

The Anti-*Khoti* Movement in the Konkan, C. 1920-1942

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Santosh Pandhari Suradkar



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The *Anti-Khoti* Movement in the Konkan, C. 1920-1949

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This is a revised version of a paper presented at the *Workshop on Exploring Entanglements of Caste and Class in Histories of Labour* organised by the V.V. Giri National Labour Institute.

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Preface

The Integrated Labour History Research Programme of V.V. Giri National Labour Institute, *inter alia*, has been mandated to undertake and promote research on the issue of labour and caste in India. Accordingly, the Institute jointly with the Association of Indian Labour Historians (AILH) has undertaken a research and collection project, 'History of Dalit Movement and Labour Movement in India' which aims to explore the entangled histories of labour and dalits, of caste and class. The history of convergence and subsequent divergence between caste and labour movement forms the necessary backdrop to understanding the complexity of dalit movement in India.

As a part of this project, a workshop, 'Exploring Entanglements of Caste and Class in Histories of Labour' was organized on March 21, 2013. In this workshop, scholars and specialists on labour history and dalit history deliberated upon conceptual issues as well as enquired into the issue of sources and archives relevant for this project.

This paper, "The Anti-*khoti* Movement in the Konkan, c. 1920-1949", was presented by Mr. Santosh Pandhari Suradkar in the workshop. The paper examines how the Independent Labour Party, founded by B.R. Ambedkar in 1936 addressed the *khoti* system in public debates and demonstrations of caste and class issues and how diverse groups of protesters, ranging from peasants to migrant laborers settled in Bombay, supported this movement.

This study would be very helpful to scholars and researchers, who would like to work on Ambedkar and his understanding on caste and class issues. I appreciate the researcher for writing such a comprehensive paper.



V.P. Yajurvedi
Director General

V.V. Giri National Labour Institute Integrated Labour History Research Programme

History of Dalit Movement and Labour Movement in India: A Research & Collection Project

The Integrated Labour History Research Programme of V.V. Giri National Labour Institute (VVGNLI) and Association of Indian Labour Historians (AILH) have launched a project titled, "History of Dalit Movement and Labour Movement in India". The Project aims to document and research dalit movement in India focusing specially on the movement's interface with labour movement. The project attempts to fill the glaring lacunae in contemporary scholarly and political discourse by researching the sociological and historical intersection between labour and dalit movement. The activities undertaken in the project will trace the emergence, track the turning points and analyze the regional dimensions of both these movements.

The project will have two interlinked components: a) Archival Collection b) Research and dissemination.

The Archival Collection aims to collect documents of all kinds that pertain to the broad rubric of interface of dalit and labour movement. It will include, *inter alia*:

- Writings and speeches of Dr. B.R. Ambedkar
- Political pamphlets produced by various dalit and labour organizations
- Political writings by important activists and scholars
- Literary and cultural artifacts such as journals produced by the dalit movement and labour movement
- Popular literature produced by dalit and labour movements on the issue of caste and labour
- Interviews and oral history of those involved at varied levels in dalit and labour movement

The Research Component of the Project includes the following:

- A comprehensive and regionally focussed research on the history of the dalit and labour movement based on the archival collection
- Organization and dissemination of the research through seminars and conferences.
- Publish studies relating to interface of dalit movement and labour movement in India

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I would like to acknowledge the valuable contribution of Shri V.P. Yajurvedi, Director General, V.V. Giri National Labour Institute, NOIDA in paving the way for making this study possible.

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At this moment of accomplishment, my sincere thanks goes to Prof. Tanika Sarkar for her valuable inputs and feedbacks in the research. This work would not have been possible without her guidance and encouragement.

I would like to express my sense of gratitude towards Prof. Umesh Bagade whose seminal work on the Caste and Untouchability provided me with some useful insights.

I am also extremely indebted to my friend Stefan Tetzlaff, who continuously supported and encouraged me for completing this work. I would like to thank Ms. Shivangi Jaiswal, Research Associate, VVGNNLI, for her continuous help and assistance in completing this paper.

I owe a great deal to all those who have been kind enough to help me in the preparation of this monograph. I sincerely thank for their intellectual and moral support.

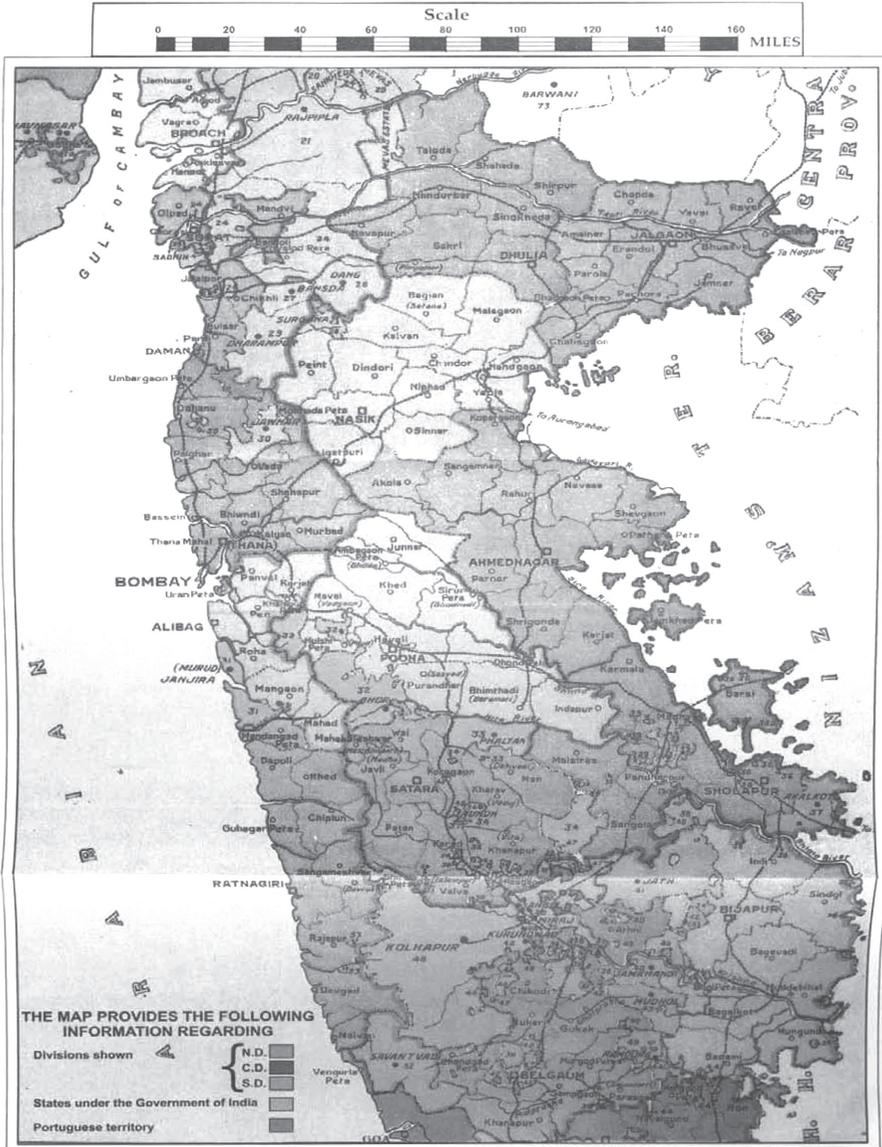
The work could not have been possible without the help of library staff of various libraries to access available sources. I am grateful to the Librarian and the ever helping staff of the Jawaharlal Nehru University Library, New Delhi, The Central Secretariat Library, New Delhi, the National Archives, and the Nehru National Museum and Library, New Delhi, the Mumbai Marathi Granth Sangrahalay and The Maharashtra State Archives, Mumbai.

Santosh Pandhari Suradkar

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The Presidency of Bombay
Showing the Divisions, Collectorates, Talukas & Native States



Map of the Bombay Presidency (1935)
Source: B. G. Kunte, ed., *Maps of India: 1795-1935*, Maharashtra State Archives, 1978 (Pune).

Source: B. G. Kunte, ed., *Maps of India: 1795-1935*; Maharashtra State Archives. 1978, Pune

The Anti-*Khoti* Movement in the Konkan, C. 1920-1949

1.1 Introduction

This paper deals with the movement against the *khoti* system in southern Konkan from 1920 to its final abolition in 1949. I will first discuss the *khoti* system of land relations in Konkan. I will show how the two most important contemporary political formations, i.e. the Indian National Congress (INC) and the Independent Labour Party (ILP), founded by B.R. Ambedkar in 1936, addressed the system in public debates and demonstrations. I will follow up on how the ILP successfully mobilised a movement on the basis of caste and class issues and how diverse groups of protesters, ranging from peasants to migrant labourers settled in Bombay, supported this movement.

Despite its centrality to the region's social development, historians have largely neglected the study of agricultural conditions under the *khoti* system as well as attitudes of political parties towards Konkani peasants. This is all the more astonishing if one considers that the agrarian crisis in the Konkan resulted in massive migration to the industrial city of Bombay.¹ Historical accounts cover the working of revenue settlements (such as the *ryotwari system*) through which they seek to understand colonial policies, their social impact as well as the resistance to the new revenue regimes.² But the history of smaller revenue settlements, such as the *khoti* system, remains completely untouched as yet. Previous accounts also ignore the fundamentally hierarchical setup of the Indian peasantry which was deeply embedded in the caste system. The entangled nature of caste-class relations needs a close focus.

In the Konkan, colonial policies contributed to the consolidation of the *khoti* land tenure and ultimately perpetuated this medieval form of exploitation. This paper argues that caste was an integral part of the

¹ Rajnarayan Chandavarkar; *The Origins of Industrial Capitalism in India - Business strategies and the working classes in Bombay, 1900-1940*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002, pp. 124-168.

² Ravinder Kumar; *Western India in the Nineteenth Century - A study in the Social History of Maharashtra*, Canberra: Australian National University Press, 1968. & Neil Charlesworth; *Peasants and Imperial Rule- Agriculture and Agrarian Society in the Bombay Presidency 1850-1935*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, UK, 2002.

material base in this regard and that the emergence of a new educated class in Bombay was deeply intertwined with caste interests. Agrarian affiliations of Congress leaders in the Bombay Presidency forced the party to support the rights of *khots*, who were the landlords in this system. Due to its upper caste and class orientation, the Congress remained a strong supporter of the *khoti* system throughout the colonial period.

Within the Bombay Presidency, *ryotwari* was the dominant revenue system. Where the land revenue was imposed directly on the *ryots* - individual cultivators who actually tilled the land - the *zamindar* usually did not have a position as an intermediary between the government and the farmer.³ In the *khoti* system, on the other hand, *khots* were rentiers of villages, farmers of land and revenue or farmers of the *khoti* customs.⁴ The *khot* from his position enjoyed many privileges. In former times he was allowed by custom, as part of rental, to exact without payment one day's labour in eight days from all cultivators in his village, except the hereditary holders, *dharekaris*.⁵ In some areas, they were hereditary officers who collected village revenues for the government. While they were appointed for this office by the colonial state, the British rarely had any direct control over *khots*. In some parts of the Bombay Presidency, most notably in the Deccan, the removal of the tax-collection rights of the Patils in the early nineteenth century was followed by the implementation of a direct land revenue settlement with peasants. This necessitated the establishment of a bureaucratic structure capable of replacing the old tax-farming methods that had been employed by the Peshwas. But in the Konkan, where the terrain's nature resulted in restricted communications, *khoti* landlords retained a substantial measure of autonomy including the right to collect taxes and to impose their jurisdiction over tenants.⁶ Of all the Konkan land tenures, the *khoti* tenure in Southern Konkan was the most complicated or was made so,

³ While introducing *ryotwari* system the British officers decided that there is no need of middlemen for revenue collection. Patils were intermediately for revenue collection from pre-British period. Therefore, Patil was removed as a revenue collector.

⁴ J.T. Molesworth; *A dictionary, Marathi and English*, 2nd Ed, Bombay: Bombay Education Society's press, 1857.

⁵ James M. Campbell; (Compile & Edited); *Gazetteer of Bombay Presidency, Ratnagiri and Savantvadi*, Vol. X, Bombay: Government Central Press, 1880, p. 139.

