

Elite Politics and Maharashtra's Employment Guarantee Scheme

Maharashtra's Employment Guarantee Scheme has been a subject of much research. Unfortunately, much of the deliberations and contestations for and against the introduction of this scheme remained untouched. This paper attempts to examine how at disparate time frames and contexts the elite managed to maintain their support base and reinforce its legitimacy by supporting a poverty alleviation programme – the EGS.

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In this paper I examine the politics of the Maratha elite in initiation and institutionalisation of Employment Guarantee Scheme (EGS) from the mid-1960s to 2001. I argue that the political contestation and the consequent intervention of the Maratha elite was instrumental in introducing and later shaping the EGS. This view is also resonated by scholars, Herring and Edwards (1983) and Gent (1988) who have stated that the support of the political elite was crucial and critical for the introduction and institutionalisation of EGS. However they have not examined in detail the dynamics, political interplay and the particular contexts that led to the involvement of the political elite in this programme and have not assessed the role played by kinship, caste and patronage structures.

I argue that the political elite plays a critical role in addressing the needs and interests of the poor and marginalised in certain contexts and circumstances. But before we assess the particular circumstances and contexts we need to know who constitutes the political elite in Maharashtra. According to Lele (1990: 150, 157) the political elite in Maharashtra in the decade of 1960 and 1970s belonged to a section that sprang from the Maratha-Kunbi caste cluster and especially so from western Maharashtra, and continues to do so even today. This caste cluster could become a political bloc through the patronage system of kinship ties (called patriarchal patronage by Lele 1990: 150, 157) that it inherited since pre-colonial period. This patronage system hitherto restricted to social and cultural levels now extended to politics and became an instrument through which state institutions such as the cooperatives and the panchayati raj were organised. The Maratha-Kunbi caste bloc soon came to control the Congress Party through which the Maratha elite institutionalised its ideology of agrarian development. Additionally, through political accommodation the Maratha-Kunbi elite incorporated leaders from other castes such as malis, dhangars, telis, lingayats, vanjaris, mahars among others into the Congress Party and state institutions. However it was the western Maharashtra Maratha elite who dominated decision and policy-making for the state Congress Party and on behalf of the elite.

At this juncture it is pertinent to ask why I use the concept of elite to understand the relationship between political regime and poverty. I wish to state that the role of the actors is very important while assessing poverty alleviation programmes in the context of coalitional politics. Sometimes their role is forgotten when ideologies stressing class-caste issues are emphasised. In coalitional electoral politics which brings together ideologies across right and left and class and caste interests, actors can and

do play a crucial and critical role in organising the class-caste ideology and mediate between caste and class interests.

I attempt to assess the causes and the processes that led to the involvement of the western Maharashtra Maratha-led elite in this programme. I also assess the significance of this relationship for the success of the programme and demonstrate how its decline is also related to the changing nature of the elites' involvement and commitment to the programme. I argue that in the early 1970s a combination of promises and threats led the political elite in Maharashtra to sponsor EGS.

But before we proceed further it is pertinent to ask how members of the Maratha-Kunbi caste cluster emerged as the political elite in the state. Members of this caste cluster are predominantly rural and are primarily engaged in agriculture or related occupations. This caste cluster is bound together through kin networks and behaves as one large social continuum. Though this caste cluster exhibits characteristics of a relatively homogenous social group, it is internally stratified on the basis of economic classes – ranging from landlords to marginal peasants and landless labourers.

Karve (1968) argues that the Maratha caste emerged from the Kunbi caste through the process of sanskritisation and claimed a higher social position, that of Kshatriya. But due to social reforms, economic and political developments during colonialism, by early 20th century these two caste groups consolidated as one caste cluster. This caste cluster over time was transformed into a political bloc through the Samyukta Maharashtra movement in the late 1950s. Soon by late 1960s a section of this political bloc emerged as the political elite by aligning themselves with the Congress Party and having a dominant presence in the institutions of local governance, i.e., cooperatives and panchayati raj institutions (PRI).¹ This section of the political elite predominantly belonged to the western Maharashtra region [Khekale 1999:125]. To sum up, the coinciding nature of leadership of the Congress Party, cooperatives and the PRI resulted in complete dominance of the Maratha elite in state politics. Below I assess how this elite managed to protect its legitimacy in the intense competitive political scenario of early 1970s.

