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978-0-521-04069-3 - Elite Politics in Rural India: Political Stratification and Political Alliances in Western Maharashtra

Anthony T. Carter

Excerpt

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PART 1
INTRODUCTION

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The problem

This study is a descriptive analysis of political stratification and political alliances in rural Western Maharashtra. My primary focus is Girvi, a large village on the southern boundary of Phaltan Taluka near the northwest corner of Satara District, but the analysis also deals with more inclusive political arenas: Phaltan Taluka, Maharashtra Legislative Assembly constituencies which overlap with Phaltan Taluka and, to a limited degree, Satara District. I make a few references to political stratification and alliances in Phaltan Municipality as well in order to contrast political activity in a small market town with that in more strictly rural areas.

POLITICAL STRATIFICATION AND UNSTABLE ALLIANCES

It long has been a commonplace among interested participants and observers that one important feature of Indian politics is the fact that power in the countryside is distributed unequally. Thus Mountstuart Elphinstone, Commissioner of the Deccan when the territories which include what is now called Western Maharashtra were annexed by the British in 1818, understood that orderly government could not be maintained without the support of the rural elite and he sought at every step to ally British rule with what he regarded as the rural aristocracy, the hereditary village officers as well as the great and small *jagirdars* (see Elphinstone 1821 and Ballhatchet 1957). Similarly, from studies such as those of Seal (1968) and Broomfield (1966, 1968) we learn to see Indian Independence not simply as the replacement of European imperialism by Indian nationalism and democracy but also as a complex process of elite circulation. Concern with political stratification in the form of elite segments of the population or of dominant castes figures largely, too, in studies of contemporary local, state, and national politics in India and in evaluation of such development programs as the 'green revolution'. In spite of all this attention, however, political stratification has been the subject of few detailed empirical studies, especially above the village level. One purpose of this study is to begin to fill that gap.

An approximate idea of the unequal distribution of power in rural Western Maharashtra, and one which strikes the observer very early, can be

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obtained from an examination of office-holders in Girvi (see Fig. 1). It must be remembered, however, that the distribution of power and the distribution of office are not completely equivalent. Some office-holders have no power, while some very powerful persons hold no office. Nor are all office-holders equally powerful.

Fig. 1 The distribution of offices in Girvi

	Marathas		Other castes	Total
	<i>vatandar</i>	non- <i>vatandar</i>		
Share of total population	24.8%	32.1%	43.1%	100%
Number of offices held	20 (66.7%)	2 (6.7%)	8 (26.%)	30 (100.1%)
No. of individual office-holders	19 (67.9%)	2 (7.1%)	7 (25.0%)	28 (100%)
No. of joint families with office-holders	15 (62.5%)	2 (8.3%)	7 (29.2%)	24 (100%)

Leaving aside the Talathi, keeper of land records appointed by the government of Maharashtra, who is an outsider, there are thirty offices in Girvi: thirteen Panchayat (village council) members, nine members of the Managing Committee of the Multi-Purpose Credit Society, five members of the Managing Committee of the Lift-Irrigation Society, secretaries for each of the co-operative societies, and a Police Patil. The two secretaries and the Police Patil are appointed by authorities outside the village, the Patil from among the members of a particular localized patrilineage. All of the other office-holders are elected. In addition, the Panchayat elects from among its own members a chairman and a vice-chairman, and each co-operative society elects a chairman. The chairmen of the three elected bodies are the most influential office-holders.

The thirty offices in Girvi are held by twenty-eight persons. The Secretary of the Lift-Irrigation Society is also a member of the Panchayat and the Police Patil is also a member of the Managing Committee of the Lift-Irrigation Society.

The concentration of office-holding is greater, however, than the analysis of it in terms of individuals indicates. The thirty offices are held by persons who are members of twenty-four joint families. In one case the eldest of six joint brothers is Chairman of the Lift-Irrigation Society and former Chairman of the Panchayat, the fifth brother is a member of the Panchayat, and the youngest brother is a member of the Managing Committee of the Multi-Purpose Credit Society. (The eldest of the six brothers is also Vice-Chairman of the Managing Committee of the Shriram Co-operative

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Sugar Factory in Phaltan town.) The brother of the Vice-Chairman of the Panchayat is a member and former Chairman of the Managing Committee of the Multi-Purpose Credit Society. The Police Patil's brother's wife is a member of the Panchayat.