⁶ Vasant Kaiwar; "The Colonial State, Capital and the Peasantry in Bombay Presidency", *Modern Asian Studies*, Vol. 28, No. 4 (Oct., 1994), p. 812.

for lack of proper information, on the advent of the British. According R.D. Choskey the *khoti* system had a history of its own, and lent itself to a variety of definitions.⁷

The Deccan was conquered from the Peshwas in 1818. While Thana was immediately handed over to the British, the surrender of Ratnagiri came only later because it was the home of the chief Brahmin families and was the Peshwa's native country.⁸ The Konkan division was divided into five districts: Kanara, Ratnagiri, Kolaba, Thana and Bombay City. Unlike the rest of the Konkan coast, the north Konkan is a flat, alluvial strip of land along the coastline, separated from the interior by hill ranges. The Southern Konkan was so placed as to resist any administrative unity and consolidation in its internal economy.⁹ The economy of the Konkan, therefore, presented several special problems.

The government of the last Peshwa (1749-1818) had played havoc with the administration of his dominions. All over the Konkan, revenue farmers were vested with both civil and criminal powers. Complaints could not be registered and the district was impoverished and left almost without any trade.¹⁰ Similarly, nineteenth century peasants living under various settlement systems, faced multiple oppressions: the rigid revenue collection by either the colonial government, the *inamdars* or the *khots*, constraints posed by moneylenders, the shortage of food grain as well as recurring famines.¹¹ Landlords were able to continue their pre-colonial forms of exploitation in parts of the Bombay Presidency, because they played an important structural role in non-*ryotwari* areas.¹² Despite its intensive methods of cultivation and

⁷ R.D. Choskey; *Economic Life in the Bombay Konkan 1818-1939*, Bombay: Asia Publishing House, 1960, p. 31.

⁸ James. A. Campbell; (Compile & Edited); *Gazetteer of Bombay Presidency, Ratnagiri and Savantvadi*, Vol. X, Bombay: Government Central Press, 1880, p. 198. See for revenue settlement in Konkan region, F.G. Hartnell Anderson; *Supplement of the Manual of Revenue Account, Accounts of Alienated (lanam) and Non-Rayatwari Villages of the Bombay Province*, Baroda: Government Press, 1968; R.G. Gordon; *The Bombay Survey and Settlement Manual*, Vol. II, Bombay: Government Central Press, 1917.

⁹ R.D. Choskey; *Economic Life in the Bombay Konkan 1818-1939*, Bombay: Asia Publishing House, 1960, p. 18.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 12.

¹¹ Parimala V. Rao; *Foundation of Tilak's Nationalism - Discrimination, Education and Hindutva*, New Delhi: Orient Blackswan, 2010, p. 63.

¹² Vasant Kaivar; "The Colonial State, Capital and the Peasantry in Bombay Presidency", *Modern Asian Studies*, Vol. 28, No. 4 (Oct., 1994), p. 811.

traditionally high levels of output, agriculture in the *khoti* south Konkan failed to diversify and to develop a commercialised component. Equally, modern communications were lacking in the region.¹³

1.2 *Khots* and their Relations with Tenants

According to the Revenue Department, the *khoti* system started in Konkan in 1502 under Yusuf Adil Shah of Bijapur.¹⁴ The landlords or *khots* were mostly Chitpavan Brahmans and a few high-caste Marathas and Muslims. They provided credit to peasants and encouraged them to settle in their villages from 1502, on condition that they would provide free labour to reclaim land from the sea and estuarine swamps, and to construct paddy fields.¹⁵ In order to increase the agrarian surplus, the central bureaucracy and *khots* took charge of large-scale settlement projects. The leading moneylenders were Gujarati Vanis and Marwar Vanis.¹⁶

The first *khots* were typically Marathas, like their Patil counterpart on the eastern side of the *ghats*. However, Brahmans came in by taking advantage of sales, mortgage and grants particularly during the Peshwa regime.¹⁷ This continued under the British on condition that the person to whom the land was handed over was liable to pay the government demand.¹⁸ Charged by the state to raise taxes in rural areas, *khots* could not only keep a part of the revenue accrument, but they often set themselves

¹³ Neil Charlesworth; *Peasants and Imperial Rule- Agriculture and Agrarian Society in the Bombay Presidency 1850-1935*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002, p. 292.

¹⁴ James. A. Campbell; (Compile and Edited); *Gazetteer of Bombay Presidency, Ratnagiri and Savantvadi*, Op. cit, p. 213. See F.G. Hartnell Anderson; *Supplement of the Manual of Revenue Account, Accounts of Alienated (Ilanam) and Non-Rayatwari Villages of the Bombay Province*, Baroda: Government Press, 1968.

¹⁵ Hardiman David; *Feeding the Baniya – Peasants and Usurers in Western India*, New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1996, p.31.

¹⁶ James MacNabb Campbell; *Gazetteer of Bombay Presidency, Kolaba and Janjira*, Vol. XI, Government Central Press: 1883, p. 103.

¹⁷ The vatan khotis being saleable made it possible, in the Peshwa period, for many Brahman families to buy themselves in, thereby reducing the older khoti families of Marathas and Muslims to small minority. See Andre Wink; *Land and Sovereignty in India: Agrarian Society and Politics under the Eighteenth Century Maratha Svarajya*, New York: Cambridge University Press, 1986, p. 359.

¹⁸ *Khoti Settlement Act, 1880, The Bombay Code, Volume I, Sixth Edition*, Bombay: Government of Bombay Legal Department, 1949, p. 548.

up as local 'minor Rajahs'.¹⁹ Along with revenue collection, *khots* were responsible for all petty judicial and police work. Their accession to the *khoti* office signaled a tightening control over Konkani society and, in turn, transformed the position of *khots* so that most of them became *de facto* landlords of areas they controlled, exacting rent from cultivators.²⁰ Caste relations between Peshwa rulers and the Chitpavan Brahmans played a crucial role in land-shifting patterns. The same Chitpavan Brahmans also provided Bombay Presidency's new educational and administrative elite.

The tenants, on the other hand, were Kunbis²¹, Mahars²², Bhandaris²³ and Shudra castes such as the Agris.²⁴ There were very few Patils in the Konkan, because *khots* did their work at many places. These *khots* were not regarded with the same respect as the Patils in the Deccan.²⁵ Patils in such villages had little to distinguish them from the ordinary *ryots*.

¹⁹ Christophe Jaffrelot; *Dr. Ambedkar and Untouchability: Analyzing and Fighting Caste*, Delhi: Permanent Black, 2004. p.77.

²⁰ Neil Charlesworth; *Peasants and Imperial Rule- Agriculture and Agrarian Society in the Bombay Presidency 1850-1935*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002, p. 31.

²¹ According to Hindu texts, Kunbis were the descendents of *shudras*. Socially, it had the highest percentage in the Konkan.

²² Mahar was untouchable caste. The Mahars live outside villages in special *maharvadas*. The Mahars were hereditary village servants and were considered authorities in all boundary matters. They were village servants, carriers of dead animals, husbandmen, messenger, labourers, and scavengers, sellers of firewood and cow dung cakes, and beggars. Most of them enjoy a small government payment, partly in cash and partly in land. The chief source of their income is the yearly grain allowance or *baluta*. They had important role in *balutedari* system who used to serve all upper caste to them in village. They did not have right to use public places. They didn't have any fix caste based occupation which helped them to migrate to the cities.

²³ The Bhandaris were traditionally toddy-tappers, but had also become warriors, merchants, cultivators and because of their costal home, often seafares.

²⁴ Agris, also known as Agle and KharPatil, numbered 211,176 at the census of 1901. They are principally found at Thana (83, 733) Kolaba (113, 115) and the state of janjira (9, 617). The majority of Agris are registered occupancy rayats paying assessments on their own holdings, or tenants (usually tenants-at-will) of superior holders to whom they pay rent in kind, which generally represent interest on a loan, the superior holders or tenants paying the proportionate assessment according to the *kabulayat* between them. See R. E. Enthoven; *Tribes and Caste of Bombay*, Bombay: Government Central Press, 1922 pp. 8-14.

²⁵ R.D. Choksey; *Economic Life in the Bombay Konkan 1818-1939*, Bombay: Asia Publishing House, 1960, p. 19.

Towards the end of the Peshwa rule, *khots* acquired the right to collect a special *vetan* (salary), called *khot faida* (profit) as rewards for managing villages.²⁶ This *khoti faida* continued to exist even after the passing of the *Khoti Act* of 1880. The *Khot's* rights were fully defined in this Act. In Ratnagiri, the *khots* were regulated by the Settlement Act of 1880. According to the Act the *khots'* full rights over villages were conceded, but most of the cultivators became customary tenants with hereditary but not transferable rights entered in the village register, and only around 5 per cent of cultivators were officially recorded as tenants-at-will. This Act legalised the *khots'* rights. The Act was continued with minor amendments till *khoti* abolition in 1949. It was paid either in grain or in cash. Generally it was two or three times the lands' assessment²⁷ or double or triple the revenue amount, which *khots* collected from tenants. In some cases, the government even paid for the *faida* by sacrificing parts of government dues.²⁸ With *khot faida*, landlords had the right to appropriate surplus from tenants.

In *khoti* villages, land was held in small units of cultivation, because all rights and assets in the village were sub-divided. This went so far that in the *khoti* areas of Ratnagiri District there could be as many as 80 *khoti* sub-sharers with a stake in a single village during the 1920s.²⁹ Sometimes they managed the area in rotation and each family was responsible for the revenue payment of a particular year. This aggravated the difficulties of the *ryot* while depriving the government of almost all advantages. Each share was treated as a separate village in the *taluka* accounts, so that sometimes there were as many as one hundred separate accounts in *taluka* for a single village.³⁰ According to the 1880 Act, the *khot* had the right to

²⁶ James MacNabb Campbell; (Compile and Edited) *Gazetteer of Bombay Presidency, Kolaba and Janjira*, Vol. XI, Government Central Press: 1883, p. 164.

²⁷ R. D. Choksey; *Economic Life in the Bombay Konkan 1818-1939*, Bombay: Asia Publishing House, 1960, p. 123.

²⁸ F. G. Hartnell Anderson; (Compiled) *Supplement of the Manual of Revenue Account, Accounts of Alienated (lanam) and Non-Rayawatwari Villages of the Bombay Province*, Baroda: Government Press, 1968, pp.14-15.

²⁹ Neil Charlesworth; *Peasants and Imperial Rule- Agriculture and Agrarian Society in the Bombay Presidency 1850-1935*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, UK, 2002, p. 298.

³⁰ F. G. Hartnell Anderson; (Compiled) *Supplement of the Manual of Revenue Account, Accounts of Alienated (lanam) and Non-Rayawatwari Villages of the Bombay Province*, Baroda: Government Press, 1968, p.16.

keep village accounts.³¹ *Khots* owed their power to their total control of the village administrative office and over the sources of local information. The 1880 Act mentioned that “when a village is held by two or more co-sharers jointly, the said sharers shall be jointly and severally responsible for the *jama*³², but one of their numbers shall be nominated every year to receive the inferior holders’ rents.”³³ If any *khoti* village was attached owing to disputes among sharers, failure to pay the *Jama*, or for any other reason, the government then appointed a *Japtidar* (village accountant) who stood in the shoes of the holder. But so long as the tenure of the village remained unchanged, the *rayats* did not become the government’s *rayats*.³⁴

Since most of the *khoti* villages had no independent accountant to parallel the Deccan Kulkarni (head accountant), the *khots* held all village documents. All records were their own accounts, which they never produced to the government, and they could keep them in any form they liked. In addition, they even monopolized the district office. So the government, at the onset of British rule, had been simply excluded from all direct contact with village society in *khoti* areas.³⁵ The peculiar nature of this area and the isolation of the villages compelled local governments to totally rely on the *khots* for all administrative responsibilities.³⁶

1.3 British Revenue Settlement in the Konkan

Necessarily, the first British revenue settlement in the Konkan in 1818 was predominantly a farming arrangement with *khots* and the government did not know what the tenant paid or whether the *khot*

³¹ *Khoti Settlement Act, 1880, The Bombay Code, Volume I, Sixth Edition*, Bombay: Government of Bombay Legal Department, 1949, p. 551.

³² ‘*Jama*’ means land-revenue payable by *khots* to the Provincial Government. It was the aggregate of the survey-assessments.

³³ *Khoti Settlement Act, 1880, The Bombay Code, Volume I, Sixth Edition*, Bombay: Government of Bombay Legal Department, 1949.

³⁴ F.G. Hartnell Anderson; (Compiled) *Supplement of the Manual of Revenue Account, Accounts of Alienated (Janam) and Non-Rayatwari Villages of the Bombay Province*, Baroda: Government Press, 1968, p.17.