The Drought and EGS

The origins of EGS can be traced to the early efforts of V S Page, a well known Congressman with socialist leanings and the then chairman of the Maharashtra legislative council, who initiated a small experiment of integrated rural development in

1964-65 in Sangli district. However it was the drought of the early 1970s that pushed the state government to make it a statewide anti-poverty scheme.

The report of the Fact Finding Committee for Survey of Scarcity Areas in Maharashtra State (1973) had identified 12 districts as drought prone districts [Subramaniam 1975]. These districts were chronically prone to the vicissitudes of rainfall and yet constituted 60 per cent of the state's net sown area [Dev 1996:560-563]. The droughts of three consecutive years led to acute shortage of foodgrain and drinking water throughout the state. With primarily rain-fed agriculture the vagaries of the monsoon-forced mass migrations of most rural landless to urban centers was common.

Not only did the landless and small farmers migrate to towns in search of source of survival, but also rich farmers, some owning 50 and 100 acres of land in the arid zone.² The small and medium peasantry predominantly belonged to the Maratha-Kunbi caste cluster – the support base of the Congress Party in the state. Alleged instances of deaths in the early 1970s, due to starvation were discussed in the legislative assembly and council.³ Subsequently, in response to the criticism from all quarters, the state leadership set up a committee under the chairmanship of V B Patil, minister for irrigation and public works, to initiate measures necessary to help those affected by drought. However this action did not satisfy the opposition and thus in 1972 another committee (Sukthankar) was appointed to find a permanent solution to counter the drought situation [Dev 1996].

The drought acted as a catalyst in mobilisation of the rural masses by the opposition parties. Simultaneously a section of the leadership within the Congress Party also sympathised with the popular movement and exerted pressure on the government [Joseph 2005]. Internal dissensions within the Congress led to factional contestations, which as I argue below was the backdrop for the dominant elite support for the introduction of EGS.

As mentioned earlier, a section of the Maratha elite belonging to western Maharashtra gradually took control of the state Congress Party and through it the control of state structures. Consequently, this development led to the polarisation of power within the party by late 1960s into two factions – one represented this entrenched Maratha elite and the other consisted of Maratha and other caste leaders from other regions of the state and also a small section of the leadership from western Maharashtra who were denied access to power.

This was also the period of the political ascendance of Indira Gandhi. By 1966, she had taken over the Congress leadership and in order to consolidate her position, she began to centralise and personalise power in order to weaken the support bases of the regional Congress leaders. The first faction owed its allegiance to Y B Chavan (who backed the cooperatives and PRI leadership) and the other faction, owed allegiance to Gandhi. The former group included Maratha elite such as Vasantdada Patil, Yashwantrao Mohite and Sharad Pawar. The other faction consisted of Ramrao Adik, Antualy, Baba Saheb Bhosale and Tirpude among others.

Thus in a move to underplay the entrenched leadership's role in the state's politics, Gandhi purportedly encouraged the anti-Chavan faction within the state Congress Party. Also, through a populist agenda she attempted to win over loyalty of the masses by bypassing the existing patronage structures fashioned by the dominant Maratha-led leadership. Her initial efforts were largely unsuccessful. However, the acute drought of early 1970s,

presented her a much-needed opportunity. In pursuance of her populist strategy she questioned the legitimacy of the dominant Maratha-led elite by urging the state leadership to accelerate and implement the land reforms. She found support for her actions in the opposition parties and her loyalists within the state Congress [Lele 1990: 180-181].

Consequently, one of the proposals to decrease the ceiling on agricultural land holdings was placed for discussion in the assembly by the Indira loyalists. The "Bagaitdars" (owners of irrigated farmlands) who primarily belonged to the Maratha elite of western Maharashtra region, resented her moves [Khekale 1999: 55-72].

Ultimately as a truce, the state Congress passed a resolution to decrease the land ceiling, but inserted various loopholes.⁴ Also, given the fact that the sugar cooperative leadership supported the Chavan faction, the Indira loyalists also began questioning the domination and its monopolisation of the cooperatives.⁵ These MLAs belonged to Konkan, Vidarbha and Marathwada. The opposition pointed out that sugarcane cultivation is predominantly found in dry land agricultural districts. Together they accounted for more than 60-70 per cent of land under sugarcane in the state, which meant higher consumption of water [Khekale 1999].

