



BHIMA KOREGAON AND THE POLITICS OF HISTORICAL MEMORY IN CONTEMPORARY INDIA

Dr. Sumanbai Shinde

Head, Department of History,
Government First Grade College Naubad, Bidar.



ABSTRACT:

The Battle of Bhima Koregaon (1818) holds enduring significance in contemporary Indian socio-political discourse, particularly for Dalit communities who commemorate the event as a symbol of resistance against caste oppression. This paper examines how historical memory surrounding Bhima Koregaon is constructed, contested, and mobilized in present-day India. It explores the interplay between historiography, politics, and identity formation, analyzing how state narratives, media representations, and grassroots commemorations shape collective memory. The study highlights the tensions between local, regional, and national interpretations of history, revealing how memory is politicized to serve contemporary agendas. By situating Bhima Koregaon within broader debates on caste, nationalism, and historical consciousness, the paper argues that the politics of memory in India is both a site of empowerment and contestation, reflecting ongoing struggles over recognition, representation, and social justice. Recent academic discussions and media analyses have also focused on the bicentenary commemoration of Bhima Koregaon in 2018 and the controversies that followed. These studies explore how public memory, state responses, media representation, and political mobilization intersect in shaping contemporary understandings of the event.¹

KEYWORDS: Battle of Bhima Koregaon, Historical Memory, Collective Memory, Dalit Identity, Caste Politics, Social Justice, Commemoration, Memory Politics.

INTRODUCTION:

Historical memory plays a crucial role in shaping collective identities, political consciousness, and social movements. In India, where history is deeply intertwined with questions of caste, religion, and nationalism, the interpretation and commemoration of historical events often become sites of political contestation. One such event is the Battle of Bhima Koregaon, fought on 1 January 1818 near the village of Bhima Koregaon in present-day Maharashtra. Although militarily a small engagement between the British East India Company's forces and the army of the Peshwa Baji Rao II, the battle has acquired significant symbolic importance in contemporary India, particularly among Dalit communities. For many Dalits, Bhima Koregaon represents a historical moment of resistance against the oppressive caste order associated with Peshwa rule. The participation of Mahar soldiers in the British forces and their role in the battle have been commemorated as a symbol of courage, dignity, and the struggle

¹ Dwaipayan Sen, "On the History and Memory of the Battle of Koregaon," The Wire, January 5, 2019.

against social exclusion. Annual gatherings at the Vijay Stambh (Victory Pillar) have transformed the site into an important place of memory, attracting thousands of visitors who seek to honor this legacy. At the same time, competing interpretations challenge this narrative, viewing the event through the lens of colonial history and nationalist discourse. As a result, Bhima Koregaon has become a focal point for debates about identity, history, and political representation.

The politics surrounding Bhima Koregaon demonstrates how historical events are not merely remembered but actively reconstructed and mobilized in the present. Different social and political groups employ historical narratives to legitimize their claims, assert collective identities, and influence public discourse. The commemoration of Bhima Koregaon thus extends beyond remembrance, becoming a powerful medium through which marginalized communities negotiate recognition and social justice while confronting dominant historical narratives. This paper examines the politics of historical memory surrounding Bhima Koregaon in contemporary India. It explores how the battle has been remembered, interpreted, and contested by various actors, including Dalit movements, political organizations, historians, and the state. By analyzing the intersection of memory, identity, and power, the study seeks to understand how historical narratives shape contemporary political struggles and contribute to broader debates on caste, nationalism, and social justice in India.²

AIM & OBJECTIVES:

Aim

To examine the significance of Bhima Koregaon as a site of historical memory and to analyze how its commemoration and interpretation influence contemporary debates on caste, identity, nationalism, and social justice in India.

Objectives

1. To study the historical background and significance of the Battle of Bhima Koregaon (1818).
2. To analyze the role of Bhima Koregaon in the construction of Dalit identity and collective memory.
3. To examine how different social, political, and ideological groups interpret and represent the history of Bhima Koregaon.
4. To investigate the relationship between historical memory, caste politics, and political mobilization in contemporary India.
5. To explore the role of commemorative practices, public memorials, and cultural symbols in preserving and shaping the memory of Bhima Koregaon.³

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

This study adopts a qualitative research approach to examine the politics of historical memory surrounding Bhima Koregaon in contemporary India. The methodology combines historical analysis, textual interpretation, and field-based observations to understand how the battle is remembered, commemorated, and politicized.