³⁵ Neil Charlesworth; *Peasants and Imperial Rule- Agriculture and Agrarian Society in the Bombay Presidency 1850-1935*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002, p. 31.

³⁶ R.D. Choksey, *Economic Life in the Bombay Konkan 1818-1939*, Bombay: Asia Publishing House, 1960, p. 21.

gained or lost by the farm.³⁷ Touring Ratnagiri District in 1823, the first Governor of Bombay Presidency, Mountstuart Elphinstone, recommended the conversion of *khoti* villages into a *ryotwari* system.³⁸ Captain Wingate in 1851 also was of the opinion that *khots* had no right to exercise unlimited power.³⁹ According to Wingate the rented and *khoti* villages, were far more backward. The *khot* was one of the worst of landlords. He strove to keep the tenant from gaining any more rights and to reduce them to be a tenant-at-will.⁴⁰ But due to huge revenue collection from Konkan region most of other officers were not hostile to the rights of the *khots*. In such a situation, the British would get huge revenue from this area without forming the administration at village level and without maintaining revenue records. Financial realities placed *khots* in a strong position during the early years of British rule. The British, therefore, inherited a situation whereby *khots* provided much of the revenue from the Konkan.⁴¹

In 1859, General Francis warned the government that the *khots* 'had openly declared that they won't have the survey in their villages'.⁴² He was convinced that the only workable settlement form had to be based on an agreement with the *khots* as superior holders.⁴³ British officers were aware of the power of the *khots*. J. A. Dunlop, the collector of Ratnagiri, wrote in 1822: "were any sudden change attempted (...) the *khots* could and would ruin and prevent the possibility of government doing anything to assist them by prosecution of the recovery of debt of which the ryots themselves know not the amount, and the greatest misery and confusion would probably be occasioned by even alarming the *khots* prematurely."⁴⁴ It was, therefore, difficult to introduce reforms in the administration likely to break the power of the vested interest in the Konkan. *Khots'* rights in other parts of the district were, Wingate understood, much the

³⁷ James. A. Campbell; (Compile and Edited); *Gazetteer of Bombay Presidency, Ratnagiri and Savantvadi, Vol. X*, Bombay: Government Central Press, 1880, p. 248.

³⁸ *Ibid.*, p.231.

³⁹ *Ibid.*, p.242.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, p.241.

⁴¹ Neil Charlesworth; *Peasants and Imperial Rule- Agriculture and Agrarian Society in the Bombay Presidency 1850-1935*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002, p. 34.

⁴² *Ibid.*, p.57.

⁴³ James. A. Campbell; (Compile and Edited); *Gazetteer of Bombay Presidency, Ratnagiri and Savantvadi, Vol. X*, Bombay: Government Central Press, 1880, p.248.

⁴⁴ R. D. Choksey; *Economic Life in the Bombay Konkan*, Bombay: Asia Publishing House, 1960, p.20.

same as in Ratnagiri. Wingate interacted with many *khots*, and the *khots* indirectly agreed that without the government's consent they would not take away the land from permanent tenant and give it to someone else.⁴⁵ The new masters of the Konkan were aware also of the power of the *khots*. In 1873, the Collector of Ratnagiri reported that of 682 *khoti* villages in the newly settled areas, *khots* of 417 villages refused to accept the assessment. Most importantly, however, the *khots'* campaign against the settlements considerably reduced revenue returns from Ratnagiri, so that large balances of land revenue remained uncollected during the early 1870s.⁴⁶ The final settlement was arrived at in 1877-79 and was embodied in the *khoti* Act of 1880. Therefore, it was thought best to continue the existing system till detailed information became available.⁴⁷ The British government accepted *khots'* rights because of the exigencies of revenue collection. Thus, the pre colonial system was legalized and continued by the *Khoti* Act of 1880.

1.4 The Agrarian Crisis and Migration to Bombay

The Konkan was a densely populated area with a high pressure on land. During the 19th and early 20th centuries, the Konkan became the labour market of industries emerging in Bombay; the seasonal overflow of labour to Bombay required planning with the aim of lifting the pressure from agriculture to industries. The agricultural structure in the Konkan under the *khoti* system had a major impact on migration processes from Konkan to Bombay city. The *khoti* system forced landless laborers to look for job opportunities as unskilled labourers. Geographically and economically, Bombay was the nearest option for Konkani labour. In 1872, the city of Bombay counted 71,000 Konkans and the number had increased to 145,000 by 1901. About 1864, before Bombay required a large market for labour, many Ratnagiris migrated to Mauritius;⁴⁸ but this migration stream almost entirely ceased by the end of the nineteenth century.⁴⁹

⁴⁵ Ibid., p. 242.

⁴⁶ Neil Charlesworth; *Peasants and Imperial Rule- Agriculture and Agrarian Society in the Bombay Presidency 1850-1935*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002, p. 57.

⁴⁷ R.D. Choksey, *Economic Life in the Bombay Konkan*, Bombay: Asia Publishing House, 1960, p.50.

⁴⁸ Especially Musalmans, Kunbis and Mahars went for work to Aden and Mauritius. Sometimes whole families migrated, but as a rule the greater number were young man. In Aden they worked as labourers and in Mauritius in sugarcane and potato fields. See *Gazetteer of Ratnagiri and Savantvadi*, Vol. X, 1880, p. 143.

⁴⁹ Henry Frowde; *Imperial Gazetteer of India, Provincial Series, Bombay Presidency*, Vol. II, Calcutta: Superintendent of Government, 1909. p. 149

This migration was so great that the Ratnagiri district alone was said to have sent not less than 1,00,000 persons to Bombay during 1889, who also returned to their Konkani fields in time for the paddy sowing.⁵⁰ There were clearly seasonal fluctuations in demand for labour in a number of industries, most notably in the construction industry in Bombay, and in the docks, which dovetailed with the periods of demand for labour in agriculture in Ratnagiri, and probably helped to establish the pattern of seasonal migration from the district.⁵¹ This was strikingly illustrated by a Bombay Labour Office investigation in 1928-29, when it found that out of the 1,348 workers studied, 63 per cent came from the Konkan, 27 per cent from the Deccan and not one worker belonged to Bombay city.⁵² Every November and December, many Marathas and Mahars went to Bombay where they worked as labourers in the storing of the paddy crop till the end of May, after which they returned to their rural fields.⁵³ With the growth of large industries, the cultivation of commercial products, the exploitation of minerals and the construction of railways and canals, a new demand for labour arose in Bombay which led many of the landless classes to seek a livelihood in big industrial centers, where the pay was far better than⁵⁴ that for cultivation work.⁵⁵ The evidence on migration patterns from the different talukas in Ratnagiri district suggests that the highest rates of outward migration occurred in those areas which were mainly 'landlord held' villages, in the north and central Ratnagiri, while there was less migration from the 'peasant held' villages in the south.⁵⁶ But Konkani peasants had never been permanent workers in Bombay. The feudal nature

⁵⁰ R.D. Choksey, *Economic Life in the Bombay Konkan*, Bombay: Asia Publishing House, 1960, p. 85.

⁵¹ Gill Yamin; "The Character and Origins of Labour Migration from Ratnagiri", *South Asia Research*, Vol. 1.9, 1 May 1989, p. 47.

⁵² *Report of the Department Enquiry, Labour Office Government of Bombay, Wages and Unemployment in the Bombay Cotton Textile Industry*, Bombay: Government Central Press, (Reprinted), 1934, p. 58.

⁵³ James MacNabb Campbell; *Gazetteer of Bombay Presidency, Kolaba and Janjira*, Vol. XI, Bombay: Government Central Press: 1883, p.105.

⁵⁴ On this, see Gill Yamin; "The Character and Origins of Labour Migration From Ratnagiri", *South Asia Research*, Vol.9, 1 May 1989, For Untouchable workers income in Bombay see G. R. Pradhan; *Untouchable workers of Bombay City*, Bombay: Karnataka Publishing House, 1938.

⁵⁵ *Census of India*, General Report Tables, 1911, p.94.

⁵⁶ Gill Yamin; "The Character and Origins of Labour Migration From Ratnagiri", *South Asia Research*, Vol.9, 1 May 1989, p.50.

of the agrarian society did not allow peasants to cut off completely their connections with the rural area. In off season tenants had to take loans from the *sahukar* or from the *khot* for their survival and for ritual customs. Official Enquiries revealed that most tenants were indebted. This interest rate was very high, and to return it, the tenant had to work on *khot* land.⁵⁷ Because the *khots* kept all records tenants were always indebted. Moreover, job insecurity in Bombay also could not ensure work for whole year.

In various ways, the *khots* were able to influence the forms of exchange to enhance their command over labour. As Ratnagiri *khots* were forced to compete for labour with urban and industrial employers, they attempted to tighten their control over tenants and to restrict mobility. The tenant had to work on their field at least for some part of the year. It should be clear, therefore, that the *khoti* tenure seriously affected the possibilities of migration.

Labour Office records show that during the period 1926-1933 Bombay witnessed a decline as a center of the textile industry and many textile workers were thrown out of employment. The Labour Office records predicted that

“It is certain, therefore, that some of these displaced operatives have returned to the land and become agricultural workers, either for hire or by working on their own land. The economic situation in the mofussil suggests that any influx of this kind from the towns must have worsened the conditions in the agricultural districts.”⁵⁸

Therefore, casual and uncertain conditions of urban employment forced many workers to maintain their village links.⁵⁹ Ironically, the nature of industrialization sustained a kind of feudal relations.

Migration proved to be more useful to the Mahars than to other castes. It improved their economic position and strengthened them to

⁵⁷ J.A. Madan; *Village Enquiry Ratnagiri*, File No. 60, 1929-1930, Maharashtra State Archives (hereafter MSA)

⁵⁸ *Report of the Department Enquiry, Labour Office Government of Bombay, Wages and Unemployment in the Bombay Cotton Textile Industry*, Bombay: Government Central Press, (Reprinted), 1934, p.58

⁵⁹ Rajnarayan Chandavarkar, *The Origins of Industrial Capitalism in India - Business strategies and the working classes in Bombay, 1900-1940*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002, p. 397

challenge Konkan's landlordism. In Ratnagiri district, in 1901, Mahars with a population of 90,000 were the second largest caste after the Maratha Kunbis were 287,000. Other untouchable castes such as the Chamars (12,000) were less prominent in this area.⁶⁰ A few women from the fishing castes, or from the various Muslim groups, migrated to Bombay, while the highest rates of female migration are to be found among the untouchable and low castes (Mahars, Chambhars and Parits) and among some of the high status Hindu artisan castes (Shimpis, Sonars and Sutars) It is significant that the lowest castes and outcastes like Mahar, Chambhar and Parit castes who were most likely to be landless or cultivate very small plots - had high migration rates for women.⁶¹ Mahars, who migrated from Konkan to Bombay as labourers, also supported the anti-*khoti* agitation.⁶² Those coming from Ratnagiri and working in Bombay used to organize conferences against the *khoti* system.⁶³ These activities were supported and encouraged by other labourers who had migrated from Madras.⁶⁴ But the laborers in Bombay and peasants in Konkan needed external organizational support to raise their voice. It happened only in the first half of the twentieth century when the emerging lower caste movements successfully built up their own organization and demanded their rights over the means of production.

1.5 The Anti-Khoti Struggle

We shall be free

We shall be free - by our own courage
 We shall not sit quietly - being frightened
 We shall break the chains - of injustice and slavery
 We shall prove to the world - our true guts
 Let us be famished - we shall uphold the self-esteem
 By doing away injustice - in a just and peaceful manner
 We shall acquire - our human rights

⁶⁰ Henry Frowde; *Imperial Gazetteer of India, Provincial Series, Bombay Presidency*, Vol. II, Calcutta: Superintendent of Government, 1909. p.149.

⁶¹ Gill Yamin; "The Character and Origins of Labour Migration From Ratnagiri", *South Asia Research*, Vol.9, 1 May 1989, p. 43.