Y B Chavan (then a cabinet minister in Gandhi's government) had to appropriately respond to this political challenge. Additionally, the extended drought situation had weakened the caste solidarity, as there emerged a rift between the Maratha leadership and the Maratha peasantry. The Maratha peasantry was being mobilised by the Non-Party Political Formations (NPPFs). This was leading to a formation of a new political bloc led by Socialist Party and dissident members of the Congress Party [Joseph 2005].

Thus it is in this overall context of drought and the consequent political threat, a resolution making EGS a statewide programme was passed in the Congress Committee meeting of 1972, attended by 62 MLAs. The key leaders involved were Y B Chavan, Vasantdada Patil, and the then chief minister, Vasantrao Naik.

This way the entrenched Maratha Congress leadership countered Gandhi's political insinuations by using her own populist strategy of "garibi hatao" and deprived opposition parties of issues. However, it required more pressure for the Maratha elite to sponsor it as a permanent programme. Below I explore the ensuing political contestations.

Political Contestations, 1972-78

The period in the mid-1970s was one of political turmoil for the Congress Party, both at the state level and at the centre. Though the trepidation due to drought had receded, the problem of rural poverty loomed large in the minds of the Maratha leadership. Moreover, the political contestations in the mid-1970s, on the one hand led to the questioning of the legitimacy of the Congress rule by the opposition parties (also by this time the "Total Revolution" of Jayprakash Narain had picked up pace) and simultaneously at the state level the competition between the two Congress Party factions had amplified. The Congress image had already taken a battering at the national level and there were signs of worse to come at the state level.

In addition to the above developments, the NPPFs by now, with the support of the state opposition and left parties insisted on institutionalising EGS and demanded that the state government create a permanent fund. Earlier in March 1973 V P Naik, the

chief minister, pledged that a sum of Rs 5 crore would be earmarked for the EGS, but this amount proved insufficient. It was at this juncture that these NPPFs stepped in to voluntarily contribute funds collected from workers of Bombay [Joseph 2005].

The state government found it difficult to fund EGS from its normal budgetary provisions and the centre was unwilling to help. So much so that to counter the Indira loyalists, Y B Chavan and Naik alleged that the shortcomings in the state's development programmes were due to the indifferent attitude displayed by the centre. As Lele points out

At the Maharashtra version of a secret "shibir" (camp), Naik is reported to have declared that "there was no threat to the Maharashtra Congress from the opposition. The image of the Maharashtra Congress had been damaged by the centre's follies..." [Lele 1990:189].

It was in this context, that the Congressmen having socialist leanings such as V S Page among others deliberated on the idea and formulated a plan having a constitutional sanction that would solve this problem – that of taxing the urban population and the rural rich. The dominant Maratha elite backed this idea.

Thus by 1975 a special tax was imposed on all those sectors that were able to pay, i.e., irrigated farming, organised industry, gainful professions, wealth and property holding, lending unearned income, secured employment, etc. However in practice the irrigated farm owners were never taxed. This action was in consonance with the dominant Maratha elites' economic and political interest of redistributing the funds collected from the urban areas and using it for rural reconstruction [Gent 1988: 1299-1303].

The installation of Shankarrao Chavan, an Indira loyalist as the chief minister in January 1975 and the declaration of the national emergency the same year, temporarily buried the expectations of EGS becoming institutionalised then. The emergency strengthened the hands of the Gandhi faction within the state Congress Party and the focus now shifted towards undermining the political hegemony of the dominant Maratha elite. This period witnessed a paradigm shift in issues regarding poverty alleviation. It was supposed that reduction of the gross economic inequalities within the society was the way to alleviate poverty. New taxes were levied, and the existing tax slabs were redesigned to accrue maximum revenue from the upper sections of society. Also, police and administrative excesses during the emergency mandated political immobility [Khilnani 1997].

After the emergency the legitimacy and popularity of the Congress Party at the centre and in the states declined. The Janata Party by now had come to power at the centre displacing the Congress Party for the first time since independence. In Maharashtra too the Congress was facing stiff resistance both from within the party and outside it from the opposition parties that had grown stronger. In the following state elections the Congress Party fared miserably and was compelled to form a coalitional government with the support of the left parties.

