumant Sopan Khote, PSI Ade, ASI Nagargoje, constable Shingare had gone to the spot and found Dadarao lying there with a head injury. Dadarao had told them that some 8-10 boys had dropped a big stone on his leg. Doiphode said that they arranged a private jeep to take him to hospital but the Dongre's alleged that it was used for following Dadarao under its headlight and killing him. He said that Dadarao was taken to the Chinchavan hospital and put on saline and only thereafter he died at about 11.30 pm. He contended that if he had been attacked with an axe, he would not have survived that long.

The story was well orchestrated but had many loopholes. On asking the people as to where the Dalit boys came from to attack Dadarao by mistake, the crowd did not have an answer. How the police spotted Dadarao in the first place, did not elicit a plausible answer. What did his dying statement say? No one could throw any light on these matters. They just told us that Dy. SP. N. H. Bhadikar, Majalgaon was investigating the matter. One thing, however, that was made clear by the police behaviour, was that they were firmly on the Savarna side and against their victims. They informed us that 13 people had so far been arrested for murder and under Atrocities Act. 10 were absconding. On asking what had happened to the balance 37 people, as Dilip Dongre had reportedly named 60 people as attackers, the Police did not have an answer.

Surprisingly, the Savarna side (and Police included) repeatedly projected some Dalit persons in the crowd to buttress their story. They volunteered saying that there was absolutely no problem to them from the Savarnas; that the latter always supported them. There was no discrimination by them against Dalits. It was only for some arrogant people that the atmosphere in the village was vitiated. Sudhakar Sopan Dongre who drove the jeep and who was the brother of Pandurang Sopan Dongre, told us that Dadarao committed excess and atrocities. (*Dadarao aagau hota, far atyachar karayacha*).

Pandurang Sopan Dongre said that Dadarao and his brothers had burnt his house. On asking about the problems at the tanker, they expectedly replied in the negative. The mob projected the Tanker driver – Bhagawan Shahuram Bahir who confirmed that there was absolutely no clash at the tanker on that day and even before. We just asked the Police whether any tanker incidents were reported to them (as Dongre family told us that the skirmishes at the tanker were a usual affair and few such incidents were even reported to the police) and the police replied that there were none.

We took the opportunity to verify facts on certain minor post-incident complaints from the victim's side. The students from Dongre family were asked by the Head Master Jagdale to take away their School leaving Certificates if they so wanted- the utterly unsolicited offer without any rhyme or reason except for casteism. Ajay Rahul Dongre, an innocent looking fourth standard kid in the local school himself told us. Unfortunately we could not see Jagdale to verify it. It was complained that after the incident the Savarnas were making their living in the village impossible. Dhurpatabai Dongre told us that they did not get things from the village shops. Reshma Dongre and Vanamala Dongre, both sixth standard students stated to us that it was true. Reshma had gone that morning to get a packet of Nirma and was refused by Gangadhar Bharati, owner of the nearest Kirana shop. She got it from the other shop. One of the persons complained that the flour mill owner, Bharatari Shinde had declined to grind their grains. Only after the intervention of the village Talathi- Munde, that he obliged. We met with Bharatari Shinde at his shop and questioned him about this. He expectedly denied but said that these people owed him a lot of money on account of past dues. He just asked them to clear it before getting further credit. They could still get what they wanted if they paid cash. Dadarao Dongre, for instance, owed Bharatari Rs. 1800. Similar things were said by Gangadhar Bharati and Bharat Uttam Bharati at their Kirana Shop.

They had a lot much to say about Dadarao Dongre. According to them, he was an arrogant person. He had a ration shop but he was not stocking it properly. People were not getting food grains and kerosene. If people asked about it, Dadarao would arrogantly ask them to take whatever was available or else to go away. The authorities had cancelled his license on the complaints from villagers. However, he got it restored by appealing to the Divisional Commissioner. They said that he was a politically influential person and could get anything done. On questioning as to who his political patrons were, we were told the names of Babu Potbhare. They went to the extent of complaining that he used to beat people in his ration shop.

Dadarao's son Shiwaji (30), did not figure in the incident per say, but was especially mentioned in characterizing Dongre family as though in justification for killing Dadarao and injuring several others. As per them, Shiwaji was a rascal. He had a rape case against him. He was also imprisoned. He did not reside in the village for some years now but visited it often.