⁶² Home Department - Special, File No. 927-A, 1939, MSA, p.215

⁶³ *Janata*, 16 October, 1937

⁶⁴ *Ibid.*, 20 November, 1937

Though poor – we shall live with dignity
 That fortitude and bravery of ours – is still alive
 It will not vanish – for it runs in our blood
 Wealth, power, dignity – we shall share them all equally
 We shall not sit quietly – even if you articulate (your opinions)
 superbly
 We are now disgusted at humiliation – caused by our dependency
 We shall do it away – with our own courage
 We shall be free – although (we seem to be) helpless, indigent
 and destitute
 With our own courage – we shall all unite!⁶⁵

Discontent against the *khoti* system had been simmering in the Konkan for long. Along with the *Malguzar* system in Nagpur, it provided the main exception in the Marathi speaking areas to a general pattern of *ryotwari* Settlement.⁶⁶ An anti-*khoti* struggle emerged within the anti-caste movement in Maharashtra. Although the Indian left movement had raised the land issue across India, left forces in Bombay Presidency showed little interest in the anti-*khoti* resentment among peasants and tenants. Indian nationalists on the other hand, always stood in favour of *khots* rights. When the British established their rule in Bombay Presidency, they did not know anything about the mutual obligations and entitlements of the *khots* and tenants. But the *khots* impressed upon the British that they were the masters of the land and the tenants were their cultivators.⁶⁷ After a long consideration, in the late nineteenth century the British prepared a Bill to abolish *khoti*, but B.G. Tilak and Mandlik took out a deputation against it as

⁶⁵ Ibid, 20 November 1937. Translation is mine; the poem appeared in the weekly *Janata* Written by B.T. Kamble. Two months after this Ambedkar introduced the *Khoti* Bill in the Bombay Legislative Assembly. Poem presents untouchables and peasants consciousness towards their agitation

⁶⁶ Gail Omvedt; *Dalits and Democratic Revolution- Dr Ambedkar and the Dalit Movement in Colonial India*, New Delhi: Sage Publication, 2007, p.195

⁶⁷ The power of the *khoti* landlords over their tenants increased between 1820 and 1880 as a result of the introduction of British concept of property to India through the courts. The courts treated the *khot* as owner of all the land in his villages, and as such entitled to dismiss tenants at will and raise rents on his land. (Gill Yamin; “The Character and Origins of Labour Migration From Ratnagiri”, *South Asia Research*, Vol.9, 1 May 1989, p. 51.)

a result of which the *khoti* system continued.⁶⁸ The *Kesari* (Tilak's Marathi newspaper) held the government's policy of removing the intermediaries between rayat and government and the people as responsible for the miseries of the *khots*. It criticized the government officials for opposing the *khots* on behalf of the peasants. The *Kesari* argued that it was the government and not the *khots* who rack-rented the peasants and rejected the government's contention that poverty in the Ratnagiri area was due to the *khoti* system.⁶⁹ A Bombay Government move to restrain the transfer of peasant lands to moneylenders in 1901 was bitterly opposed by Tilak and Gopal Krishna Gokhale; and Tilak, the father of Extremism, once made a revealing comment: 'just as the government has no right to rob the *sahukar* (moneylender) and distribute his wealth among the poor, in the same way the government has no right to deprive the *khot* of his rightful income and distribute the money to the peasant. This is a question of rights and not of humanity'.⁷⁰ When Mandlik died *The Marhatha* expressed its deep regret that the *khot's* had 'lost their best and strongest defender'.⁷¹ These *khoti* supporters were among the newly educated class mostly Brahman in Bombay Presidency. Sumit Sarkar has observed that their social roots lay not in industry or trade, increasingly controlled by British managing agency firms and their Marwari subordinates, but in government services. They often combined some connection with land in the shape of intermediate tenures.⁷² Most Congress leaders of Maharashtra were Chitpavan Brahmans, who supported the *khoti* system and always stood against any change in village economy.

The beginnings of an effective protest against the *khots'* exactions in the 1920s undoubtedly depended in part on the growing interest and involvement of politicians with wider power and influence. Some Legislative Council members, notably S.K. Bole (Bhandari caste leader of

⁶⁸ Home Department – Special, File No. 927-A, 1939, MSA, p. 231.

⁶⁹ *Kesari*, 28 February 1898. See Parimala V. Rao, *Foundation of Tilak's Nationalism – Discrimination, Education and Hindutva*, New Delhi: Orient Blackswan, 2010, p. 90.

⁷⁰ Sumit Sarkar; *Modern India 1885-1947*, Chennai: Macmillan, 2008, p. 69

⁷¹ *The Mahratha*, 25 August, 1889

⁷² In the last phase of nineteenth century, Sahuakar's and Jamindar's grabbed farmers' lands. Therefore farmers started to riot against them, the Deccan riots was one of those. It is in this situation that the British started to take legislative action to prevent the farmers' pathetic condition. In reaction to this, M.G. Ranade and B.G. Tilak came out with stiff opposition to the British interference.

the non-Brahmin Party in the Bombay Legislative Council), highlighted the grievances of *khoti* tenants. Also newspapers like the *Navayug* took up their cause.⁷³ Bole was active in Bombay presidency politics. He remained in close association with Ambedkar and supported his activities. Bole attempted to bring an anti-*khoti* legislation on 6 October 1922 regarding the appointment of a committee to enquire into the conditions of these tenants who cultivated the land under *khoti* system in Ratnagiri and Kolaba districts. He argued that forced labour was one of the horrendous characteristics of this system. The *khots* collected four times the amount of tax which they paid to the government and did not give any receipts to the tenants.⁷⁴ This resolution was withdrawn when Mountfords (who was the Commissioner for the Southern Division) proposed that the mover of the resolution should wait until the enquiry which was being made into the economic conditions of cultivators of the Kolaba and Ratnagiri districts. The fact, however, was that the enquiry was never meant to be an enquiry into the *khoti* question, but only incidentally touched on the *khoti* questions. Despite the restricted scope of that enquiry, however, some of the glaring evils of the *khoti* system were disclosed.⁷⁵ But the government did not appoint a proper committee and entrusted it to the commissioner alone. Bole tried to work outside the Council for the cause of tenants against the *khoti* system. Ambedkar supported him in this cause, but nothing came out of it at first. Then, in the 1930s, Ambedkar launched a peasant rebellion⁷⁶ against the *khoti*, which was to prove very effective.

In 1936, Ambedkar formed a political party in Bombay, the Independent Labour Party, after discussions with several colleagues. The aim was to concentrate on the problems and grievances of landless and poor tenants, agriculturalists and of urban workers.⁷⁷ He fused issues pertaining to caste

⁷³ Neil Charlesworth; *Peasants and Imperial Rule- Agriculture and Agrarian Society in the Bombay Presidency 1850-1935*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002, p. 275.

⁷⁴ P. G. Kanekar; *Serfdom in the Konkan*, (City name is missing), Working Men's Institute, p. 288.

⁷⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 57

⁷⁶ Before *khoti* struggle Ambedkar had launched anti-Maharwatan struggle, which strongly challenged caste based occupational system.

⁷⁷ In 1938, Ambedkar in his letter '*Shrmjivi Vargas Jahir Vinanti*' wrote that Independent Labour Party does not represent only one caste or one religion. This party has been established to fight for social, economic and political rights of working class. In party there is no difference between touchable and untouchable, Brahmin and non-Brahmin, Hindu and Muslim. Anyone can involve in this party. *Janata*, 30 July, 1938.

and class and constituted them as the core of his party programme. He explained the Party's objectives in an interview with the *Times of India*. The party would undertake to establish Land Mortgage Banks, Agriculturalist producers' co-operative societies as well as marketing societies with a view to improving agricultural productivity. He particularly dwelled on the fragmentation of small holdings, which was a severe handicap in the way of the application of capital and improved methods of cultivation to agriculture and was therefore a direct cause of rural poverty. Moreover, he stressed his aim of abolishing the *khoti* system.⁷⁸ He proposed "State ownership" in agriculture with collective methods of cultivation. He suggested that the government should nationalize land, and agriculture into a "State-Industry" by acquiring subsistence rights in the agricultural land held by the private individuals whether owners, tenants or mortgagees. It is to be remembered that Ambedkar never advocated confiscation of land from landlords. He advocated the nationalization of land with compensation to land owners in the form of debentures equal to the value of their right in land.⁷⁹

His demand for the abolition of *khoti* system appalled the *khots*. The Ratnagiri district *Khot* and *Zamindar Sabha* complained to the president of the AICC on 11 August 1936 that, "The programme of abolishing *khoti* is a confiscatory programme. It looks very much like socialism or communism (...). If in the coming elections, Congress' appeals to the tenant-voters on the programme of abolition of *khoti*, the situation that would be created, can easily be understood. A class war would begin, in which passions would run high, leading perhaps even to riots with extremely undesirable consequences."⁸⁰ Ambedkar's shift to working class and poor peasant politics was necessary for an electoral strategy, whose aim was to widen his movement's social support base. Although he shifted to the labour movement, the eradication of untouchability still remained the core issue on his political programme.

He tried to abolish the *khoti* system through legal procedure. On 17 September 1937, he introduced a Bill in the Bombay Legislative Council for the abolition of the *khoti* system in Konkan, a position more radical

⁷⁸ *The Times of India*, 15 August, 1936.

⁷⁹ B. S. Mani; "The Economic Philosophy of Dr. Babasaheb Ambedkar", in S. M. Pinge; (ed.) *Birthday Anniversary of Dr. Babasaheb Ambedkar*, Aurangabad: Vol. IV, People's Education Society, Special Issue, 1966, p.59.

⁸⁰ *AICC Papers*, File No. P-16, NMML, P. 111 See also Shri Krishan; *Political Mobilization and Identity in Western India, 1934-47*, New Delhi: Sage Publication, 2005.

than his party's programme.⁸¹ Though the ILP in its manifesto demanded abolition of the *khoti* system but the anti-*khoti* agitation became more vibrant than its legal procedure in Assembly. Moreover, the party had to follow parliamentary politics but the anti-*khoti* agitation was an entirely different in its struggle. It must be noted that in the first Provincial Assemblies, Ambedkar was the first legislator in India to introduce a Bill for the abolition of serfdom of agricultural tenants. He aimed at securing occupancy rights for tenants. He demanded the abolition of the *khoti* tenure and its substitution by the *ryotwari* system.⁸²

While presenting the Bill in the Legislative Assembly he said, "the system of *khoti* tenure while it binds the *khot* to pay revenue to the government leaves him free to do what he likes to the inferior holders and this freedom has been so grossly abused by the *khots* that the inferior holders are not only subjected to all kinds of exactions but they have been reduced to a state of abject slavery."⁸³ Shivaram Laxman Karandikar, a Hindu Mahasabha leader who was a strong supporter of the *khoti* system, opposed this Bill. During the 1937 election, Karandikar was supported by the *khots* and was elected from northern Ratnagiri where the *khots* had a stronghold.⁸⁴ After a disappointing response from the Congress to his suggestions, Ambedkar warned the *khoti* supporters that "if the *khoti* system is not abolished then it would be a great threat to *sarvajanic shantata* or public peace."⁸⁵ The Congress government did not bring forth this Bill for discussion in the Assembly. Therefore, Ambedkar launched a protest march against the Bombay Legislative Assembly to abolish the *khoti* system. In this struggle, even communists were involved. The climax was a march of 25,000 peasants to the Bombay Council Hall on 12 January 1938,⁸⁶ the biggest pre-independence mobilization of peasants in Maharashtra. We might compare this with the figure of 15, 000 that is claimed for the *Kisan* rally held at Faizpur at the time of the 1936 Congress session.⁸⁷

⁸¹ Gail Omvedt; *Dalits and Democratic Revolution- Dr Ambedkar and the Dalit Movement in Colonial India*, New Delhi: Sage Publication, 1994, p.196.

⁸² Dhananjay Keer; *Dr. Ambedkar Life and Mission*, Bombay: Popular Prakashan, 1954, p. 296.

⁸³ Dr. B. R. Ambedkar; Bombay Legislative Assembly Debate, in Vasant Moon (ed.) *Dr. Babasaheb Ambedkar Writings and Speeches*, Vol-2, Bombay: Government of Maharashtra: 2005, p. 100

⁸⁴ *B.G. Kher Paper*, IV- VII Installment, Serial Number 32, NMML.

⁸⁵ *Janata*, 25 September, 1937.

⁸⁶ *Janata*, 15 January, 1938.