It was in this context that in 1977, Vasantdada Patil the then chief minister with the support of the dominant Maratha elite enacted the EGS bill. It also received unanimous support from all the state parties. From the above analysis two plausible explanations may be forwarded for the elite support. The first could be that of threat to legitimacy and the second that EGS had potentialities to serve elite interest.

Scholars [Gent 1988, Dev 1996] have argued that though EGS has provided employment to the poor the benefits have been skewed to a certain degree and are accrued primarily to the elite rural gentry and therefore is no surprise that some have even portrayed it as a mechanism for redistributing resources from the urban population of Maharashtra to the rural rich [Herring and Edwards 1983: 584-86]. Also, the EGS work distribution from 1975 to 1988-89 displays a skewed regional distribution – the "Maratha elite"-dominated districts received unusually high levels of EGS resources in this period [Moore and Jadhav 2005].

Did provisions that were incorporated from time to time serve elite interests? A provision that was included as early as in 1972 dealt with the availability of works only during the lean agricultural season. Also the wages were deliberately pegged lower than the agricultural wages. These two provisions ensured availability of cheap labour on farms thereby protecting the interests of the peasantry and especially the Maratha elite who were large landholders. Besides the provision that stated that the EGS work sites as far as possible should be situated within a five mile radius of a village, tied the labourers to the rural elite. Moreover, the EGS resolution of 1972 accorded the highest priority to agriculture and allied activities (Government Resolution of Maharashtra 1972).

The 1978 Act changed the institutional nature of the EGS, linking it organically to the cooperatives, the PRIs and the Congress Party. In order to do so, the leadership put in place a complex administrative and bureaucratic arrangement thus providing access to the local and state level leadership. Maharashtra was one of the few states to prohibit MLAs from participating in the tahsil and district-level PRI, and most MLAs though supportive of the general principles of decentralisation were also wary of loss of control over resources and patronage. The EGS committees set up at the tahsil and district levels enabled MLAs to play an active role at the implementation level.⁶ Thus, EGS became one linkage structure that could appease those sections of elite who could not be accommodated in other state institutions.

Changing Elite Interests

The latter part of the 1980s inaugurated a new economic context in Maharashtra in tandem with the rest of the country – a new programme of structural adjustment, liberalisation and globalisation. The Maratha elite of western Maharashtra reinterpreted and redefined agrarian development by attempting to integrate its agricultural activities in such areas as floriculture, horticulture, viticulture and food processing with the emerging new global market. They endeavoured to combine agriculture and allied activities with the service sectors such as information technology, banking, insurance and the leisure industry.

This stance is attested by the fact that Sharad Pawar the then chief minister (1988) and leader of the western Maharashtra lobby made possible the endorsement of this policy of agricultural globalisation by the state government. Henceforth, the state exhorted the farmers to adopt horticulture and accept an export friendly cropping pattern and this was a new alliance was charted out between the rural-based Maratha elite and urban-based elite [Palshikar and Deshpande 1999: 2411-12].

The extent to which the tertiary sector entered agriculture can be gauged from the fact that newer technologies and well developed communication facilities became the order of the day.

The report of the working group on horticulture development for the 10th five-year plan has drawn out a significant correlation between expansion of tertiary activities and increase in agriculture and allied services (working group on horticulture development for the 10th Five-Year Plan, June 2001, GoI; Table-2.3: 16).

Certain towns now specialised in processing of certain horticultural goods. For instance, within Nashik district, Niphad, Dindori and Kalvan areas, became famous for grape cultivation. Similarly, Satara district, Mahabaleshwar and Pachgani became famous as producers of strawberry and flowers (carnations, gerberas, anthurium, orchids).

The involvement of the service sector in globalisation of agriculture and allied services thus expanded the interests of the western Maharashtra elite to non-agrarian and urban-based constituency. It is in this context Palshikar and Deshpande (1999: 2411 and 2417) contend that this new formation of urban centered service and agricultural alliance, sought a new political framework. In other words it could mean that the western Maharashtra Maratha elite had now developed a new constituency – that of the urban-based unorganised sector. Simultaneously, certain political processes since the late 1980s changed the power equations in the state that necessitated amendment to the EGS Act itself.

Breakdown of the Congress System in the State

The control over the Maratha-Kunbi caste cluster had proved to be the main political strength of the Congress Party in the state. Through the Congress Party the entrenched Maratha leadership was able to control the cooperatives, the PRIs and also the EGS. However, this picture gradually changed from late 1970s due to factional infighting within the state Congress Party.

