

Hindu Festivals, Noise, and the Politics of Soundscape in Mumbai, India

by  
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## Abstract

*In the Indian megacity of Mumbai, loudness is power. Over the last fifty years, politicians have emerged as the leading patrons of the exuberant music-oriented events comprising Hindu religious festivals. As sponsors of Hindu festival processions and other events, Mumbai's political elite have discovered a medium through which they can connect with massive crowds of young, ecstatic festival attendees, tapping into the affective potential of musical sound while imbuing the message of their party with a sense of divine power and authority associated with a festival's idiomatic forms of ritual musical expression. Sponsorship of festival events has proven to be a critical campaign strategy for political parties, especially those aligned with Hindu nationalist and other chauvinistic ideological platforms. The result has been the systematization of political patronage in Hindu festival organization, as well as the growth of a prolonged, industrialized "festival season," saturated with political funds and dense with increasingly loud celebrations. For the political sponsors of any given festival event in Mumbai, drowning out sonic competitors is the key to demonstrating one's own vitality and capacity for leadership. Politicians and their collaborators thereby go to great lengths to ensure that their own festival event will produce the loudest sound, even committing criminal acts to suppress the enforcement of noise laws. The excessively loud sound of religious festivals has come to represent the defining feature of the urban soundscape, transforming Mumbai into one of the loudest cities on earth and galvanizing the efforts of a sizeable community of local anti-noise activists who now stand as principal adversaries to the city's political elite.*

*This dissertation argues that the phenomenon of loudness in Mumbai's festival soundscape serves a crucial role in the consolidation of power for political sponsors, while simultaneously providing a space for the production of political and civic subjectivities as well as the assertion of a socio-political voice among festival participants. Utilizing ethnographic and ethnohistorical methods, my interdisciplinary research provides new theoretical perspectives and new paths for future inquiry in the global study of sound and citizenship in the world's cities.*

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# INTRODUCTION

## SOUND, CITIZENSHIP, AND SUBJECTIVITY IN MUMBAI

This dissertation examines the unique and foundational role that sound from Hindu religious festivals has come to occupy in the dynamics of urban life in Mumbai, India. Using ethnographic and ethnohistorical methods, my interdisciplinary research offers new insights into the phenomenon of Mumbai's festival sound, commonly designated locally as "noise pollution," or simply "noise." For the first time in the scholarly literature on the region, I trace the connections between contemporary debates over festival "noise" in Mumbai, the role of sound within the seismic shifts of the late twentieth century in the regional political status quo, the centrality of sound and "noise" in the formation of modern political subjectivities and modes of civic engagement, and recurrent patterns of sectarian violence over musical sound that took place during the colonial period across India. The chapters of this dissertation provide new theoretical perspectives and new paths for future inquiry in the global study of sound and citizenship in the world's cities.

The research presented here is framed by several key questions. First, how has sound, particularly the music of large-scale public Hindu religious festival events, come to be such a salient point of anxiety and conflict for Mumbaikars? Second, why — despite decades of organized efforts from self-styled "anti-noise" activists, the existence of elaborate laws at various levels of government specifying decibel limits in public spaces, and the steady accumulation of clear evidence highlighting the injurious effects of loud sound on public health in the city and region — does the problem of festival "noise" persist? Finally, what new understandings does the case of Mumbai's festival "noise" offer,



on a generalizable level, regarding the potential role that sound can play in processes of governmentality and governance as well as in the expression of political agency?

The central argument of this dissertation posits that through loudness (in Mumbai's festival events), power is attained and reproduced while political and civic subjectivities are shaped and articulated. More specifically, as this dissertation will demonstrate, Hindu festival music assumed new prominence in the late colonial era as a rallying point around which groups of Hindus imagined a new kind of political personhood, as citizens of a nascent Indian nation founded upon the Hindu religion in rejection of European colonialism as well as the exclusion of religious minorities who did not conform to this vision of Indian unity under Hinduism. Throughout the twentieth century, the concept of "noise" came to be imbued with new significance for Bombayites, and through it they developed novel ways of understanding their place in the world both as cosmopolitan citizens of a global city as well as participants in local contestations over their city's highly idiosyncratic acoustic environment. Within the last fifty years, politicians, especially those aligned with the ideology of Hindu nationalism, have made religious festivals (and the music associated with them) an instrumental part of their strategies for mobilizing support and asserting territorial dominance. The efficacy of these strategies relies heavily on the affective capacity of music and sound, as those politicians that sponsor the most aesthetically revered bands and DJs with the loudest sound systems find the greatest success in appealing to throngs of young, enthusiastic potential voters. The participants in festival events themselves take part in a crucial process of civic and political subject formation rooted in a hyper-masculinized Hindu regionalist identity, with the loudness of

such events enabling them to collectively assert a socio-political and sonic voice that is otherwise silenced within the city's stratified social milieu.

In the section that follows, I will introduce a group of musicians with whom I conducted participant-observation research in Mumbai. Through this brief written introduction to the band, I will establish the most significant facets involved in the case of festival "noise" in contemporary Mumbai.