⁸⁷ Kanekar, *Serfdom in the Konkan*, (name of City) Working Men's Institute, p. 298

The first demand presented by the deputationists was the enforcement of the minimum standard of wages for agricultural labourers. The second was that all the arrears of rent should be remitted since the revenue arrears had been also remitted. They urged that immediate legislation should be made to provide with or without compensation for the abolition of the *khoti* system and the *inamdar* system⁸⁸; and landlordism, which was economically and socially tyrannical, must go.⁸⁹ Demanding fixed wages for the agricultural labourers instead of wages in kind which existed in the *balutedari* system⁹⁰ was an effort to destroy the caste based economy. This (1930-40) was the period when his Dalit-based Independent Labour Party joined with communists to organize peasants and workers and he described his struggle as being against both 'capitalism' and 'Brahmamism'.⁹¹ After this Assembly march, Ambedkar delivered a speech where prominent Marxist leaders, such as Indulal Yagnik and S. A. Dange, were present. He declared his closeness to Marxist ideology.⁹² The ILP flag was red and during the protest march they used to shout the slogan "*khot shahi nasht kara, savakarshahi nasht kara, shetkaryancha vijay aso, kamkaryancha vijay aso, lal bavata ki jay.*"⁹³ (Destroy the *khoti* rule, destroy landlordism, victory to peasants, victory to workers, victory to red flag). These were the years in which the pages of *Janata*, Ambedkar's weekly newspaper, were filled with reports of the struggles of workers and peasants against 'capitalists and landlords' as well as, of Dalits against atrocities.⁹⁴ The anti *khoti* movement therefore established Ambedkar's credentials as a leader of a class struggle.

⁸⁸ In the *inamdari* system, an individual or an institution received some lands as *inams* in return for some service to the kings. The *inam* holders pay no land tax to the government, but leased the *inams* to the tenants for cultivation on payment of rent.

⁸⁹ Dr. Babasaheb Ambedkar; "Dr. B.R. Ambedkar and his Egalitarian Revolution", in Vasant Moon (ed.); *Dr. Babasaheb Ambedkar Writings and Speeches*, Vol.-17, Part 3, Bombay: Government of Maharashtra: 2003, p. 170.

⁹⁰ The *balutedari* system which was also known as the 'system of *bara balutedar*' because there were twelve key castes in this arrangement. The castes called the *balutedars* provided, in principle, precise hereditary service to the village—rather than to the *jajman*. The *balutedari* castes did not, however, provide the same type of services and it would be wrong to consider them as being on equal footing. See Christophe Jaffrelot, 2000, p.10.

⁹¹ Gail Omvedt; *Dalits and Democratic Revolution: Dr Ambedkar and the Dalit Movement in Colonial India*, New Delhi: Sage Publication, 1994, p.278.

⁹² *Janata*, 15 January, 1938.

⁹³ *Ibid*, 24 December, 1938.

⁹⁴ Gail Omvedt; *Dalits and Democratic Revolution: Dr. Ambedkar and the Dalit Movement in Colonial India*, New Delhi: Sage Publication, 1994, p.278

In fact, anti-*khoti* feelings had been simmering for a long time; they did not emerge only during election time. In the coastal talukas, there is extensive evidence of tenant discontent in the 1920s and 1930s in the years of the depression. Agitation by the *khoti* tenants was rife throughout 1925,⁹⁵ because the conditions, even in 1926, as reported by Mountford, the Commissioner of the Southern Division, were not different from those described in 1875. He was compelled to observe that with few exceptions, the *khots* had done nothing to improve their tenant's conditions. The Village Enquiry Report on Ratnagiri in 1930 reported that the source of indebtedness was that the total crop was not sufficient for the maintenance of the people in the village for the whole of the year; it was sufficient for four months only. Besides there was no subsidiary industry in the village from which people can supplement their livelihood. Hence the people had to borrow money for ceremonial purposes, especially for marriages. The rate of interest on the loans borrowed from the *sahukar* and the landlord were 2, 3, 4, *pies* per rupee per month respectively. The loans were generally unsecured.⁹⁶ Moreover, almost all Kunbis and Mahars were in debt as well as large number of Marathas. Reasons for indebtedness differed according to their caste position. Kunbis and Marathas had taken loans for weddings but Mahars had taken them for their daily livelihood.

It was Sambhaji Tukaram Gaikwad⁹⁷ who took the initiative to organize the *Bahiskrit Vargache Jangi Zahir Sabha* in July 1929, and highlighted the atrocities being committed in Chiplun, Khed and Dapoli by caste Hindus.

⁹⁵ Neil Charlesworth; *Peasants and Imperial Rule-Agriculture and Agrarian Society in the Bombay Presidency 1850-1935*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, UK, 2002, p.274.

⁹⁶ Bombay Provincial Banking Enquiry Committee, Home Department, SPL, File no 60, 1929-30 MSA

⁹⁷ Alias Dadasaheb Bhaurao Gaikwad, who was Ambedkar's strong supporter throughout his life. He was a mass leader, he had strong hold in Nashik and in Konkan. Dadasaheb Gaikwad who, along with his compatriots, were the real organisers of the Mahad Satyagraha of 1927, one of the major protest actions of the Dalits in the country. He remained strong follower of Ambedkar. After Ambedkar he launched national level protest on land issue. For detail see Gail Omvedts, *Building the Ambedkar Revolution*, Sambhaji Tukaram Gaikwad and the Konkan Dalits, Bhashya Prakashan, Mumbai, 2011.

It was in support of the Mahar Watan Bill⁹⁸; and for the creation of the Konkan Sauraksha Fund to help the victims.⁹⁹ Ambedkar had started the anti-*khoti* movement in 1929 and in April 1930 in the *Shetkari Parishad* (Peasant Organization) he announced his anti-*khoti* struggle at Chiplun followed by A. V. Chitre who started to build up an organization. The first peasant meeting was held at Goregaon in a Mangaon Taluka.¹⁰⁰ The Parishad and the ILP adopted a programme which rejected the practice of *makta* (produce) rent that the tenants had to give to the *khots*. One of the strongest non-*makta* strikes took place at Cheri from 1932 to 1937. Tenants had to pay the landlord half of the gross produce and in some cases even more, and they had to perform all kinds of unpaid labor. Before the strike tenants demanded that they would pay half of the produce. Tenants also demanded a written confirmation of the right to cultivation for the next year. The *sahukars* refused all these demands and the Cheri strike started. An intensive campaign was carried out by the ILP. This included public meetings of workers in Bombay. Most of them were Municipality and mill workers. The struggle was joined by communist leaders like B.T. Randive and G.S. Sardesai. There was a big procession of 3,000 peasants, waving the red flag. Due to the Cheri strike *khot* land became arid for four years

⁹⁸ The village economy in Maharashtra was called *balutedari System*. There were twelve *balutedars* Mahars were one among them. *Balutedars* were employees of a village in feudal India who received their *balute* or *gavahi* for the religious, craft or labour services they rendered. The Mahars were hereditary village servant, they were carriers of dead animals, husbandmen, messenger, labourers, scavengers, sellers of firewood and cow dung cakes, and beggars. In return to their service they used to get a small government payment, partly in cash and partly in land. The chief source of their income is the yearly grain allowance or *baluta*. Mahars were the Government servants according to the 1874 Watan Act. Ambedkar explained Mahar *watan* problems as the following: firstly, in Mahar *watan*, Mahar did not have fixed work but they had to do all kinds of works. The Bombay Hereditary Offices Act 1874 did not fix Mahars' work but gave the authority to the Collector to decide. Mahar *watan* service was *vethbegari*. Secondly, in Mahar *watan* the number of people who have to work in one village was not decided. During 1924-26 Ambedkar studied the Mahar *watan* system and came to conclusion that the system had degraded Mahars. He urged the need to break the shackles and liberated them from Mahar *watan* for their all round progress. Finally, in 1937, Ambedkar brought the bill to abolish Mahar *watan*. Mahar *watan* was abolished in 1961.

⁹⁹ Gail Omvedt; *Building the Ambedkar Revolution, Sambhaji Tukaram Gaikwad and the Konkan Dalits*, Mumbai: Bhashya Prakashan, 2011, p. xi

¹⁰⁰ Chandrakant Dharmadhikari; *Khoti Virudhacha Ladha*, (publication missing), 4 July 1999, p. 29.

and therefore *khots* went to court against their tenants.¹⁰¹ In this situation the Congress organized meetings to reduce the tension between *khots* and tenants. Instead of supporting the *khoti* abolition demand the Congress proposed a law to stop this conflict.¹⁰²

Many non-*makta* strikes took place under the ILP's guidance. Underi was one of the famous ones. In Underi village tenants stopped paying rent (*khand*) to the *khots*. Therefore, *khots* went to court against them. The Sessions Court of Alibagha (verdict on 25/12/33) accused several people and sentenced them to prison for ten years.¹⁰³ Bombay mill and Municipality workers established the *Underi Khatala* Committee to generate funds for victims. Committees were founded across Bombay and members came mostly from the labour camps. The *Underi Khatala* Committee had decided to appeal in the upper court against the Alibagh Session Courts verdict. Committee members organized meetings in Bombay for *Underi* funds and explained the exploitation of *khots*. They collected funds through organizing *jalsas*¹⁰⁴ at different places. The Committee would invite various *jalsa* parties to perform and they appealed to the gathering to donate money for *Underi* victims.¹⁰⁵ Ambedkar took the case to the High Court and the High Court reduced their prison term by one year.¹⁰⁶ The *Janata* wrote that the court's duty was not just to find the accused and punish them but they have to find out the root cause to uproot it. Ambedkar unified peasants and workers in a common project of class justice. The movement made imagination use of press, public speeches and popular cultural performance.

1.6 Agrarian Issues in the Konkan and the 1937 Election

Due to the growing response to the anti-*khoti* agitation and Congress' lack of mass base here, the Congress was forced to review the situation. In 1936, the Congress appointed a 'Peasant Inquiry Committee', which subsequently reported that the relations between *khots* and tenants

¹⁰¹ Ibid., pp. 44-51

¹⁰² *Home Department - Special* (confidential report), file No. 922 (2) 1937, MSA, p. 173

¹⁰³ *Janata* (Bombay) 6 January 1933

¹⁰⁴ Singing group, the folk drama *tamasha*, in their programme they used describe untouchable and workers situation in Bombay and in rural area. *Jalsa* had tradition from Phule's movement which became very active in 1930s under Ambedkar's agitation. Basically it was speaking against exploitation.

¹⁰⁵ *Janata* (Bombay), 17 February, 1934

¹⁰⁶ *Janata* (Bombay), 4 August, 1934

had been deteriorating for several years. Tenants were going on strikes frequently for their demands. Therefore, the government had to look into the matter.¹⁰⁷ In the report of the sub-committee for peasants, appointed by the Bombay Provincial Congress Committee under the chairmanship of N. V. Gadgil, it was recommended that the *khoti* system of Ratnagiri and Kolaba districts should be abolished. The Congress knew that it had less support from Konkan and for the forthcoming election they had to ensure their vote bank. Therefore, to attract tenants they recommended that the *khoti* system be abolished. Before this, the Congress had strong support from *khots*. An article, entitled '*Khots Support Congress*', in the *Bombay Chronicle* of 12 February 1936 stated that "Many *khots* have promised solid support to the Congress. A manifesto to that effect is being issued."¹⁰⁸ But in November 1936, a secret Police Abstract reported about the Congress position in the Konkan area where they were losing their political base. It said "it will be remembered that Congress prestige in the Konkan suffered a set-back on account of the 'Maharashtra Peasants' Committee Report' which was not favorable to that large body of land holders, the *khots*. Even today, the Congress hold over the peasants in Ratnagiri is practically non-existent, and it has therefore been necessary for Jedhe and Gadgil to concentrate on propoganda in this area. It cannot be said that they have yet met with any success and they have moreover to overcome a good deal of counter propoganda."¹⁰⁹ The Bombay Provincial Congress Committee had promised in its election manifesto of 1937 that it would abolish the *khoti* system. Naturally the *khots* from Ratnagiri district threatened to resign from the Congress. Hence, crucially the Congress started losing its hold on *khots* as well as among tenants. Keeping in mind the 1937 election and to get the support of a large part of the peasant community, the Congress recruited Gadgil and Keshavrao Jedhe whose task was to bring the upper caste peasant community into the fold of the Congress.

Before 1930, Keshavrao Jedhe had been an eminent Non-Brahmin leader in Maharashtra and he had considerable influence within the non-Brahmin community. During this time, Jedhe presided over some peasant conferences and the usual resolutions were passed about the reduction of land revenue, redemption of debts etc.¹¹⁰ Then Shankarrao Dev and Gadgil, the Congress leaders, gave an assurance to the *khots* while on tour

¹⁰⁷ Ibid.