The factionalism within the state Congress had begun as early as 1972 but was not a serious threat so as to undermine the cohesiveness of the party. But by 1978 three factions emerged – one was loyal to Y B Chavan while another group derived its power from sugar cooperatives and maintained a distance from Y B Chavan (Maratha leader Vasantdada Patil informally led this latter group). Both these factions had their social base among the Maratha-Kunbi community. The third faction, primarily opposed to the sugar cooperatives, was led by the Marathwada based SB Chavan; himself a Maratha but with little support from the Maratha-Kunbi community [Palshikar and Deshpande 1999: 2410-11].

The continued factional infighting of the Maratha leadership and the unrelenting interference by Gandhi in the politics of the state Congress Party undermined Congress hegemony in the state. With the increased factionalism within the state Congress, and its consequent weakening, the Maratha elite within the party began to shift their loyalties to other political parties⁷ [Lele 1990:177-85].

While on the one hand the Congress Party itself was fragmenting, on the other the economic and political splintering within the Maratha-Kunbi caste bloc was growing though the kinship and social ties remained as before. Palshikar Deshpande (1999) suggests that poor Marathas deserted Congress because of the latter's inclination to favour only a section of few rich western region Maratha elite families.

Another criticism hurled against the western Maharashtra Maratha elite by other Congressmen was that they always claimed that its rule was representative of Bahujan Samaj, (non-brahmin castes – vanjaris, telis, lingayats, malis, dalits and others), which was not so in reality. Over time the Congress Party's support

base vis-à-vis the lower castes, lower Marathas and Kunbis and Maratha elite from Marathwada and Vidarbha declined in context to the competitive political scenario of the late 1980s.

Realising that the party was losing its legitimacy amongst its constituency, a section of the Congress leaders led by the western Maharashtra Maratha elite attempted to cement ties with the dalits through RPI and other dalit factions. This move alienated the Maratha elite of the Vidarbha and Marathwada region as they felt that they were left out of these negotiations. The renaming of the Marathwada University as Dr Ambedkar University in 1988, further aggravated the situation as this hurt the sentiments of the Maratha elite, after whom the university and the region were named. These leaders deemed this development as an unwanted political interference in their domain, by the western Maharashtra Maratha elite and thus some among them now aligned with the Shiv Sena and BJP.⁸

To compound matters, this period also witnessed the re-emergence of the question of underdevelopment in certain parts of the state – Marathwada and Vidarbha. The leadership across the political spectrum from these regions contended that the state government had not done much since the last three decades. These contestations within and outside the Congress Party and between the dominant Maratha elite and the non-party political outfits resulted in further questioning of the legitimacy of the entrenched elite.

In this context, the Shiv Sena (SS) and Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) since the late 1980s had become serious contenders to the state Congress Party in Maharashtra, especially in the Konkan and Marathwada region.⁹ Besides these two parties Janata Dal also emerged as a serious contender to the Congress hegemony. With the emergence of this local level leadership belonging to the BJP and Shiv Sena, and the Janata Dal the linkages with the state level leadership that predominantly belonged to the Congress Party were severed.

Further, the decision of the Mandal commission report of 1990¹⁰ to incorporate the Kunbis as OBCs led to the fragmentation of the Maratha-Kunbi caste political bloc, the erstwhile constituency of the Congress Party. The Kunbis especially from the Marathwada and Konkan regions were now mobilised by the BJP and SS [Palshikar and Deshpande 1999].

Thus by the late 1980s the structures of patronage – the Congress Party, the cooperatives and the PRI through which power was routed and controlled by the western Maharashtra Maratha elite, splintered. The BJP and SS now made inroads into the state institutions, i.e., cooperatives and the PRIs thus challenged the western Maharashtra Maratha elites' hegemony. This could be one reason as to why the elite lost interest in the scheme that functioned earlier as a patronage structure and henceforth looked at it to maximise short-term individual interests. Below I assess the implication of the competitive nature of politics vis-à-vis the status of EGS.

Modification and Decline

At its peak in the late 1980s, the EGS accounted for a fifth of the capital spending of the state government. These figures demonstrate that the political energy around the implementation of EGS in the period 1975-76 to 1987-88 was at its peak and also attests to the fact that the popular mobilisations were very active [Moore and Jadhav 2005].

