This is a work of academic scholarship. To make Marathi and Hindi terms accessible to nonspecialist readers, I employ transliterations without diacritics and offer the translation in parentheses so that the sense of a word or expression is immediately clear. The many terms used to describe untouchables are drawn from archival sources, colloquial speech, and interviews. None is meant to hurt or offend anyone. In addition to their caste names—for example, Chambhar, Mahar, Mang—members of the untouchable communities are referred to colloquially as asprushya (untouchable), bahishkrit varga (excommunicated classes), Anarya (non-Aryan), and atishudra (lowest among the shudra or laboring classes).

By 1911, the British government was using the term “Depressed Classes” to refer to the untouchable communities, though there were demands for replacing this derogatory term with “noncaste” or “nonconformist” Hindus. From 1935, the term “Scheduled Castes” has been in use. This refers to the state-wise list of untouchable communities who are eligible for constitutional safeguards.

In addition to governmental nomenclature, M. K. Gandhi adopted the term “Harijan,” or “people of god,” in 1933, to atone for the sin of untouchability. Some years later, a mass conversion of ex-untouchables to Buddhism in Nagpur in 1956 gave rise to the category nava Boudha (neo-Buddhist).

However, the term commonly used today by those who have suffered the stigma of untouchability is “Dalit,” which means “ground down” or “broken to pieces” in Marathi and Hindi. The term first made its appearance during the late 1920s, but gained prominence during the 1970s, at
a time of literary and cultural efflorescence among Dalit youth in Maharashtra. Today, the term is used across India in recognition of Dalits’ claims to a history of suffering and resistance against caste inequality. I use the word “Dalit” throughout this study, even when that usage is anachronistic (for the colonial period, for instance), when writing about general or conceptual matters pertaining to the untouchable communities. I use the expression “Mahar Dalit” (pl. Mahar Dalits) to detail the activities of this particular caste, which was at the forefront of political conscientization in Maharashtra. I capitalize the word because I believe that 165 million Indians are entitled to a capital letter.¹
Figure 1. Map of Maharashtra and adjacent areas, with state boundaries as of 2008. Courtesy of Philip Schwartzberg, Meridian Mapping, Minneapolis (MN), with editorial assistance from Joseph E. Schwartzberg.