Viewed in terms of caste membership the concentration of office-holding is greater still. Twenty-two of the thirty offices are held by members of the Maratha caste, the dominant caste in rural Maharashtra with roughly fifty-five per cent of the population. Of the eight offices held by non-Marathas, five are the result of special features of the electoral law rather than a reflection of the distribution of power. Two offices are reserved for members of the Scheduled Castes. A few members of other minority castes are able to win election to the Panchayat because candidates stand for election in geographically defined wards in which their castes are numerically significant. Within the Maratha caste an important distinction is made between *vatandars*, members of patrilineages which traditionally held estates in office and land, and non-*vatandars* or, as they were formerly called, Kunbis. The Marathas as a whole comprise about fifty-seven per cent of the population of Girvi and the *vatandars* about twenty-five per cent, but twenty of the thirty offices, and all of the important ones, are held by *vatandar* Marathas.

It is apparent, then, that power in rural Western Maharashtra is concentrated in the hands of relatively few persons and that a large majority of those who hold power are members of one small section of the population. To borrow terms from the study of political stratification in Occidental countries, there is what C. Wright Mills calls a 'power elite' consisting of a relatively small number of persons who are in a position to influence public decisions (see Mills 1959:3-29). Some sections of the population are represented disproportionately in the power elite and these sections may be termed the 'political class' (see Bottomore 1966). In the rural portions of Western Maharashtra the political class consists almost exclusively of the dominant *vatandar* Marathas. However, in towns and in those villages where Marathas form a small part of the population the political class includes other groups as well.

Another striking feature of Indian politics is the instability of political alliances at certain levels of the political system. If alliances are examined in terms of the relations between leaders and followers in their roles as members of castes, as patrons, clients, landlords, or tenants there often seems to be considerable stability. However, when one focuses on the political elite their political choices often seem unrelated to their roles as party members, patrons or landlords, or to their positions in the caste and kinship systems, and one finds that alliances among the elite frequently

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are very unstable. This feature of Indian politics has been well known at least since Weiner's (1957) study of the development of India's multi-party system in the early years of Independence in which he noted the contrast between the relatively stable alliances between leaders and followers within what he called 'factions' and the unstable alliances between faction leaders. Concern with the possibly harmful consequences of unstable alliances may have reached its peak in India in the months following the 1967 General Election when frequent floor crossings led to the fall of the governments of Madhya Pradesh, Haryana, West Bengal, Punjab, and other Indian states. When the Haryana government fell in November 1967 thirty-seven of the seventy-nine Members of the Haryana Legislative Assembly had crossed the floor in the previous eight months and four of them had done so four times (*Manchester Guardian*, 22 November 1967). After the fall of the Madhya Pradesh government in July 1967 Jayaprakash Narayan said that defectors who did not resign and seek fresh mandates from their constituents should be 'gheraoed', confined to their homes by demonstrators (*The Indian Express*, 26 July 1967). Leaders of many parties called for an agreement among the parties to refuse membership to defectors who had not obtained a fresh mandate.

The Maharashtra Congress Ministry has not suffered from such defections, but they are not unknown in the State. Thus in 1957 the Raja of Phaltan, Malojirao Naik Nimbalkar, was the Congress candidate for the Legislative Assembly from the Phaltan-Khandala constituency. He was defeated by Haribhau Nimbalkar, a local labor leader backed by the Samyukta Maharashtra Samiti, a coalition of opposition parties which sought the division of Bombay into linguistic states. In 1967 the Raja and his son, Vijaysingh, resigned from the Congress. Vijaysingh stood for the Legislative Assembly in Phaltan-Khandala as an Independent backed by the Sampurna Maharashtra Samiti, the successor to the earlier Samyukta Maharashtra Samiti. He was defeated by the Congress candidate, his former ally, K. R. Bhoite. Bhoite was supported by Haribhau Nimbalkar, now a Congressman.