Facts of Sonna Khota: Our Analysis

The versions of the victims and the perpetrators of the crime have to be different. But it is not difficult to discern the facts of Sonna Khota if one physically reaches there and acquaints with its settings. Sonna Khota is a far flung village in the backward Beed district, bound on two sides by the mighty Balaghat Mountains and hence at first glance appears like a tribal village. But it does not have tribal population although its associate villages in Sonna Khota Gram Panchayat have them. It represents a typical village where modernity has just been brushed in the form of a road running through villages, electricity lighting the homes and modern products adding to conveniences of life etc., but tradition has not allowed its sway deep into the cultural lives of the people. The Dalits moreover are too poor and economically dependent on the Savarna Maratha community to muster any material challenge to their caste rule. No one therefore needs to say that feudal domination of Marathas, classical caste discrimination, even untouchability is naturally practiced in the village. Dalits of Sonna Khota have however been politically elevated because of the activities of RPI, to be conscious of their discrimination. This consciousness could not overcome their material dependence and as a result they reflected hopeless fragmentation not only to have ludicrous two factions of the same political party but also to be the black sheep of the Savarnas, against their kith and kin in the times of unprecedented crisis.

The incident of July 14, 2003 can be reconstructed easily as follows. Some verbal skirmish with reference to caste, between Seema, Dadarao Dongre's daughter, and other Savarna people has taken place in the morning. Seema reports this matter to her father and others at home. Dadarao is not an ordinary Dalit. He is the owner of village ration shop, is a member of the Gram Panchayat, is a father of young healthy sons and has enough mobile and immobile property in the village so as to make assert his independence from the casteist Savarnas. He has, by and large, been the face of rising Dalithood which is most grudged by the traditional Savarna castes in similar village settings. The reaction to Seema's report in Dadarao as well as in his homestead must have naturally been strong. Dadarao, after all had been experiencing the animosity of these casteist elements for too long; they have also made him suffer materially by bringing his ration shop to the brink of closure. The incident must have provoked some visible reaction from him or from some member of his family.

The Savarna version of the incident is full of logical holes. As for Arun and his friend riding a motorbike in a drunken state, dashing against some Savarna person, may not appear implausible but thereafter some four persons going to the Dalit basti to take Arun for a medical check up to establish a case of drunken driving against him appears too far fetched to be true. If at all, these people must have gone to thrash Arun and instead got beaten by him. There is no way to confirm these facts because we could not meet with any of the involved persons to verify them. A similar story is taken as plausible account of the incident by Ramakant Gaikwad whose report has been published in the latest issue of Saptahik Maharashtra, dated July 28, 2003- a respected Marathi weekly published from Aurangabad. This story is based on the interviews with some ladies- Mathurabai, Shantabai and Rukminibai, all belonging to the Savarna community. It cannot therefore be accused of any bias. The narration goes as follows: In the morning of July 14, 2003, between 9 to 10 am, Seema had gone to fetch water from the tanker. She was asked by

some Savarna youth not to take water as it pollutes them. She could come after they finished. Seema reported the matter at home. It created anger in the Dongre family. Nothing however happened until afternoon. At about 4 or 5 pm Arun Dongre, Seema's cousin along with his friend went to a hand pump near Gram Panchayat and asked a small Savarna boy who was extracting water into his pitcher to move it away. When the boy ignored Arun and did not remove his pitcher, Arun started abusing him. Gaikwad reconfirms that this information was given to him by Rukminibai and Panchphulabai during his interview with the Savarna ladies. The story proceeds: Arun then went through the village shouting abuses. When some Savarna youth went to the Dalit basti to question him, they were allegedly beaten by Arun and his friends with lathis and axes. Within an hour, at around 6 pm, a mob of some 200 Savarna people, equipped with lathis, axes and spears attacked houses of Dadarao and Sundarrao Dongre.

There is no dispute about the balance gory account of the incident. The important point in this story is that there is a confirmation of the morning clash at the water tanker in which Seema was abused by the Savarna youth in caste name. The Dalit version of the story is perfectly corroborated by the Savarna side. The Dalits did not tell us in plausible terms of the provocation for ferocious attack. The balance story perhaps fills this gap. The details apart, but we are sure that some specific provocative act was performed in reaction to the morning incident by some member of the Dadarao Dongre's family. It could very well be Arun. When the Savarna youth went to Dalit basti, it could not just be for questioning Arun. They did go there with an intention to teach him a lesson. We summarily reject the orchestrated motor-cycle version of Savarna-Police combine as a poor fabrication, although the essential part of some Savarna youth going to Dalit basti after Arun and getting beaten there, is common to both. Stringing all the information together, we feel that some Savarna youth going to dalit Basti around 4-5 pm with an intention of thrashing Arun but instead getting wounded in possible stone pelting from there, (and not attacking with axes and lathis) is plausible. One reaction of Arun's abuses might have been in beating of Sanjeevani Dongre at the water tanker in the evening which Sundararao told us about.