¹⁰⁸ Home Department – Special, File No. 800 (106)-D-(2), 1936. MSA, p.169.

¹⁰⁹ Ibid.

¹¹⁰ Ibid.

in Konkan that the Congress would abolish *khoti* within 20 years but the personal rights of *khots* as landlords would not be taken away. During election time, Sardar Patel on behalf of Congress promised to the *khots* in writing that they will not abolish the *khoti* system.¹¹¹ Due to the opposition of the *khots* and promises made to them, the election manifesto pledges to tenants could not be fulfilled by B. G. Kher (the first Prime Minister of the Bombay Presidency).¹¹² The Congress held many meetings in Chiplun Taluka and asked the people not to rely on what the members of the ILP were telling them. It was explained that the *khoti* could not be abolished until the *khots* get adequate compensation; and that Ambedkar was misleading them.¹¹³ Due to its changing position on the *khoti* system, *khots'* support was resumed. Thus, the Congress tried to convince both *khots* and tenants at the same time and tied itself up in contradictions.

The election campaign of 1937 sparked a renewal of the ongoing struggle. Elections were held on 17 February 1937. The Congress in Bombay Presidency won 86 out of 175 seats. It could not secure an absolute majority in the Bombay Legislative Assembly, but it was the largest single party.¹¹⁴ The results of the elections in Bombay were gratifying to the ILP: out of the 17 candidates it put up, 15 were successful. It won 11 out of the 15 reserved seats for the Untouchables in Bombay.¹¹⁵ Three general candidates, Anandrao Chitre from Ratnagiri North, Surendranath Govind Chitnis from Kolaba and Shamrao Parulekar from Ratnagiri East, as well as two Untouchable candidates, Vishram Gangadhar Savadkar for Kolaba and Gangadhar Ragharam Ghatge for Ratnagiri, won from the ILP in the region.¹¹⁶ Ambedkar won from the reserved constituency from the working class locality Byculla and Parel.¹¹⁷ It was from the Konkan that the largest number of candidates was put up. After election ILP organized meeting at Kamgar Maidan to congratulate elected candidates. Ambedkar in his

¹¹¹ *Janata* (Bombay), 25 September, 1937.

¹¹² Kanekar, *Serfdom in the Konkan*, (Name of City and year is missing) Working Men's Institute, p.298.

¹¹³ Home Department - Special, File No. 922 (2), 1937, MSA, p. 255.

¹¹⁴ *B. G. Kher Paper*, III Installment, File Number 2 NMML.

¹¹⁵ Jayashree Gokhale; *From Concessions to Confrontation: The Politics of an Indian Untouchable Community*, Bombay: Popular Prakashan, 1993, p. 135.

¹¹⁶ *B.G. Kher Paper*, IV- VII Installment, Serial Number 32, NMML.

¹¹⁷ Byculla primarily housing Marathi working class community and Parel an industrial area provided space for mill workers.

speech said that till now he was fighting for untouchables issue but he changed his mind and will fight for workers and peasants. He emphasized that establishment of ILP was big shift in his ideas.¹¹⁸ (Read Ambedkar's full speech)

Was the party successful or not? At the national level it was insignificant; but at the provincial level it became the biggest opposition party. Elected members included not only Untouchables but also some radical caste Hindus, notably Shyamrao Parulekar, who later joined the CPI.¹¹⁹ This indicated that the basis for its victories in general constituencies was the anti-landlord struggle of peasants as well as its work on caste issues.¹²⁰ One candidate from the Hindu Mahasabha¹²¹ and three candidates from the Congress won from Konkan. After this election, the Congress Socialists said that the most unsatisfactory results, so far in the Presidency was concerned, had been in the Ratnagiri district. The Congress has lost its majority there.¹²²

After the election, the Shetkari Sangh (ILP's peasant organization in Konkan) started to organize the party at the village level. Bhai Chitre was looking after the formation of branches. Local party branches received tenants' complaints and responded to them.¹²³ Because of the ILP's office work at local level, many tenants went to court against *sahukars*.

1.7 Efforts for a National Alliance of Class Movements

In this period, Ambedkar began to develop interactions with many workers' and peasants' organizations, which he regarded as natural allies for his cause. The ILP appealed to peasants' and workers' organizations to come together and to form a national level alliance against the Congress.¹²⁴ In 1938, the *Janata* carried news on the Kisan Sabha and the activities of

¹¹⁸ *Bhandari Vijay*, March-April 1937

¹¹⁹ Gail Omvedt; *Building the Ambedkar Revolution: Sambhaji Tukaram Gaikwad and the Konkan Dalits*, Mumbai: Bhashya Prakashan, 2011, p. 43.

¹²⁰ Gail Omvedt; *Dalits and Democratic Revolution: Dr Ambedkar and the Dalit Movement in Colonial India*, New Delhi: Sage Publication, 1994, p.196.

¹²¹ The Hindu Mahasabha supported the *khoti* system.

¹²² Home Department - Special, File No. 800 (106)-D-(5) 27 February 1937, MSA, p. 161.

¹²³ *Janata* (Bombay), 26 June 1937

¹²⁴ *Ibid*, 24 June 1939.

one of his leaders, Swami Sahajanand, in Bihar. Sahajanand's statement that 'the Congress does not represent peasants',¹²⁵ attracted Ambedkar to a great extent. On Sahajanand's visit to Bombay, the ILP welcomed him and Ambedkar discussed issues of mutual concern with him.¹²⁶ But this did not result in any further cooperation. They had different understandings of imperialism and about the workers' political front. Ambedkar told Sahajanand that he was ready to support the Congress if they would really fight against imperialism. But the Congress allied primarily with capitalists and land lords. Ambedkar did not regard the Congress as anti-imperialist. To him, it was an organization negotiating with the imperialist forces on behalf of the upper castes and classes.

In 1938, the *Janata* underlined similarities between ILP and Kisan Sabha, but it also expressed its dislike of the Sabha, believing that it supported the Congress as its political front.¹²⁷ The ILP promised that if the Sabha established its own organization they would join them.¹²⁸ For Ambedkar, supporting the Congress amounted to putting power into the hands of Brahmans and landlords (*bhatji* and *shetji*), and capitalists, and he declared that the ILP's struggle was to create working class rulers.¹²⁹ Though Sahajanand accepted that capitalists dominated the Congress, he still felt close to Congress nationalism and expressed his view that the working classes should take over the Congress from within. Thus, Sahajanand was not willing to oppose the Congress and to form an independent political front.¹³⁰ Sahajanand's closeness with the Congress forced Ambedkar to go alone.

The *Janata* not only wrote on the Sabha activities, it also focused on peasant's movements in Bengal and Gujarat. It appreciated their anti-Congress independent stand.¹³¹ Indulal Yagnik's activities in Gujarat against feudalism also were reported in the *Janata*. It is interesting to note that while working for an alliance with these groups, Ambedkar did not push for the eradication of caste and untouchability as the core issue of his

¹²⁵ Ibid, 28 May 1938.

¹²⁶ Ibid, 31 December 1938.

¹²⁷ Ibid, 28 May 1938.

¹²⁸ Ibid, 28 May 1938

¹²⁹ Ibid, 28 May 1938

¹³⁰ Ibid, 31 December 1938.

¹³¹ Ibid, 4 June 1938

programme. This was a purely political tactic to form a national level front against the Congress. Though the social base of Ambedkar's party was limited - he often used the term '*Hindi Shramjivi Varg*' or Hindi working class (It included Marathi and Hindi speaking workers) in the *Janata* - it appealed to the entire working class of India. Ambedkar adopted this strategy because he was aware of the limitations posed by the social base of his political party, although he proclaimed that his party represented 80 per cent of the population.¹³²

Disappointed with the socialists, he complained that the socialists had all those years demanded the confiscation of all *zamindari* lands and the abolition of the capitalist system, but they were silent when a concrete Bill was brought forward to put an end to the *khoti* system.¹³³ Along with communists, he organized one of the biggest workers' strikes against the Trade Disputes Bill.¹³⁴ But this alliance could not survive for long. Marxists attacked Ambedkar for organizing separate untouchable workers' conferences.¹³⁵ They saw the working class as a homogenous entity and refused to see problems of untouchable workers separately. Similarly, the Left organization in the Bombay Presidency remained largely silent on issues related to the *khoti* system. Their involvement in anti-*khoti* agitation was only limited to 1937s peasants' march on the Bombay Assembly. It was difficult for Ambedkar to find allies at the national level who could stand against the Congress in order to fight issues of untouchability and feudalism.

1.8 Roots of 'Class' in 'Caste'

Ambedkar found it difficult to organize all castes under the banner of peasants' rights. The bulk of the population, consisting of Kunbis and Mahrattas, did not intend to mix with untouchables. Though Kunbis, Mahrathas and Mahars were all tenants yet socially and ritually Kunbis

¹³² Ibid, 4 June 1938.

¹³³ Dhananjay Keer; *Dr. Ambedkar Life and Mission*, Bombay: Popular Prakashan, 1954, 310.

¹³⁴ Home Department - Special, File No. 550 (25) III, 1938, MSA, p.131. The Congress Ministry introduced an Industrial Dispute Bill in the Bombay Legislative Assembly on 2 September 1938. The Bill known as the first of the 'Black Acts' against Bombay workers made conciliation compulsory; and under certain very ill-defined conditions it made strikes illegal.

¹³⁵ *Janata* (Bombay), 19 February 1938.

and Mahrathas were superior to Mahars. Therefore, they could socially boycott Untouchables. Ambedkar had already estranged the feelings between the two castes by advising the Mahars not to skin carcasses and not to eat carrion. Untouchables also refused to pay *baluta* in cash or kind.¹³⁶ He advised them to exercise their legal rights over public property and natural resources.¹³⁷ Although Ambedkar tried to mobilize peasants on the issue of class rights, he knew that the untouchable tenant's socio-economic condition was worse than that of other tenants. Therefore he advised untouchables to migrate to cities to be relieved from the oppression at the hands of caste Hindus and landlords. He felt that cities were more hospitable to untouchables; here they would have at least a chance to become a class and to forego their caste restrictions. In an August 1929 article in the *Bahishkrut Bharat*, Ambedkar said that upper caste solidarity resulted in caste being used for tenants to support the *khoti* system.¹³⁸ He said that Brahmans were not the only hurdle for the upliftment of untouchable castes, but even non-Brahmans were responsible for it. Ambedkar described the nature of class in India as rooted within the caste system. The *Janata* complained that class solidarity was very strong among upper castes, who come easily together to serve their common interest. But the reverse was the case with the working classes. Ambedkar described the peculiar nature of the caste system, in which caste solidarity was strong among upper castes but fragmented below this level.¹³⁹ The *Janata* explained that though struggles against untouchability show that the struggle is between untouchable and touchable, however, the real struggle was much more economic than the social. Untouchables did not have any control over production. They were stuck in virtual slavery and they did not have the option to sell their labour in the open market. Unless and until untouchability was abolished, they would not have any right over the production.¹⁴⁰ The ILP tried to combine Marxist methodology with the issue of anti-untouchability.

¹³⁶ Rajnarayan Chandavarkar, *The Origins of Industrial Capitalism in India - Business strategies and the working classes in Bombay, 1900-1940*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002, p. 138

¹³⁷ Home Department - Special, File No. 927-A, 1939, MSA, pp.170-71.

¹³⁸ Chandrakant Dharmadhikari; *Khoti Virudhacha Ladha*, (publication and place missing), 4 July 1999, p. 23.

¹³⁹ *Janata* (Bombay), 27 May 1938.

¹⁴⁰ *Janata* (Bombay), 22 August 1936.

