



# **CULTURE OF INEQUALITY**

## **THE CHANGING HINDU–MUSLIM RELATIONS IN MAHARASHTRA**

*Amod Damle and Nilu Damle*

**ROUTLEDGE**



# CULTURE OF INEQUALITY

This book offers a historical perspective on the changing Hindu–Muslim relationship in India through a study of syncretic traditions in Kurundwad, Maharashtra. It explores the social and cultural dynamics between the two communities and analyses underlying issues of caste hierarchy, Hindu hegemony, and social dominance.

The volume focusses on how the realization of cultural distinctiveness, politics of identity, and the struggle for dominance have played a role in shaping Hindu–Muslim relations in Maharashtra. Through field interviews conducted over three years, the authors contextualise and analyse the nature of cultural hybridity in Kurundwad and how the relationship has changed over the years. The book also focusses on notions of tolerance and inequality, and provides insights into the reasons for the growing distinctiveness in cultural and religious identity in Kurundwad since the 1990s, in the aftermath of the demolition of the Babri Masjid and the Shah Bano verdict.

The book provides a comprehensive framework for understanding the relationship between Hindus and Muslims in India. It will be of great interest to researchers and students of sociology, politics, modern history, cultural studies, minority studies, and South Asian studies.

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# CULTURE OF INEQUALITY

The Changing Hindu–Muslim Relations  
in Maharashtra

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 Routledge  
Taylor & Francis Group  
LONDON AND NEW YORK

First published 2021  
by Routledge  
2 Park Square, Milton Park, Abingdon, Oxon OX14 4RN  
and by Routledge  
52 Vanderbilt Avenue, New York, NY 10017

*Routledge is an imprint of the Taylor & Francis Group, an informa business*

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*British Library Cataloguing-in-Publication Data*

A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library

*Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data*

A catalog record has been requested for this book

ISBN: 978-0-367-81942-2 (hbk)

ISBN: 978-1-003-01402-7 (ebk)

Typeset in Sabon  
by codeMantra

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## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

We want to thank Mr Jaysingh Kumbhar for assisting us in conducting the fieldwork. Without Mr Kumbhar's integrity and experience, this project would have never come to fruition. We want to convey our gratitude to Mr Mansigh Kumthekar for providing us with valuable historical insights and archival documents. We are grateful to Ms Shoma Choudhury and Dr David Page for showing us our blind spots with their insightful feedback. Finally, we want to recognize the contributions of Mr Sahil Shaikh, without whose enthusiasm and patience it would have been impossible to gain deeper insights into the Hindu–Muslim relations in Kurundwad.



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# 1

## INTRODUCTION



Figure 1.1 Kurundwad, Maharashtra. Copyright 2019 by Amod Damle.

India is home to the world's third-largest population of Muslims. Except for a small number of Arabs, Turks, and Afghans who first arrived in India more than a millennia ago, most of India's Muslim population consisted of Hindu converts; Indian Muslims were not (are not) outsiders. Indian Muslims and the nation's Hindu majority have had a complicated relationship ever since Islam arrived in India in the 7th century. During the best of times, the two communities shared a way of life, and during the worst, committed gruesome violence and spilled each other's blood. The confluence of Hinduism and Islam and the shared practices that emerged from such a convergence played a vital role in tempering the volatile relationship between Hindus and Muslims. In 1992, with the demolition of the Babri Mosque, the Hindu–Muslim relationship in India reached a new low. Yet, the local newspapers from the Sangli and Kolhapur districts of Maharashtra published accounts of how the Muslim residents of two small villages—Kurundwad and Gotkhindi—housed Ganesh idols in the mosques during the Ganesh festival. The newspapers publish such stories every year during the Ganesh festival (Haygunde, 2010; Zee 24 Taas, 2018).

How could the Hindus and Muslims engage in cultural sharing in Kurundwad and Gotkhindi while communal violence engulfed the rest of India? Under what conditions, we ask, do such shared practices prevail? Does cultural hybridity exemplify some of the noblest human traits—the desire to cooperate and communicate—or, does it hide an inglorious side of human nature. To tackle these questions, in 2016, we embarked on a study of Kurundwad.

Kurundwad is located in the Kolhapur district, in the southern region of Maharashtra, 406 kilometres southeast of Mumbai. Situated at the confluence of the rivers Panchganga and Krishna, Kurundwad was a part of the Deccan States Agency during the British Raj. In addition to Kurundwad, the Deccan States Agency oversaw several other princely states, including Sangli and Kolhapur. Established in 1933, the Deccan States Agency was under the suzerainty of the Bombay Presidency.

Kurundwad was founded in 1733 by Trimbakrao Patwardhan with a jagir from the Peshwas. Serving the Maratha Empire as military commanders, Trimbakrao and his two brothers, Govind Hari and Ramachandra, expanded the southern region of the empire to the river Tungabhadra. Recognising their service to the empire, the Peshwas rewarded each brother with a jagir, or a land grant, which included the region between the rivers Krishna and Tungabhadra. Trimbakrao, Govind Hari, and Ramachandra chose Kurundwad, Miraj, and Tasgaon, respectively, as the capitals of their jagirs (Parasnis, 1917).

In 1812, the Peshwas divided Kurundwad into two regions. In 1850, one of the two areas, known as Shedbal, came under the British government's authority. In 1854, the British divided the remaining portion of Kurundwad into two branches—Kurundwad Senior and Kurundwad Junior. Hindu Brahmins belonging to the Patwardhan family ruled both branches of Kurundwad. In 1948, both branches joined the Indian union.