We reject even the version of Savarna-Police combine about Dadarao's killing. As per them, Dadarao could have been killed by the Dalits themselves as they alone possessed weapons. It is utterly preposterous to say the least. The house and the entire Basti having been surrounded by a ferocious mob of 200, about which there cannot be any possible doubt, there is no way that any Dalit youth could escape it. Everybody from the Dongre family hid inside houses. Facing a sure death, it was Dadarao alone who mustered courage to slip out of the house and disappear into darkness. None other than the Savarnas could follow and kill him which they did. It would not be possible to chase him in darkness moreover and hence it is possible that people followed him in a jeep and killed with the help of its powerful headlights.

Dadarao and his family ran and hid in Sundarrao's house. Entire families of Dadarao and Sundarrao locked themselves in that small house. The attackers were so furious that they climbed up the walls and threw away the corrugated sheets that were held in place with the weight of stones. In addition they started stoning people from those gaps. No one

hiding there could escape without getting drenched in blood. The blood of people sprayed around on every article in the house that could still be seen in its stains.

The main target of this attack being Dadarao, he slipped out of the house terror-struck and ran through the field behind in the direction of Khadki village. Immediately, some people ran after him and some followed in a jeep. It was fairly dark. He was caught and was attacked with axes, sticks and stones. People told us that Dadarao's left leg was almost broken; he had deep wounds in the shoulder and head. He was lying in a pool of blood when Dharur Police reached and carried him to Primary Health center of Chinchvan. Dadarao breathed his last soon after reaching this center. The post mortem on his body was performed at the same center itself. Not much is known about its contents.

In the heat of this gory incident, a shocking development has already taken place that exposes to what extent the poison of caste has spread into vitals of our society and in corollary, the pathetic state of Dalit politics in the so called progressive state of Maharashtra. An All Party Action Committee, formed in Vadvani of Bid district to oppose the Dalit case in Sonna Khota incident had taken out a big procession in Vadvani under the leadership of Shiv Sena's taluka chief Vitthaldada Lagad on July 21, 2003 against the Dalit-side in the Sonna Khota incident. It had observed a Bandh on Monday and claimed 100 per cent response. The procession had about 10 to 12 thousand people which is quite significant for the small town like Vadvani. The procession marched to the Tahsil Office and demanded inter alia withdrawal of the economic assistance of Rs. Five lakh given to the family of Dadarao Dongre, refusal to rehabilitate the Dongre family in Vadavani taluka and arrest of the criminals in Dongre family. It is not clear who the constituents of this Action Committee are besides Shiv Sena that has not hidden its leadership role, but it is reported that this movement has the underhand support of NCP and BJP (Dainik Mahanayak, Aurangabad). Hanmant Upare of BRP-Bahujan Mahasangh, on being asked about the dynamics behind this event, said in our telephonic interview that the reactionary camp received impetus from the statements of Kripashankar Singh, the Minister of state for Home, who was sent for fact finding into the Sonna Khota incident by the Congress President Sonia Gandhi, that it was not a caste atrocity and rather it was a clash between the two anti-social groups. He said that he and his party have widely condemned this statement of Kripashankar Singh.

Not Discrete Incidents but a Pattern

The three major incidents dealt with above may appear as discrete incidents but they are not. In the context of time and space they are a veritable part of a pattern of violence created by a series of incidents that have happened and are still happening all over Marathwada. A perfunctory survey of news appearing in only one Aurangabad newspaper for a limited period can testify to this fact:

- There was a clash between Dalits and Savarnas at Chaturwadi in Ambajogai taluka on the issue of fallow (Gayaran) land on July 11, 2003. Savarnas burnt down huts of Nagnath Kamble and other Dalits. When Nagnath Kamble sat on fast unto death

along with his family, the Police have recorded the crime against Ramkisan Limbaji Pawar, Shivaji Ramkisan Pawar, Mahadu Ramkisan Pawar and Rajebhau Narayan Khandekar under the Atrocity Act. (Saptahik Maharashtra, 18 July, 2003)