1.9 Peasant Rebellion and the Congress Response

Ambedkar blamed the Congress for delaying his Bill for 10 months and expressed his distress that the *khoti* system would continue because of his party's minority position in the Legislative Assembly.¹⁴¹ He warned the tenants

“Your (tenants’) *swarajya* lies in the abolition of the *khoti* system, and as long as you do not abolish the *khoti*, you will not gain *swarajya*. Though there is British rule in India, really there is rule of the *khots* over you”.¹⁴²

Ratnagiri Zila Shetkari Parishad and Cheeplun Shetkari Parishad were mobilized by Tanaji Mahadev Gudekar and Sambhaji Tukaram Gaikwad to campaign for the bills and to organize public pressure on the government. Several meetings were held across the Konkan region and other parts of Bombay Presidency during this campaign.¹⁴³ Ambedkar asked peasants to boycott *khot* land. Peasants themselves at the village level started bringing resolutions against exploitation through *khots*. These insisted that tenants should boycott the cultivation of land which the *khot* has taken away from them. No one should work for him and if someone does so then he will be boycotted by the village.¹⁴⁴ In the *Janata*, Ambedkar appealed to tenants to forget their different castes and to feel that they are one caste, that of tenants.¹⁴⁵ Maharashtra had a strong sense of anti-Brahmanism and this was reflected in a meeting of the tenants of Maratha, Mahar, Teli, Sonar and Bhandari castes, held at Gothane in Malwan taluqa on 20 May 1939, when they decided not to cooperate with the Brahmins (who were *khots* in many cases).¹⁴⁶ This collective voice against feudal oppression helped ILP to build up a common ground across peasant castes.

Tenants were always indebted and they demanded a reduced rent so they could survive. Initially tenants demanded that they would give half of their produce as rent. *Khots* were not willing accept their demands. in such

¹⁴¹ Home Department - Special, File No. 927-A, 1939, MSA, pp. 224-25

¹⁴² Ibid.

¹⁴³ Gail Omvedt; *Building the Ambedkar Revolution: Sambhaji Tukaram Gaikwad and the Konkan Dalits*, Mumbai: Bhashya Prakashan, 2011, p. xiii.

¹⁴⁴ Home Department - Special, File No. 918-A, 1938, MSA.

¹⁴⁵ *Janata* (Bombay), 28 May 1938.

¹⁴⁶ *Weekly Report, DM, Ratnagiri, 27 May 1939* in Home Department - Special, File No. 918-B, 1939, MSA.

situation in 1939 there were many violent activities against each other. There were cases where tenants murdered *khots*. Ambedkar, condemned this and asked tenants to give up violence. After the ILP's campaign, in Konkan tenants strongly refused to pay rent. The Congress government was afraid about tenants unity against the *khots* and the Congress. So the situation in the late 1930s worsened and forced the government to look into this matter. The question of a moratorium on agricultural debts for a period of one year came up for discussion at the meeting of the Congress the Bombay Legislature in December 1938. It was understood that pending legislation for providing adequate relief to the agriculturist-debtors, a moratorium with regard to agricultural indebtedness might be declared. But there was a strong opposition to the suggestion. Fear was expressed that the rural credit machinery would crash if moratorium were declared.¹⁴⁷ In another meeting of the Congress they said "On the issue of moratorium, the feeling was that the Congress Ministry had already brought into existence measures that were tantamount to a moratorium and considerable relief in this direction had already accrued."¹⁴⁸ A meeting of the Congress in the local legislature was held in Bombay. The tenancy problem occupied a lot of attention in view of conflicting opinions expressed by *inamdars* and *khots* on the one hand, and tenants on the other. The discussion centered round the issues of whether permanent occupancy rights should be conferred on the tenants, the conditions under which they were to be granted; the minimum period of tenancy; and the fixing of maximum rent either in cash or in kind.¹⁴⁹

Finally in February 1939 the Congress brought in the *Kul Sarakshan Kayada* or the Tenancy Bill in the Bombay Assembly. The bill was strongly opposed by Parulekar. He reminded the Congress of the promises they had given in their election manifesto which were different.¹⁵⁰ The Congress government promised to give permanent tenancy on some conditions. According to the bill till January 1, 1938, those who have cultivated land for the last six years would be given permanent tenancy. To claim land occupation they had to produce receipts of rent payment which they had paid for several years. But due to the illiteracy of tenants and the *khots'* strong dominance over revenue records, *khots* never

¹⁴⁷ *The Bombay Chronicle* (Bombay), 13 Dec 1937.

¹⁴⁸ *The Bombay Chronicle* (Bombay), 14 Dec 1937.

¹⁴⁹ *The Times of India*, 14 Dec 1937.

¹⁵⁰ *Janata* (Bombay), 18 February 1939.

gave receipts. Therefore, tenants did not possess receipts. Further, the bill said, they will get tenancy rights only in *khoti*, *inami* and *talukdari* villages. Moreover, tenancy rights would be given only from those lands, where the landlord was possessing 33 acre *bagayati*¹⁵¹ land or 100 acre *jirayati*¹⁵² land. Moreover, those landlords would have to pay revenue annually not less than 150 rupees.¹⁵³ The bill put in these conditions where tenants had little chance to claim their tenancy rights. Moreover the bill did not provide any proper method to fix the rent. Ambedkar called this bill irresponsible. One of the conditions of the bill was that if the tenant damaged the land then the *khot* had the right to evict him. The ILP wondered why tenants would damage land which was the main source of their livelihood. This provision helped *khots* to remove tenants from the land at any point of time while misusing this condition.¹⁵⁴ The ILP attacked the Congress pronouncement of making tenancy permanent in a way which would strengthen the *khoti* and the *malguzari* system. This resolution tried to keep tenants under the system of landlordism. The ILP believed in the abolishing of *khoti* and the *malguzari*¹⁵⁵ system.¹⁵⁶

During these days, Chitre concentrated on the anti-*khoti* agitation and delivered very vibrant speeches against the *khoti* system. In 1938, he warned protesters that

“if the *khoti* was not abolished, they should be prepared to revolt and die after bloodshed; that they should not allow the *khots* to drink the blood of agriculturists and that they should raise their sticks if they were troubled by the Congress and the *khots*”¹⁵⁷

He asked them not to be afraid of attachments and jails.¹⁵⁸ In the same month, several *khots* of the Ratnagiri district requested police protection

¹⁵¹ Garden land which is more fertile.

¹⁵² Land appropriate to or fit for agriculture but having no garden. This land is having only *rabi* crops or monsoon crops.

¹⁵³ *Janata* (Bombay), 20 August 1938

¹⁵⁴ *Tillori Kunbi Monthly Report in Ibid.*, 27 August 1938

¹⁵⁵ The Land tenure prevailing in the erstwhile Central Provinces was known as *Malguzari* system in which the *Malguzar* who was merely a revenue farmer under the Marathas, was invested with proprietary rights over villages.

¹⁵⁶ *Janata* (Bombay), 2 July 1938

¹⁵⁷ Home Department – Special, File No. 927-A, 1939, MSA, p.7

¹⁵⁸ Home Department – Special, File No. 918-B, 1939, MSA, p. 247.

as they feared Chitre's propaganda would lead the Mahars and tenants to violence.¹⁵⁹ Therefore, in 1938 and 1939, there were frequent reports of 'intense feelings' between landlords and tenants, vociferous and angry meetings and assaults by Mahars on Brahmin or *bania khots*.¹⁶⁰ Retired Mahar servicemen, returning to their home villages or settling in towns and cities, were a crucial source of support for the struggle.

Ambedkar's visit to Ratnagiri in 1938 was an important event in the development of the movement against the *khoti*. He presided over six meetings in different parts of the district for the propagation of the position of his party and for gathering the support of masses for the proposed bill.¹⁶¹ He criticized the Congress and Gandhi for their pro-landlord stands.¹⁶²

Under the leadership of N. N. Patil, peasants started opposing the Congress programme in Konkan. Kher's visit in 1938 was strongly opposed by tenants. On 20 December 1938 when Kher came to deliver a speech, peasants demonstrated against him. They went to the venue and put many questions to Kher. N. N. Patil posed counter questions regarding the anti-*Khoti* Bill. Tenants shouted slogans "*Congress sarkar cha nishedha aso, fitur shahi nasht kara, bhandval shahi nasht kara, kala kayada nasht kara, samrajya shahi nasht kara*" (Congress government down down, destroy capitalism and Black Act). Patil was shown black flag.¹⁶³

In 1939 Parulekar observed that tenants "would not get adequate food unless they united and did away with the *khots* and *Sawakars*" He asked tenants not to help the police, Magistrates, Collectors, and they should not repay the loans of *sawkars* nor quit the lands which were in their possession.¹⁶⁴ In order to destroy the triangular collaboration between the Congress, colonial rulers and *khots*, Ambedkar followed the path of mass struggles, asking peasants to boycott *khot* land and to refuse paying *makta* or produce.¹⁶⁵ He advised them that whatever grain they produced, must

¹⁵⁹ Home Department - Special, File No. 927-A, 1939, MSA, p.9.

¹⁶⁰ Rajnarayan Chandavarkar; *The Origins of Industrial Capitalism in India - Business strategies and the working classes in Bombay, 1900-1940*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002, p. 139.

¹⁶¹ Home Department - Special, File No. 927-A, 1939, MSA, p.161.

¹⁶² *Ibid.*, p.129.

¹⁶³ *Janata* (Bombay), 31 December 1938.

¹⁶⁴ Home Department - Special, File No. 918-B., 1939, MSA.

¹⁶⁵ Home Department - Special, File No. 927-A, 1939, MSA, p. 247.

be harvested and taken home by them; and that they should not be afraid of going to jails. He promised publicly that he would accompany them to jail.¹⁶⁶ A song of 'Peasants and Workers' in 1938 depicted the exploitation of peasants who sowed the grain and tilled the field only to have the crop taken by the landlord.

Reap the crops----but don't give
One grain to the parasite!
Mine the wealth----but don't give
One particle to the thieves!
Make clothing---but don't give
Even a rag to the idle
Make weapons---to take in your hands
for your own self-defence!
Victory to peasants---victory to workers
Long live the red flag!¹⁶⁷

Ambedkar adopted this method because in the 1880s *Khoti* Act had confirmed that "*khots* shall continue to hold their villages conditionally on the payment of the amount of the *jama*".¹⁶⁸ Therefore, in order to paralyse the *khoti*, the agreement between the *khot* and colonial ruler had to be destroyed. Ambedkar believed that there was no other way than this struggle as well as the legal process.¹⁶⁹

But the method ran into a lot of problems due to the caste-feudal structure of villages. The *Janata* explains that village strikes were more difficult to organize than the urban ones. In cities, after a strike, workers had a chance to join other mills but in villages peasants were totally dependent on the *sahuakar* and the *khot* and they did not have any other job options.¹⁷⁰ In this situation tenants, particularly untouchables, were fully dependent. Therefore, before calling a strike they had to confirm the unity of peasants.

¹⁶⁶ Ibid. & *Janata* (Bombay), 28 May 1938.

¹⁶⁷ *Janata* (Bombay), 27 August 1938. Translated and quoted in Gail Omvedt, *Dalits and Democratic Revolution: Dr Ambedkar and the Dalit Movement in Colonial India*, New Delhi: Sage Publication, 1994, p. 203.

¹⁶⁸ *Khoti Settlement Act, 1880, The Bombay Code, Volume I, Sixth Edition*, Bombay: Government of Bombay Legal Department, 1949.

¹⁶⁹ *Janata* (Bombay), 4 June, 1938.

¹⁷⁰ *Janata* (Bombay), 26 July, 1938.

In the anti-*khoti* struggle, unity of different castes paralyzed the *khots* in some parts of the region. In many strikes, tenants brought a resolution not to cultivate *khots'* land and land became arid. Therefore the *khots* started importing labour from other villages. But due to the tenants' solidarity, other village tenants refused to work on their land as well. The *khot* used caste to destroy their unity, but it did not work this time. It became difficult for *khots* to ask other castes to come for work if one caste refused to do it. Owing to the unity among various castes, the *khots* were also not able to gather witnesses against the tenant's rebellion for not obeying the *khoti* pattern.¹⁷¹ The *khots* used to appeal in the court that the court should punish the tenants if they refuse to work in their land. Normally courts verdicts always supported to the *khots'* position. In many cases tenants used to opposed the court verdict and claimed their ownership over the same land from which they were evicted. They continued to cultivate that same land.¹⁷² In many cases, the *khots* could not convince Maratha caste men to stand witness against an untouchable tenant.¹⁷³ Therefore, they tried to recruit witnesses from other villages. But this impressive class solidarity among various castes was restricted only to economic interests. It could not create a social feeling of oneness. Their economic interest could bind them till their interests were served.

In April 1928 Ambedkar had complained to Executive Council of Home Department that Mahars were facing problems in the Kolaba district because they decided to abandon their traditional duties such as skinning dead animals. Muslim *khots* were forcing Mahar to resume their work. Due to their threats, none of the Mahars could leave their village.¹⁷⁴ After Ambedkar's declaration to leave the Hindu religion, untouchable workers stopped worshipping Hindu gods and stopped doing traditional village duties. This was resisted by Kunbis and Marathas with the help of the *khots*. To maintain the social order upper caste tenants and *khots* used come together to force untouchables to practice all Hindu rituals. Thus, there was alliance of dominant culture and caste economy to keep lower castes at the bottom of social strata.¹⁷⁵

¹⁷¹ *Janata* (Bombay), 9 July, 1938.