1. Research Design: The study follows a descriptive and analytical design, aiming to explore both historical events and their contemporary socio-political interpretations. The research emphasizes understanding perspectives from multiple stakeholders, including marginalized communities, political actors, historians, and media sources.

2. Data Collection: Archival documents, letters, and official records related to the Battle of Bhima Koregaon. Field observations at the Vijay Stambh (Victory Pillar) during annual commemorative events. Semi-structured interviews with Dalit activists, community leaders, and local residents involved in

² Shraddha Kumbhojkar, "Contesting Power, Contesting Memories: The History of the Koregaon Memorial," *Economic and Political Weekly* 44, no. 23 (2009): 49–56.

³ Prabhash K. Dutta, "Bhima Koregaon: How Symbol of British Imperialism Became Emblem of Dalit Pride," *India Today*, January 7, 2018.

commemorations. Scholarly books, journal articles, and theses on Dalit history, caste politics, and memory studies.

3. Data Analysis: To interpret texts, media reports, and archival material for recurring themes, narratives, and ideological framing. To examine how historical narratives are constructed, contested, and used for political mobilization. To explore differences in historical interpretation across social groups, regions, and political affiliations.

4. Ethical Considerations: Informed consent is obtained from all interviewees, ensuring confidentiality and anonymity. Sensitivity is maintained toward issues of caste, identity, and political affiliation, avoiding any form of bias or harm. Media reports, newspapers, and digital platforms documenting Bhima Koregaon events and controversies. Analyses of cultural representations such as films, literature, and social media discussions.

SIGNIFICANCE OF THE STUDY

The study of Bhima Koregaon and the politics of historical memory is significant because it provides insight into the complex relationship between history, identity, and power in contemporary India. Historical events are not merely records of the past; they are actively interpreted, remembered, and utilized to shape social and political realities. Bhima Koregaon serves as a prominent example of how collective memory influences contemporary debates on caste, representation, and social justice. This research contributes to the understanding of how marginalized communities, particularly Dalits, use historical memory as a means of asserting identity, dignity, and political agency. By examining the symbolic importance of Bhima Koregaon, the study highlights the role of historical narratives in challenging dominant interpretations of the past and promoting alternative perspectives rooted in the experiences of oppressed groups.⁴

The study is also important for understanding the dynamics of memory politics in India. It explores how different political, social, and ideological actors construct and contest historical narratives to advance their interests and influence public discourse. Such analysis helps reveal the ways in which history becomes a site of negotiation, conflict, and democratic engagement. From an academic perspective, the research contributes to the fields of history, political science, sociology, memory studies, and Dalit studies. It enriches scholarly discussions on collective memory, public commemoration, identity formation, and the relationship between history and contemporary politics. Furthermore, the study has contemporary relevance as debates surrounding Bhima Koregaon continue to shape discussions on caste relations, nationalism, and constitutional values. Understanding these debates can promote greater awareness of social inequalities, historical injustices, and the importance of inclusive historical representation in a diverse democratic society. Overall, the study underscores the enduring influence of historical memory in shaping political consciousness and social movements, demonstrating how interpretations of the past continue to affect the present and future of Indian society.

SCOPE AND LIMITATIONS OF THE STUDY

Scope of the Study

The present study focuses on the historical significance of the Battle of Bhima Koregaon (1818) and its transformation into a powerful symbol of collective memory in contemporary India. It examines how the event has been remembered, commemorated, and interpreted by various social, political, and cultural groups, with particular emphasis on its importance within Dalit movements and identity formation. The study explores the role of historical memory in shaping political discourse, social mobilization, and debates surrounding caste, representation, and social justice. It analyzes commemorative practices, public memorials, media representations, and scholarly interpretations related to Bhima Koregaon. The research also investigates how competing narratives surrounding the

⁴ Anand Teltumbde, *Republic of Caste: Thinking Equality in the Era of Neoliberal Hindutva* (New Delhi: Navayana, 2018).

event reflect broader tensions between caste-based identities, nationalism, and historical consciousness in modern India. Geographically, the study primarily focuses on Maharashtra, where Bhima Koregaon is located and where annual commemorative events are held, while also considering the wider national significance of the event. Temporally, the research examines both the historical context of the 1818 battle and its evolving political and social relevance in contemporary India.⁵