By the late 1980s two important changes occurred vis-à-vis EGS. The first was the doubling of EGS wages in 1986, that

were henceforth brought at par to minimum wages, a long-standing demand of the popular movement and the second was the alterations to the EGS Act in 1988 and 1990, that redefined the nature of EGS by providing space for entry of private contractors and enabling EGS funds to be used for private land development. This new development has meant that the power of selective disbursement of grants has increased and this provided the elite much more discretionary powers.

As Vatsa (2005; 12) has demonstrated, the most significant change has been increasing commitment of EGS allocation to individual asset building such as wells and plantations in 1990s. The percentage share of these individual asset-building schemes in total EGS expenditure has been on an average about 25 per cent in the last 10 years, which suggests a major shift in the programme strategy of the EGS.

The figures of EGS expenditure on wages in the period 1986-1991 (after the doubling of wages) demonstrate that there was a distinct fall in total EGS expenditure – from 63 per cent to 52 per cent on an average. Moreover, the total expenditure through the horticultural and Jawahar well scheme also touched an all time high of 39.8 per cent of the total EGS expenditure – pointing to the fact that maximum benefits were accrued by private land owners and private contractors.

It is interesting to note that the decline in the EGS begins immediately after the amendment in 1988 and also the doubling of wages. Also, EGS works have declined universally throughout the state though the decline in western Maharashtra is most prominent. I attempt to relate this fall to changing nature of the polity and economy in the state in 1990s by analysing developments at four levels (a) decline in popular mobilisations, (b) availability of alternate non-agricultural employment opportunities, (c) multiplicity of anti-poverty programmes, and (d) fiscal intervention by the state.

In the late 1980s soon after the revision of the EGS wages, the popular movements in the state declined. The reasons vary from its internal problems to bureaucratic intervention in restricting EGS works. Joseph (2005) has demonstrated in detail how the fragmentation of various NPPFs involved in demanding proper implementation of EGS provisions died out by the late 1980s. With the decline in mobilisations the pressure on the political elite to implement the scheme also decreased.

The overall demand for EGS works might have declined due to the availability of abundant alternate means of employment. This is attested by the fact that the per capita income in certain districts had increased – the increase was perceptible in the western Maharashtra districts and some industrial districts like Aurangabad and Nagpur in Marathwada and Vidarbha region of the state, the credit of which cannot solely be given to EGS (District Statistical Abstract, GoM, 1991-92 and 2001-02).

The centre introduced and frequently modified existing rural public works programmes. These are funded by the centre but, like the EGS, implemented by agencies of the state government. With these programmes operating simultaneously, identification of EGS blurred. Savale (2004), demonstrates that rural workers sometimes do not know whether they are working on an EGS project or some other public programme.

Additionally, in the changed economic and political scenario, the fiscal deficits had become acute. Though the surpluses generated due to under spending is usually exhausted on the next years EGS works, part of it is also used to stave off fiscal deficit. Accordingly, any “savings” on EGS expenditure do contribute

to improving the current fiscal situation of the state government. Moreover, the doubling of wages also led to a fear of excessive expenditure. This combined with the steady increase in the number of incomplete EGS works since the late 1970s and 1980s provided the state government an opportunity to curtail new projects thereby dampening the demand for EGS employment [Moore and Jadhav 2005].

What is pertinent to note is that in this context the cooperative structures also began losing their political strength as they became enmeshed in financial crisis and their importance as a patronage structure for the western Maharashtra elite also declined considerably. Also, with the splintering of the overlapping patronage structures of Congress Party, cooperatives, PRIs and EGS by the entry of leadership at various levels of other party members, non-Congress parties are now sharing the Maratha-Kunbi constituency.

The line of authority that was integrated with the power structure through the Congress Party, the cooperatives and PRIs at all levels disintegrated in the context of competitive politics. With the fracturing of the overlapping and interlocking patronage structure, the MLAs and local leadership irrespective of party allegiance have become more important while assessing the success of EGS implementation. As Savale (2004) demonstrates, the fortunes of EGS implementation now has shifted to the degree of local level activism and the level of personal political interest of the local leadership.

Conclusion

Three phases created the conditions for western Maharashtra Maratha led elite to support introduction and institutionalisation of EGS. During these three phases there were many steps forwards and backwards. The first was the drought of early 1970s. The second was the popular mobilisations that questioned the legitimacy of the elite. Lastly, the mobilisation of a faction within the state Congress Party that challenged the hegemony of the western Maharashtra Maratha elite.