¹⁷² Home Department – Special, 918-A, 1938, MSA.

¹⁷³ *Janata* (Bombay), 6 August, 1938.

¹⁷⁴ Home Department – Political, File No. 184/28, A- Class, 1928, MSA.

¹⁷⁵ *Janata* (Bombay), 20 November, 1937.

Apart from economic struggle in various villages Kunbis started performing marriage rituals without the help of Brahmins. They would not give *dakshina* or fees to the Brahmins for presiding over marriage rituals and they stopped calling Brahmins to weddings.¹⁷⁶ This was the impact of Ambedkar's cultural revolt and it was close to Phule's tradition.¹⁷⁷ Their struggle focused more on cultural and economic exploitation by Indians than on that by the imperialists.

The struggle became vibrant in 1939 when the government recorded a "grave situation, which, unless handled in good time, might lead to a crisis enveloping the whole of the Ratnagiri and Kolaba District. The tension was due to a full-fledged no rent campaign. The Government warned that in the course of the next month the whole district may be involved."¹⁷⁸ In 1939, a clear *pro-khoti* stand emerged from the Congress across the Konkan and tenants started opposing the Congress position. Therefore, the Congress government started to arrest the ILP leaders.¹⁷⁹ The Bombay Sentinel in May 1939 reported that a Kisan leader had been arrested by the police. ILP leaders had been served with notices forbidding them to take part in peasant activities.¹⁸⁰ The Janata attacked such policies and stated that those struggles were legal but the Congress, when in power, branded them illegal.

The government so far had refused to grant an inquiry. The local Kisan union under the leadership of Parulekar had faced all kinds of threats. Shankar Rao Kode, president of Shetkari Sangh, was arrested on 28 May 1939 and ex-president Masurekar and Kamalkant Govind Dalal, president of the union, had been served with notices forbidding them from taking part in peasant activities at Kuvala.¹⁸¹ The Congress alleged that the Sangh had illegally collected land revenue and local funds from the tenants, in

¹⁷⁶ *Janata* (Bombay), 18 March, 1939.

¹⁷⁷ For Phule's movement see Gail Omvedt; *Cultural Revolt in a Colonial Society: The Non-Brahmin Movement in Western India, 1873-1930*, Bombay: Scientific Socialist Education Trust, 1976.

¹⁷⁸ Home Department - Special, File No. 918-B, 1939, MSA.

¹⁷⁹ There was a news in '*Konkan Krushival*' that the Congress arrested many ILP leaders from Ratnagiri and Kolaba district and the Congress had plan to arrest more leaders those who are involve in anti-*khoti* movement. See *Janata* (Bombay), 10 June, 1939.

¹⁸⁰ Home Department - Special, File No. 918-B, 1939, MSA.

¹⁸¹ *The Bombay Sentinel* (Bombay), 29 May 1939.

addition to the subscription to the Sangh, under false representations. The Sangh wanted to establish the system of paying only the fixed assessment (*dhara*) in lieu of rent (*Mamul Khand*).

Printed leaflets about the activities of the Kuvle Shetkari Sangh were distributed at the Kankavali police station giving a graphic description of the condition of tenants and the ways and means used by the *khots* for recovering their dues. The leaflets appealed for monetary help, pointing out that the future of the *khoti* system depended on the success of the Sangh.¹⁸² S. V. Parulekar who was also leading the Sangh in Konkan demanded to adjourn the House on the issue of arrest of peasant leaders. The Police asked Sangh office-bearers to appear at police stations with the accounts and documents.

A much more sinister aspect of the situation, one that did great damage to the Congress government, was the fact that, even among alleged offenders involved in the very same case under identical sections of the Indian Penal Code, an invidious distinction was being made between those who were Congressmen and those who were not. When Kode was arrested, Masurekar (Congress MLA) was served with notices along with one more Sangh leader on same ground. But Masurakar got bail soon and others did not.¹⁸³ In this case Kode was roped and handcuffed. This was criticized by union leaders.

Tenants took out processions to support Kode. Kode's prosecution was based on the view that he had cheated the members of the Union. But the members themselves resented government action and demanded the withdrawal of the case.¹⁸⁴ The discontent and the resentment resulted in the unwillingness of the people to cooperate with the Revenue authorities, the closing of tea-shops to them etc.¹⁸⁵ The Shetkari Sangh collected signatures and thumb-impressions on the application which they produced in the court. This application expressed confidence in the honesty of Kode and said that the money he collected was safe in the hands of the Union. The District Magistrate told the Sangh that instead of collecting money from tenants they should have repeated their demands to the revenue authorities and the *khots*.¹⁸⁶ Finally the government too accused them because it did

¹⁸² Home Department – Special, File No. 918-B, 1939, MSA, p. 51.

¹⁸³ *The Servant of India*, 8 June, 1939.

¹⁸⁴ Home Department – Special, File No. 918-B, 1939, MSA, p. 101.

¹⁸⁵ *Ibid.*

¹⁸⁶ *Ibid.*

not get their revenue from the *khots* due to Sangh's activities. In this regard the Congress government supported the *khot* to maintain their rule over the tenants.

A.V. Chitre, due to his revolutionary speeches was imprisoned in 1938. In May 1939, the Bombay Sentinel reported "Grave Tension in Ratnagiri-Struggle Between *Khots* and Tenants: Non-Payment of Rent Begins".¹⁸⁷ The *khots* were often beaten up by the tenants.¹⁸⁸ Under the title 'Agrarian Agitation', the government reported that the Mahars of Deorukha taluka, refused to pay their dues of *khoti* rents to the *khots* as ILP workers and Ambedkar asked them not to do so.¹⁸⁹ There were many complaints from northern Ratnagiri and the *khots* filed cases against tenants.¹⁹⁰ The Police found that similar activities could start in other areas as well. Therefore they demanded extra police forces in those villages. *Khots* used to keep gurkha¹⁹¹ forces for their security. Mostly the whole village would act against the *khot* when the *khot* came to take possession of land in 1940.¹⁹² In 1940 the Revenue Department suggested to the Collector that their local-officers should not take any part in *khot* and tenant riots. If it was necessary to be there for land possession then there should be extra police force. Moreover, the collector and his subordinates should try, whenever possible, to impress upon the tenants the futility of their action, especially under the Bombay Tenancy Act. The Baldapur riot of August 1940 between *khot* and tenants shows that the colonial ruler did not have much role to control the situation.¹⁹³

Detailed records of the police department provide information about the involvement of large numbers of middle castes such as Kunbis, Telis and Agris. For instance, on 1st January 1938 the ILP held a meeting at Dapoli, which was attended by 5000 agriculturists consisting of about 3000 Mahars and 2000 Kunbis.¹⁹⁴ The general tenor of their speeches was that the agriculturists and the untouchables should unite together against

¹⁸⁷ Ibid.

¹⁸⁸ *Janata* (Bombay), 26 June, 1937.

¹⁸⁹ Home Department - Special, File No. 918-B, 1939, MSA.

¹⁹⁰ *Janata* (Bombay), 9 July 1938.

¹⁹¹ Gorkhas were indigenous people mainly from mid-western and eastern Nepal. Their duty was to guarding particular area or houses with some payment.

¹⁹² Home Department - Special, File No. 918-A, 1938, MSA.

¹⁹³ Ibid.

¹⁹⁴ Home Department - Special, File No. 927-A, 1939, MSA, p. 11.

landlords,¹⁹⁵ and they decided not to cooperate with Brahmins who ill-treated them.¹⁹⁶ Among various struggles led by Ambedkar, the anti-*khoti* struggle involved a large number of non-dalit leaders. To compete with the expanding social base of Ambedkar's movement, the Congress started organizing Chambhar conferences and alleged that Ambedkar was only a leader of Mahars.¹⁹⁷

Sitaram Narayan Shivrakar and Narayan Sadoba Kajrolkar, both Chambhar leaders of the Congress, organized conferences to oppose Ambedkar's leadership. Its main aim was to prove that Mahars were looting the Chambhar's share and therefore the Chambhar should not follow Ambedkar. They proposed Gandhi as their leader and the Congress as their savior and appealed to join the Congress.¹⁹⁸ Kajrolkar said that it was not possible to abolish the *khoti* system at once but he expected that some concession would be given to the tenants. The effort behind organizing such conference was to reject Ambedkar's claim of being a class leader and to project him only as a caste and particularly a Mahar leader.¹⁹⁹

Struggles between Ambedkar and the Congress continued until 1942. After that, political negotiations with the British diverted Ambedkar's attention. The British sent the Cripps Mission to India to solve the puzzle about the transfer of power. Cripps presented his plan to various communities and there were signs that untouchables would be excluded from this political discussion. Cripps himself asked Ambedkar if he represented untouchables or the working class. So it was difficult for Ambedkar to work with class politics at this point. Therefore, he shifted his movement from class to caste through the establishment of the Scheduled Caste Federation.²⁰⁰

By the end of the British rule, the *khot* was a useless middleman and performed no useful function for either the government or the *ryot*. It was found that there were a number of *khots* who were absent from their villages.

¹⁹⁵ Home Department – Special, File No. 927-A-1, 1939, MSA, p. 67.

¹⁹⁶ Home Department – Special, File No. 918-B, 1939, MSA.

¹⁹⁷ *The Bombay Chronicle* (Bombay), 21-12-1937 in Home Department – Special, File No. 922 (2), MSA, p.137.

¹⁹⁸ *The Bombay Chronicle* (Bombay), 29 November 1937.

¹⁹⁹ Home Department – Special, File No. 922 (2) (Confidential report) 1937, MSA, p. 23.

²⁰⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 173.

The collector managed far more villages for the *khots* than the *khots* did for the collector. This was due to the *khots*' concentration on their livelihood elsewhere than on village management.²⁰¹ Finally the government passed the Bombay *Khoti* Abolition Act in 1949.²⁰² However, the Act did not depict the *khots* as exploitative agents.²⁰³

1.10 Conclusion

The *khoti* structure was consolidated and legalized under colonial rule. While power was more decentralized in the hands of *khots*, the colonial government had an insignificant role in village administration. Among the important *khot* rights, *khot faida* and *khasgi* land provided the right to appropriate surplus from tenants. The educated class in Bombay Presidency had a major role in supporting the *khoti* system as many of them came from landlord families and controlled the Congress. It opposed any structural changes in the village economy, which was reflected in their urban politics. Their class-consciousness was always rooted in caste-consciousness. However, the large scale labour migration from Konkan to Bombay played a significant role in connecting worker and radical urban intelligentsia with issues of rural Konkan. In order to preserve the land-owning pattern in the Konkan region, there was a silence among members of the congress about *Khot* exploitation.

Unlike in the Deccan, in the Konkan, the Kunbis' economic position as tenants forced them to form an alliance with untouchable castes against their common exploiter - the *khots*. Ambedkar understood the role of caste and untouchability within the village economy. He regarded caste as a basic obstacle, preventing peasants from coming together as a class. The anti-*khoti* movement was not related only to the removal of *khots* from land. It was also about the rights of the marginalized sections to production. The priority he accorded to the issues of caste and untouchability in his political programme did not

²⁰¹ R. D. Choksey; *Economic Life in the Bombay Konkan 1818-1939*, Bombay: Asia Publishing House, 1960, p. 125.

²⁰² *The Bombay Khoti Abolition Act, 1949, Bombay Act No. VI of 1950*, Mumbai: Government of Maharashtra (Law and Judiciary Department), 1950.

²⁰³ *Bombay Legislative Council Debate*; 15 October 1949, p. 486.

attract other peasant organizations as allies. But peasants of various castes did unite and the left supported and acted within the movement. But Left organizations supported Ambedkar only in some specific events. Their definition of a 'proletariat' class did not allow them to look into caste as a significant exploitative category. The anti-*khoti* struggle could unite protests against untouchability along with protests against feudalism. Various peasant castes therefore came together as a class to defend their economic interest but after the event they remained fragmented along their separate caste interests. The social base gained by Ambedkar during anti-*khoti* struggle did not survive. His shift from class to caste organization, necessitated by the urgent need to project himself primarily as an untouchable leader led to the shrinking of his political programme and mass base.

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