Kurundwad is famous for its proximity to Narsobachi Wadi, an important destination for the devotees of Dattaguru. Kurundwad is also known for the peaceful coexistence of its Hindu and Muslim communities. During the Ganesh festival, the Muslims of Kurundwad host Ganesh idols in the Muharram Khanas. A Muharram Khana is where the Muslims install an icon representing a Pir or a Muslim saint during the Muharram festival. The presence of a Ganesh idol in a Muharram Khana is considered a sign of Hindu–Muslim unity. By hosting a Ganesh idol in a Muharram Khana, Muslims not only express their devotion to the Hindu god but also disregard Islam's prohibition of idolatry.

During the study, we observed that even though the Hindus and Muslims celebrate each other's holidays, underneath the facade of cooperation, the two communities have begun to drift apart. Increased visibility of Hindu symbols in public places and the adoption of Islamic dress code by a growing number of Muslims indicate that Hindus and Muslims have

begun to circumscribe their cultural identities. Historically, the confluence of Hinduism and Islam made the Muslims appear less alien to Hindus. An increased familiarity between Hindus and Muslims allowed Muslims to rule India despite being a minority ethnic group. With the decline of the Mughal Empire and the rise of the East India Company, the differences between the Hindus and Muslims became pronounced. The British government's balance-and-rule policy posed the Muslims as a counterbalancing force to the Hindus, which threatened the idea that Hinduism alone defined the Indian nation.

We argue that inequality and dominance are inherent cultural dimensions. No culture is monolithic, and yet the dominant group tends to portray their values as the values of society at large. When social change signals to the dominant group that they no longer represent the rest of society, the changing circumstances pose a threat to the dominant group's status. In other words, the commonness of culture allows the dominant and the subordinate group to maintain the status quo regarding their relationship with each other. When a subordinate group emphasises its distinctiveness, the perceived differences strain the fabric of commonness, which poses a threat to the status of the dominant group. The dominant group responds to the threat by becoming more distinct and by imposing their worldview on the subordinate groups. We suggest that the increased visibility of Hindu symbols in Kurundwad represents a reaction of the Hindu nationalists to the perceived threat of Islam.

We do not claim that underscoring the differences between Hindus and Muslims is the only factor that causes communal conflicts. Understanding the impact of cultural segregation on the Hindu-Muslim relationship remains our primary goal. Yet, in chapter seven, we explore other factors such as urbanization and political competition that escalate tensions between the two communities.

### **Contextualising the Hindu–Muslim relations in Kurundwad**

The politicization of Hindu and Muslim identities and the resulting conflicts, which occurred over the last two centuries, are a relatively recent phenomenon. The term Hindu was used by the Greeks and Muslims to refer to those who lived beyond the river Sindhu (Jaffrelot, 2007; Talbot, 1995). From the Greek and Muslim perspectives, the term Hindu did not denote a homogenous religious group. The people of India did not describe themselves as Hindus until the medieval period.

The first contact between Islam and the earlier population of the Deccan occurred when Alauddin Khalji defeated the Yadava king Ramadeva Yadava in 1294 A.D. Conflicts occurred whenever the advancing Muslim armies encountered the earlier population of India. The people of India were no

strangers to conflict. They had seen dynasties, such as the Chalukyas and the Rashtrakutas rise and fall. They had suffered during the violent formative periods of these dynasties. They had also seen the Chalukyas and Rashtrakutas empathise with their subjects after the initial period of conflict. The Muslims were culturally vastly different from the earlier non-Muslim dynasties, which prevented them from fully assimilating with the population of the subcontinent (Kulkarni, 1991–1992).

Although the earlier population of India did not describe themselves as Hindus before the arrival of Islam, they saw themselves as a hierarchical society marked by Brahminical dominance. Islam is a proselytising religion, while Hinduism is not. Those who were not born within the Hindu caste system had no place in Hinduism, which allowed the earlier population of the subcontinent to define Muslims as non-Hindus and, therefore, as outsiders or aliens. The old myths and traditions associated with the Brahminical culture and the realisation that Muslims were different from the local population of India led to the emergence of the Indic, Hindu identity.<sup>1</sup> For example, the Vilasa grant,<sup>2</sup> a long copperplate grant issued sometime between 1325 and 1350 C.E., compares the Andhra noble Prolaya Nayaka to an incarnation of the god Vishnu in his battle against the evil Muslims. Yet this emerging identity was neither homogeneous nor solely religious. The Hindus remained divided into castes and sects and attributed the differences between the Hindus and Muslims to not just their religions but also their ethnicities. Muslims not only practiced a different religion but also spoke a different language and had distinct dietary habits (Talbot, 1995).

The terms culture, society, and religion are notoriously difficult to define.<sup>3</sup> Geertz (1973) considers religion a cultural system that imposes order onto the world and makes the ordering principles appear factual to the believers. Simmel (1950) suggests that cultural and religious beliefs emerge from and shape one another. As a system of beliefs, religion is a subset of a larger body of shared beliefs that we call culture. Thus, everything that is religious is also cultural, but not everything cultural is religious. A Hindu who does not harbour religious beliefs is still a Hindu as long as he or she adheres to the Hindu way of life. In *The Discovery of India* (1989, originally published in 1946), Jawaharlal Nehru makes a clear distinction between Hinduism as a religion and Hinduism as a way of life.<sup>4</sup> Unlike Nehru, the Hindu nationalists conflate the two terms (Varshney, 2002).

The first Muslim invasion of India took place in the 8th century when Muhammad-bin-Qasim defeated king Dahir of Sindh. The Hindus demonised Islam whenever they faced the advancing Muslim armies but later, during the periods of stability, managed to coexist with the Muslims. In the Deccan, during the early days of the Bahmani Empire, the sultans carried out forced conversions, destroyed temples, and imposed the jizya tax—a religious tax on non-Muslims. Once the Bahmani Empire grew stable, the sultans took a different approach to governance. While the Muslim rulers