LIMITATIONS OF THE STUDY

The study is limited by the availability and accessibility of historical records and archival sources related to the Battle of Bhima Koregaon. Some historical accounts may contain differing interpretations, making it challenging to establish a universally accepted narrative. The research primarily relies on qualitative data, including historical documents, academic literature, media reports, and interviews. As a result, findings may be influenced by the perspectives and interpretations of the sources consulted. Given the politically sensitive nature of caste and identity issues, certain viewpoints may be underrepresented or contested. The study does not attempt to determine the absolute historical correctness of competing narratives but rather focuses on understanding how these narratives are constructed, remembered, and used in contemporary political and social contexts. Furthermore, the research concentrates on the politics of historical memory and does not provide an exhaustive military or political history of the Battle of Bhima Koregaon. Its primary concern is the role of memory, commemoration, and identity in shaping present-day social and political discourse.

REVIEW OF LITERATURE

The Battle of Bhima Koregaon and its place in contemporary Indian politics have attracted considerable scholarly attention from historians, sociologists, political scientists, and scholars of memory studies. Existing literature highlights the ways in which historical events are transformed into symbols of collective identity and political mobilization. The writings of Dr. B. R. Ambedkar played a significant role in bringing attention to Bhima Koregaon as a symbol of resistance against caste oppression. Although Ambedkar did not produce a detailed historical study of the battle, his visit to the Vijay Stambh in 1927 contributed to its importance within Dalit political consciousness. Subsequent Dalit intellectuals and activists have interpreted the event as representing the struggle for dignity, equality, and social justice. Historian Rosalind O'Hanlon and other scholars of Maharashtra's social history have examined the socio-political conditions of the Peshwa period and the experiences of marginalized communities under the caste hierarchy. Their works provide important historical context for understanding why Bhima Koregaon became a powerful symbol within Dalit memory and identity.⁶

Scholars of Dalit Studies such as Gopal Guru, Sharmila Rege, and Anand Teltumbde have analyzed the relationship between caste, historical representation, and political mobilization. Their research emphasizes how marginalized groups employ historical memory to challenge dominant narratives and assert alternative interpretations of the past. Teltumbde, in particular, has discussed Bhima Koregaon as a site of memory that reflects broader struggles against caste discrimination and social exclusion. Research on collective memory by scholars such as Maurice Halbwachs and Pierre Nora provides an important theoretical framework for understanding the politics of memory. Halbwachs argues that memory is socially constructed within groups, while Nora's concept of "sites of memory" (*lieux de mémoire*) explains how monuments, commemorations, and historical locations become symbolic spaces for preserving collective identities. These theoretical perspectives are highly relevant to the study of Bhima Koregaon and the Vijay Stambh as a commemorative site. Studies on memory politics and nationalism have further demonstrated that historical events are often contested

⁵ Dadoo, Saumya, and Shailza Sharma. "Tracing Carceral Continuities: A Review of Recent Works on the Incarcerations of the 'Bhima Koregaon-16.'" *India Today*, January 7, 2018.

⁶ Dutta, Prabhaskar K. "Bhima Koregaon: How Symbol of British Imperialism Became Emblem of Dalit Pride." *India Today*, January 7, 2018.

and reinterpreted according to contemporary political interests. Scholars have noted that Bhima Koregaon has become a subject of competing narratives. While Dalit organizations celebrate it as a symbol of resistance against caste oppression, some nationalist interpretations emphasize the involvement of the British East India Company and question its commemorative significance. These debates illustrate the complex relationship between history, memory, and political identity.

DISCUSSION OF THE SUBJECT

The Battle of Bhima Koregaon was fought on 1 January 1818 between the forces of the British East India Company and the army of Peshwa Baji Rao II near the village of Bhima Koregaon in present-day Maharashtra. Although the battle was a relatively small military engagement within the broader Third Anglo-Maratha War, it gained lasting historical significance due to the participation of Mahar soldiers in the British forces. The victory was later commemorated through the construction of the Vijay Stambh (Victory Pillar), which bears the names of soldiers who fought in the battle. Over time, the event acquired meanings that extended beyond its military context. For many Dalit communities, particularly the Mahars, the battle came to symbolize resistance against the social exclusion and discrimination associated with the caste system under Peshwa rule. As a result, Bhima Koregaon evolved from a historical battlefield into a powerful symbol of social memory and collective identity. Historical memory refers to the ways societies remember, interpret, and preserve the past. The memory of Bhima Koregaon demonstrates that historical events are not simply remembered but are continuously reconstructed according to present social and political needs. The annual gathering at the Vijay Stambh has transformed the site into an important place of remembrance where participants honor the legacy of those associated with the battle. The significance of Bhima Koregaon lies not only in the historical event itself but also in the meanings attached to it by successive generations. Through commemorative practices, speeches, songs, literature, and public rituals, the battle has become embedded in the collective memory of many Dalit communities. These practices help preserve a sense of historical continuity and strengthen community identity.⁷