Faced with the fact that in such fluid alliance systems there is no apparent connection between political alliances and such institutions as caste, class, kinship, and community some observers have characterized Indian politics as 'patternless'. Thus Brass writes that

The merging and mixing of regions and peoples in Uttar Pradesh combines with a lack of communication throughout the state among members of ethnic groups to produce a relatively complex politics without clear patterns. The factional character of internal Congress politics in the State also tends to produce patternless politics. (1965:32)

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Political coalitions are not based on natural interest groups, but instead are mere factions. It is in this vein that Brass argues that 'a system of factional politics', characterized by a high degree of instability of alliances within and among coalitions,

may develop in any society under certain objective conditions. Three conditions have contributed to the development of the factional system of the Uttar Pradesh Congress: the absence of an external threat, the presence of an internal consensus upon ideological issues, and the absence of authoritative leadership. (1965:232)

In addition to these conditions, however, Brass attributes the instability of alliances in the Uttar Pradesh Congress to the availability of a multiplicity of patronage sources and to the 'status motivations of individual faction members and leaders' (1965:152). Status aspirations lead faction personnel to seek new alliances while the availability of alternative sources of patronage ensures that such changes are possible. Once one man changes his alliances the movement is communicated throughout the factional system according to the principle that 'the enemy of an enemy is a friend' (Brass 1965:151). Thus, although certain objective conditions permit a factional system to develop, the motive forces behind such a development, in this view, are individual status aspirations and irrational personal antagonisms (Brass 1965:168-82; see also Weiner 1957:251). This is what Brass means, I think, when he argues that in a status orientated factional political system such as the Uttar Pradesh Congress 'personal enmity is the primary organizing principle of factional conflict' (1965:328).

Speculations concerning the personality characteristics of Indian politicians are unnecessary, however, for the instability of political alliances in India can be explained much more simply by reference to the elite nature of Indian politics. What is more, such an explanation will account for the areas of stable alliances in the Indian system as well. The second aim of this study, then, is to delineate some of the connections between political stratification and the pattern of political alliances.

To say that Indian politics are dominated by a powerful elite recruited predominantly from a small political class is to argue that there is a discontinuity in the distribution of power. Although the chairman of a district council is much more powerful than the chairman of a village panchayat, both are members of the power elite and have some influence on political decisions, as may members of the political class who have privileged access to official and unofficial positions of influence. Persons who are outside the political class have no such influence. The political system is so structured and managed that even their vote often counts for nothing. It follows that we may distinguish two kinds of political alliances, vertical and horizontal. Vertical alliances are those between elite leaders and

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members of the political class generally, on the one hand, and their followers outside the political class, on the other. Horizontal alliances are those between one elite leader or political class member and another. As I shall argue, vertical alliances occur primarily within village arenas and are most often based on ties of economic dependence. Horizontal alliances are found in all political arenas. They sometimes are influenced by ties of caste and kinship, but purely tactical considerations are of much greater importance. Vertical alliances are relatively stable, while horizontal alliances are relatively unstable.

SOCIAL STRUCTURE AND SOCIAL ORGANIZATION

Of the two tasks which I have set myself in this essay, the first, to describe the pattern of political stratification in rural Western Maharashtra, is relatively straightforward, but the second, to delineate the relations between political stratification and the pattern of alliances in the region, is extremely complex. I must examine the impact of political stratification on political alliances in all the arenas for which I have data and also on different sorts of occasions. At the same time I must consider the influence on political alliances of caste, class, and kinship, for much of the literature on Indian politics suggests that these are important variables. I attempt to analyse this complex of relationships by using the distinction between social structure and social organization. In particular I regard political alliances as the result of decisions to extend or withhold support or cooperation and, therefore, as an aspect of what Firth calls 'social organization', i.e. 'the systematic ordering of social relations by acts of choice and decision' (Firth 1961:40), and I then attempt to show how these decisions are related to a variety of antecedent structural frameworks which 'serve to define and restrict the alternatives which are offered to each actor' (Barth 1959a:3). Although I consider the role of caste and kinship, I argue that the most important structural frameworks are the pattern of political stratification and the system of governmental and administrative arenas of political action.

In his lectures on *Models of Social Organization* (1966) Barth distinguishes between descriptions of patterns of regularity and explanation of the processes which generate such regularities. In his view,

Explanation is not achieved by a description of the patterns of regularity, no matter how meticulous and adequate, nor by replacing this description by other abstractions congruent with it, but by exhibiting what *makes* the pattern, i.e. certain processes. To study social forms, it is certainly necessary but hardly sufficient to be able to describe them. To give an explanation of social forms, it is sufficient to describe the processes that generate the form. (1966:2)

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Most previous accounts of local-level politics in India have been attempts to describe patterns of regularity. The patterns are quite complex, however, and the attempts have met with only limited success; some observers even have felt that there are elements of irrationality and unpredictability in the behavior they attempt to describe (e.g. Brass 1965:238). Barth's studies of Pathan leadership and coalition formation (1959a and 1959b), Bailey's work on confrontations (1968), Mayer's work on action-sets and quasi-groups (1966), and the present analysis of alliances in rural Western Maharashtra, on the other hand, are attempts at explanatory, generative models. All are concerned with social organization, which, as Firth notes, introduces a dynamic element into the anthropologist's analytical framework.

