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Recasting Maratha: Caste, Colonialism and Identity Formation in Western India

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Abstract

This paper charts the evolving meaning of the category ‘Maratha’, tracing its transformation from a broader historical category—encompassing pre-colonial warrior heritage, a historical polity, a regional identity, and a linguistic identity—which was more flexible in terms of its definition to a consolidated caste identity shaped by colonial modernity in the course of the early twentieth-century Western India. The paper describes the ways in which social categories were formulated, lived, and debated during the colonial era, highlighting the intricate relationship between them and the socio-political context, with a particular focus on the Maratha. It positions the modern historical narratives of caste and identity often framed through the ‘us’ and ‘them’ dichotomy.

By tracing the transformation of the Maratha category, the paper highlights how identity is not a fixed essence but a socially constructed category, shaped through cultural, historical, institutional, and socio-political processes. It argues that the sociality of identity is produced within existing social normative discourses in contradictory and contested ways. The paper emphasises that the construction of ‘identity transcends simple binary oppositions, showing a far more nuanced and layered process of self-making.

Keywords: Maratha identity, Caste formation, Colonial Modernity, Identity Politics, Self-Other