- June 10, 2003: At Anvi Bangal village of Badnapur Taluka a Dalit family in the clash on the issue of water. One Sanjay Gangadhar Bhosle, a Savarna person threw away the vessel of Ranjanabai Dattatraya Patole, a Matang woman and abused her. Many people from Bhosale family came running to the spot and started beating Matang people. Police intervened and arrested the accused.
- June 22, 2003: At Karadgaon in the Dhansawangi Taluka, a clash broke out between the Dalits and Savarnas.
- May 21, 2003: At Matmal in Lonar taluka on the border of Vidarbha-Marathwada a Dalit bridegroom was paraded in the village with his shoes on his head for the crime of entering the Hanuman Temple. The Savarnas abused the Dalits in the caste name- 'Mharade majalet', beat up bridegroom's mother till she fell unconscious and humiliated Taterao Lahane to the extent that he has threatened self immolation if the Savarna criminals are not punished. (Saptahik Maharashtra, dated June 9, 2003, Report by Narendra Lanjewar- Mandir Batawale: Nawardevachi Dhind, p. 35)
- July 23, 2003: The Savarnas have imposed collective boycott on the Dalits in Asola (lakh) village in Aundha Nagnath taluka and stopped giving them water. Balu Ranganath Karhale and Jagannath Nana Karhale belonging to Savarna caste beat a Dalit youth named Baban Bhagorao Nangre severely and threatened him of dire consequences if the matter was reported to Police. Baban however reported the matter to Kurunda Police Station on July 25, 2003. Enraged by this act, the Savarnas have imposed the social boycott on Dalits that included stopping the supply of drinking water.
- A Dalit woman was beaten, her house was devastated and she was dragged and humiliated by the Savarna people at Moregaon in Selu taluka of Parabhani district on the issue of polluting their pots at the public water tap. (Dainik Mahanayak, Aurangabad, 11.06.03)
- June 23, 2003: Just 4 Km from Bhutegaon, at Karandgaonwadi, a clash between one Narayan Lahane of Buddhist community and Dattu Mitkari of a Savarna caste on the issue of a pathway between farms, culminated in death of a Savarna person and serious injury to the three Dalit persons.
- July 20, 2003: Savarna attack a Dalit- Madhav Male at Shahapur in Deglur Taluka with public declaration because Male refused to give his Gayaran land for building Mahadev temple.

Conclusions

Maharashtra is one of the Indian states where there have been movements to awaken Dalits and other backward castes which have really impacted on the social life of the State. Mahatma Phule and Babasaheb Ambedkar lived in Maharashtra and have been the beacon lights in the movement against discrimination based on caste. Several years have passed and the State has seen several movements and campaigns drawing inspiration from these great people. In spite of all this, the distinction and discrimination based on caste still prevails in Maharashtra. A slight provocation like a dispute at the water pump leads to polarization as Dalits and non-Dalits; non-Dalits attack Dalit bastis, destroy their houses and even kill them. This is what really happened in three incidents which the fact finding team investigated. It is possible that every incident has a background. Dalit struggle itself is one of the ingredients of the background. However, in all the three incidents the immediate provocation was the low social status which the high caste accord to the Dalits. The Dalits are not supposed to assert their rights and equality before the law. If they do, they have to pay a price.

In spite of the Constitutional rule for over half a century, we could not rid our culture of caste. It was very recently that five Dalits were lynched at Jajjhar in Haryana in broad day light in front of a police Station. Acharya Giriraj Kishor, one of the prominent leaders of the Sangh Pariwar indignantly justified it. He said the cow was sacred; its life was sacrosanct; it cannot be violated. Those who violate it can be physically eliminated. The statement was not anything very surprising; it just reflected our culture which is called Indian culture.

Violence against Dalits cannot materialize if there is an organized resistance from Dalits. The Savarnas appear particularly emboldened to perpetrate atrocities on Dalits in Marathwada as the recent pattern suggests. This can be directly correlated to the hopeless fragmentation of Dalit-organizations. Marathwada provides an ideal ground to try out any kind of casteist programme.

The recent overtures to Ambedkarite Dalits by the Shiv Sena, the party which had openly opposed their movement for renaming of Marathwada University after Babasaheb Ambedkar, and which has been consistently against them since its inception, under the slogan 'Bhimshakti + Shivshakti' clearly indicates their strategy to gain some extra votes that could catapult them to power. It stems from the fact that it has lost nearly 70 Assembly seats by water thin margin, mostly in Marathwada and Vidarbha, in the last election. In the context of all pervasive disillusion of Dalits with the Various RPIs and established Dalit leadership, Shiv Sena has smartly played its move confounded the existing confusion of Dalit politics.