In keeping their commitment to agrarian development, the elite initiated moves to institutionalise EGS by integrating it with other state institutions, i.e., the cooperatives and PRIs. The accompanying political contestations and pressures in the context of the aftermath of the national emergency built up pressure on the Maratha elite to enact EGS by 1977-78.

Since the late 1980s and early 1990s they entered horticultural and export led agricultural commodities. No wonder there was an attempt to introduce new provisions in the EGS act to reflect these developments. This was also a period since when the EGS expenditure and mandays began to wane. These changes were accompanied by other political changes. By early 1990s the Congress ceased to be the party of the Maratha-Kunbi caste bloc. In this changed economic and political context, I have demonstrated how the Maratha elite involvement and interest in the EGS waned.

Thus to sum up, this paper has highlighted the role of the political elite and the institution of patronage structure. It demonstrates how the political elite in the context of electoral democracy operates within a matrix of promises and threats. This analysis suggests the need to consider the involvement and commitment of stakeholders other than the poor, which becomes critical to initiate and institutionalise poverty alleviation programmes. This is particularly true in the case of India wherein democracy spans disparate social and cultural groups together

with caste and class inequalities and especially today as the government of India is introducing a nationwide Employment Guarantee Act. **EPW**

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Notes

- 1 For a detailed account please refer to the MPhil thesis titled 'Elite Dynamics and Caste Politics in a Poverty Alleviation Programme: A Case Study of the Employment Guarantee Scheme of Maharashtra' (2005), Department of Sociology, University of Pune.
- 2 Migration to urban areas due to famine conditions, need for EGS (Discussion in the Maharashtra State Legislative Assembly or MSLA, February 26, 1973: 909). Debate to provide work until next harvest to stem migration to urban areas (Maharashtra State Legislative Assembly, August 16, 1973, Vol 38.2, No: 13:1554)
- 3 Active debates regarding starvation deaths were also carried out. MSLA debates on: (December 4, 1972: 981-985) (December 8, 1972: 1455-56), (February 16, 1973: 416-429) (March 6, 1973: 1675-1677).
- 4 This vital concession given to the Bagaitdars, 18-acre limit along with the broad definition of "family" enabled them to retain their entire land holdings. Thus, instead of loosening the grip of the rich farmers of the rural economy, this ceiling legislation only ensured their permanent presence in the countryside, 'Maharashtra Land Reforms: No Benefits to Landless', *Economic Times*, August 26, 1972:3.
- 5 "Two thirds of the sugar factories are located in western Maharashtra. Congress member Prabhugaonkar, while moving this resolution in the Legislative Assembly in 1972, stated that the cooperative sugar factories in the state had made huge profits at the cost of the society and the purpose of running cooperatives for social objectives was defeated. In no other field has such a huge profit been made at the cost of the society, he added and described it as "sugar coated monopoly". Therefore urged that both the cooperative and private sugar factories should be nationalised immediately" [Khekale 1999: 136].
- 6 The District Employment Guarantee Committee other than bureaucrats consists of (1) the minister in charge of the district, (2) president, zilla parishad (accompaniment to GR, GAD, No FD/EGS 1072/P-1, 1972).
- 7 The contestations within the state Congress Party led to fragmentation of the Congress as INC and INC(I) in the 1978 state assembly elections. The latter were the Indira loyalists whereas the Chavan faction remained in the INC. These two factions were merged by 1985.
- 8 A section of the Marathas had been opposed to the Mandal recommendations and to the renaming of Marathwada University. The Maratha Mahasangha

had held this position officially. The pro-OBC and pro-dalit stance advertised during Pawar's tenure hurt the caste pride of conservative sections among the Marathas especially those from the Marathwada region of the state. These same sections were also doubtful about the policy of liberalisation and industrial penetration in rural areas [Palshikar and Deshpande 1999: 2419].

- 9 The Mumbai-based Shiv Sena party did well in the 1988 elections to district councils, and, in a coalition with the BJP, controlled the state government between 1995 and 1999 [Thite 1996].
- 10 The OBC category was "created" in Maharashtra by the Mandal Commission in the 1980s, otherwise these castes were considered as part of the Bahujan Samaj – a broad category comprising of all the non-brahmins.

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