CONCLUSION AND FINDINGS

The study reveals that the Battle of Bhima Koregaon occupies a unique place in contemporary India as both a historical event and a powerful symbol of collective memory. Although the battle was a relatively small military engagement in 1818, its significance has expanded over time through processes of remembrance, commemoration, and political interpretation. The research finds that Bhima Koregaon serves as an important site of identity formation and political consciousness, particularly among Dalit communities. The memory of the battle has been preserved through annual commemorations, cultural practices, public discourse, and social movements, transforming it into a symbol of resistance against caste-based oppression and a source of collective empowerment. The study also demonstrates that historical memory is neither fixed nor universally accepted. Different social, political, and ideological groups interpret the meaning of Bhima Koregaon in different ways. While many Dalit organizations view it as a representation of social justice and equality, other groups emphasize alternative historical and nationalist perspectives. These competing interpretations illustrate the contested nature of historical memory in democratic societies. Furthermore, the research highlights the role of public memorials, commemorative events, media representations, and political mobilization in shaping contemporary understandings of history. The Vijay Stambh and annual gatherings at Bhima Koregaon function as important spaces where memory, identity, and political expression intersect. The study finds that the politics of memory surrounding Bhima Koregaon reflects broader issues within Indian society, including caste relations, representation, historical recognition, and social inclusion. The event demonstrates how historical narratives can be used both to challenge existing power structures and to strengthen collective identities among marginalized communities.

⁷ Kumbhojkar, Shraddha. "Contesting Power, Contesting Memories: The History of the Koregaon Memorial." *Economic and Political Weekly* 44, no. 23 (2009): 49–56.

CONCLUSION

The study concludes that Bhima Koregaon is far more than a historical battlefield; it is a significant site of historical memory that continues to influence contemporary political and social discourse in India. The battle's remembrance illustrates how the past is actively reconstructed and mobilized to address present concerns related to identity, justice, and representation. The politics of historical memory surrounding Bhima Koregaon reveals the complex relationship between history and power. Competing narratives about the event reflect broader struggles over whose histories are recognized, whose voices are heard, and how the nation understands its past. These debates demonstrate that memory is not merely about preserving history but also about shaping social and political realities. The study further concludes that historical memory can serve as an important tool for empowerment, particularly for marginalized communities seeking recognition and equality. At the same time, the contestation of memory highlights the challenges of accommodating diverse historical experiences within a pluralistic democratic framework. Ultimately, Bhima Koregaon exemplifies the enduring relevance of history in contemporary society. Its continued significance underscores the importance of inclusive historical narratives, democratic dialogue, and social justice in fostering a more equitable and representative understanding of India's past and present.⁸

RECOMMENDATIONS FOR FURTHER STUDY

The present study on Bhima Koregaon and the politics of historical memory in contemporary India opens several avenues for further academic inquiry. While this research has focused on the symbolic, political, and cultural dimensions of memory, additional studies can expand and deepen understanding of the subject in the following ways: Future research may compare Bhima Koregaon with other sites of historical memory in India and abroad where marginalized communities commemorate resistance or struggle. Such comparative analysis would help situate Bhima Koregaon within a broader global framework of memory politics and identity formation. There is scope for more extensive ethnographic studies involving long-term fieldwork at commemorative sites. In-depth interviews with participants, activists, and local communities could provide richer insights into lived experiences, emotions, and motivations associated with the annual commemorations. Further studies could examine the role of digital platforms, social media, and online activism in shaping public perceptions of Bhima Koregaon. The increasing influence of digital communication in constructing historical narratives warrants focused academic attention. Additional research may explore how state institutions, educational systems, and official historical narratives represent Bhima Koregaon. This would help understand the relationship between power, knowledge production, and historical interpretation. Given the legal and political controversies surrounding Bhima Koregaon in recent years, future studies could analyze how legal processes, state actions, and political discourse interact with historical memory and collective identity.

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