The current pattern of violence significantly highlights Matangs as the victims. It is prima facie surprising to find this caste coming out prominently in caste violence as a victim. It however can be explained by the rising organizations of Matangs all over Marathwada. They are undergoing the process the Mahars have done before and are paying price for that.

Individual incidents may have their own separate reasons but that does not explain the pattern which one perceives in Marathwada. In this respect, it may be noted that the elections are round the corner and main political formations are in process of taking concrete shape. The political organizations who participate in electoral politics have traditionally employed violence as a process of alienation and consolidation. We have clearly observed that in the wake of violent incidents, the Savarnas get united sans-party lines, which clearly benefits the party that represents their interests. Dalits, on the other hand, would seek shelter under its adversary. If a mainstream party is reasonably sure of its Savarna segment, and needs the extra Dalit votes, it stands to benefit by such violence against Dalits. Conversely, if a party relies more on Savarna votes and does not expect much of Dalit votes, it also benefits from such incidents. While the exact cost-benefit of a particular party will depend upon the strategy and how diligently it carries it out, it is fairly certain that violence against Dalits has such a great potential electoral gains associated with it that it is difficult for political parties not to try it out. This political nuance can be clearly seen in the acrobatics of the leaders of mainstream political parties, who visited the places where these incidents took place. Shendges and others told us that no Shiv Sena leader visited them and the NCP leaders who visited Bhutegaon did not see them.

There are several constituencies in Maharashtra where main political parties have won or lost by small margins. The Dalit population in the State constitutes 13 per cent which is significant in terms of electoral politics. By one analysis, (see Praful Marpakwar, "Poor Report Card Prompts Sena Makeover" in Indian Express dated July 9, 2003) there are 120 seats out of 288 in Maharashtra where Dalits decide the fate of the candidates. There is a competition among the main political formations in Maharashtra therefore to win over the Dalits, either by alienating or attracting them for make electoral gains. It is very possible that this politics of convenience is playing a role in catalyzing a pattern of violence against the Dalits in Marathwada.

CPDR Demands

1. Adequate compensation should be paid to the family and dependents of victims accounting for the loss they suffered such that the survivors live a life of dignity.
2. The affected people should be fully rehabilitated at the places of their choice or which are free of such caste incidents. The State needs to take cognizance of the fact that all these people face certain threat from the powerful Savarna community for having dared to go against them in the wake of these incidents.
3. There is an attempt from the organizations of Savarnas and some other people to attribute these incidents to reasons other than caste and thereby not to register these cases under the Atrocities Act. They have gone so far as to demand annulment of this special Act. Considering the fact that any and every case can be superficially seen sans-caste, this is totally an untenable argument. It is an incontrovertible fact that in our society, caste constitutes a defining factor for a Dalit. We therefore consider that belonging of a victim to a Dalit community is a sufficient condition as envisaged in the Atrocity Act and demand that all such

cases must be registered under the Atrocity Act in addition to the relevant clauses of IPC.

4. Special Courts should be set up to speed up the trial of cases of atrocities against Dalits, which will also act as a deterrent to the perpetrators of crimes.
5. The common factor in these incidents can be seen as the clash at hand pumps. If the Dalits had an exclusive hand pump in their area, these incidents may not have occurred. Failing to take cognizance of social reality and installing hand pumps in Dalit areas is a serious lapse on the Government part. We demand that sufficient numbers of hand pumps be immediately provided for Dalit bastis in every village.
6. A significant part of the law and order machinery (number of Policemen) is deployed for protection of a few so called VIPs in our Democratic Republic while a large number of vulnerable people like Dalits are left without any protection. This is clearly illustrated by the facts that the caste-violence prone Dhansawangi Taluka has just 36 policemen for 95 villages. We demand that the Government should immediately take steps to strengthen the law and order machinery for protection of Dalits in larger parts of Marathwada region which is prone to caste violence.
7. Police investigation has been lax and ineffective in all the cases that we investigated. The Government must deploy in affected places, Police Officers who are free from caste prejudices and upright enough not to succumb under political pressure. The abysmally low rate of conviction in the atrocities cases against Dalits in the country proves its importance. As for the implementability of this aspect, we suggest that the Government must create and institutionalize a record for the Police to identify and inventorize such police officers who are efficient, upright and free from caste prejudices. Whenever the incidents of caste atrocities take place, the Government should constitute adhoc team or team(s) out of such officers and send them to the places to conduct investigations in shortest possible time and to present them before the Courts.