Structural forms set a precedent and provide a limitation to the range of alternatives possible – the arc within which seemingly free choice is exercisable is often very small. But it is the possibility of alternative that makes for variability. A person chooses, consciously or unconsciously, which course he will follow. And his decision will affect the future structural alignment. In the aspect of social structure is to be found the continuity principle of society; in the aspect of organization is to be found the variation or change principle – by allowing evaluation of situations and entry of individual choice. (Firth 1961:40; see also Firth 1954, 1955 and 1964.)

Analyses of social organization in terms of generative models raise a number of important theoretical questions. Barth observes that the value of such models is that they allow us to test our explanations of the relations between structural frameworks and organizational choices by observing the consequences of variations in the frameworks. In order to use generative models in this manner, however, we need to know (1) how structural frameworks are interconnected, (2) how organizational decisions are influenced by structural frameworks, and (3) how organizational decisions, in turn, affect structural frameworks. I must stress that my analysis of political alliances in rural Western Maharashtra is too crude to advance our understanding of these problems very far, but I do want to make a few brief comments in order to put my argument into perspective.

Anthropological understanding of the connections between structural frameworks is well advanced, but we have made little progress on the relations between decisions and frameworks. My own analysis is a case in point. I am able to show how a particular pattern of unstable alliances is reasonable given a certain configuration of structural constraints, but I am unable to deduce the pattern of alliances from the configuration of constraints. Nor has this issue been faced squarely by those who have written most extensively on social organization. Firth writes only that 'structural forms set a precedent and provide a limitation to the range of alternatives

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possible' (1961:40), while Barth argues that structural frameworks 'serve to define and restrict the alternatives which are offered to each actor' (1959a:3). In his later lectures on generative models Barth states that transactional or organizational behavior

takes place with reference to a set of values which serve as generalized incentives and constraints on choice; it also takes place with reference to a pre-established matrix of statuses, seen as a distribution of values on positions in the form of minimal clusters of jurally binding rights. (1966:5)

This is all very well, but Barth's claim to have generated or deduced patterns of regularity from such distributions of values is overstated.

The problem is a very difficult one because, as such diverse scholars as Leach (1954) and Levi (1949) have shown, the system of structural frameworks upon which action is based in any given society is likely to be ambiguous and self-contradictory in at least some respects. Leaving such difficulties aside, however, the problem of generating organization from structure seems to resolve into two major parts. It is a matter of interests and constraints, of carrots and sticks. Some courses of action are prohibited; of those which are not prohibited, some are likely to prove more successful than others in achieving given interests. Our difficulty is less in understanding what actions are prohibited than in understanding why some permitted actions are preferred over others.

Two developments in social theory may provide us with some help in elucidating the relations between organizational decisions and antecedent structural frameworks. As Barth notes (1966:5), the theory of games is a generative model of just the sort he advocates. Given a particular set of rules and a minimax definition of rational behavior, the theory of games allows one rigorously to deduce optimal organizational strategies. But the interests and constraints which are operative in the situations with which anthropologists typically are concerned rarely can be stated with the rigor demanded by the theory of games. Nor do optimal minimax strategies seem to do full justice to the ambiguities of actual behavior. The results of Riker's (1962) attempt to apply games theory to the analysis of political coalitions, for example, are indeterminate; the data neither confirm nor refute the theory.

The work of Fortes on domain theory also is of use in connection with generative models. Fortes nowhere defines what he means by 'domain', 'trusting that its import would show in its usage' (1969:87), but a careful reading of his analyses of the Tallensi and Ashanti social systems (see especially 1945, 1949a, 1949b, 1953a, 1953b, and 1969) reveals that he so far has identified three domains: (1) ritual, (2) politico-jural, and (3) domestic or familial. Each domain consists of a class of ideas or rules concerning