### **BANJO MUSIC, FESTIVAL PATRONAGE, AND THE POLITICS (AND AESTHETICS) OF LOUDNESS**

Jaideva Beats is a band of young musicians specializing in *banjo*: a regional style of street music common to the Indian state of Maharashtra where Mumbai is situated. *Banjo* music represents a ubiquitous part of the contemporary celebration of large-scale *sarvajanik* (public) Hindu festivals in Mumbai. Most often performing in procession, *banjos* typically feature a repertoire emphasizing instrumental arrangements of Marathi-language film songs alongside Hindu devotionals. *Banjo* music takes its name from its historical use of the instrument *bulbul tarang*, sometimes known as the "Indian banjo," although electronic keyboards are now used more commonly in place of a *bulbul tarang*. The amplified keyboard of a *banjo* group provides the music with its melodic content. It is accompanied by a wide assortment of percussion instruments that typically include Indian drums (e.g. *tasha* and *dhol*) alongside Western-style marching drums and drum kits. With a range of drum sizes and timbres, a well-outfitted *banjo* group is capable of creating a dense suffusion of the audible frequency range.

The members of Jaideva Beats (all men, and nearly all under the age of 25) depend on income from paying gigs during the months of festival season to support themselves and

their families through the year. Like much of their audiences at the festival events at which they perform, these musicians mostly come from Mumbai's Marathi-speaking, Maratha-caste, working-class Hindu communities with ancestral roots in Ratnagiri and other rural districts of the Maharashtrian Konkan region. Employment in these communities can be dangerously scarce, especially since the decline of the city's textile industry in the late twentieth century. For Jaideva Beats, the festival season brings a frenzy of activity as the band gigs their way across the city, often performing multiple times in a single day at festival events.

The economic opportunities presented by Hindu festivals have grown enormously during the last fifty years, ever since politicians integrated the sponsorship of festival events into the core of their campaign strategy. Involvement in religious festivals offers politicians a chance to appeal to massive crowds of young, ecstatic festival attendees from key "vote bank" communities (particularly Jaideva Beats' community of working-class, Marathi-speaking, Konkan Hindus). Festival organizing committees (*mandals*) receive funding from politicians and parties who allocate copious (and nearly entirely unregulated) amounts of money to festivals. The symbiosis between politicians and *mandals* has come to fill the economic vacuum left behind by the collapse of the textile industry, now serving as a major source of informal sector employment for low-skill workers.

For members of Jaideva Beats and their community, festivals are often understood and discussed as examples of divine intervention: moments in which the gods (acting through politicians and *mandals*) descend upon the physical plane to bring jobs to the devout. Politicians and festival organizers are thereby positioned as mediators of such acts

of divine intervention, thus enhancing public views of their power, authority, and benevolence.

The political parties that have found the greatest advantage in utilizing Hindu festivals as a campaign vehicle tend to be those with Hindu nationalist and Maharashtrian chauvinist platforms, most notably the Shiv Sena party, which has come to dominate both local politics and festival sponsorship since the late twentieth century. Through its patronage of Hindu festivals, Shiv Sena has cultivated a strong public perception of the party as defenders of the Hindu religion and Maharashtra's Marathi-speaking "sons of the soil," allegedly besieged by Muslims and other religious minorities as well as migrant laborers from North and South India portrayed as seeking to take jobs away from working-class native Maharashtrians.

Among the Jaideva Beats band members, support for Shiv Sena and its ideology is unequivocal. Like other young Marathi-speaking Hindu men with working-class backgrounds, the members of Jaideva Beats face a cruel and precarious job market for unskilled laborers. The Sena's platform therefore resonates strongly with them, as the party places blame for these economic circumstances squarely on their preferred scapegoats of religious minorities and Hindi-speaking migrants from North India seeking employment opportunities in Mumbai. In casual conversation, members of Jaideva Beats would frequently remark on their feelings of identification with the far-right party or its characteristic ideology, especially on the basis of labor issues and the migration of non-Maharashtrians into Mumbai<sup>1</sup>. Moreover, many of the band's contacts in festival *mandals*

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<sup>1</sup> Ethnomusicologist Anna Schultz (2013) has conducted research on a different musical situation in Maharashtra in which musicians have similarly found appeal in the ideological messaging of Hindu nationalism. In her book *Singing a Hindu Nation: Marathi Devotional*

are affiliated with Shiv Sena, and the several band members have personal familial connections to Shiv Sena party operatives.

While the political and economic impact of contemporary festival patronage has often escaped close scrutiny in Mumbai's public discourse, its sonic impact has been explosively conspicuous and hotly debated in recent years. The growing influx of political funds has transformed the soundscape of festivals with more events, bigger processions, more bands and DJs, louder sound systems, and increasingly massive crowds. An arms race has developed between rival politicians seeking to outdo each other on the sonic stage.

In the festival events they sponsor, Shiv Senaiks and other politicians covet loudness as a way to express and consolidate their power. Performed as an expression of devotion to a deity, the sound of festival music is imbued with a divine quality that grants a sense of might and righteousness to an event's political patrons in the eyes of the hundreds of thousands (or at times even millions) of revelers that take to the streets in procession. As political parties compete for the support of the democratic populace, so too do the performers they sponsor compete to be heard amidst the clamorous festival soundscape.

The city's most powerful political actors convey their vigor and authority to their voting

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*Performance and Nationalism*, Schultz focuses on a subgenre of *kīrtan* singing in Maharashtra known as *rāṣṭrīya kīrtan* ("nationalist kirtan"), in which performers use the religiously-suffused classical music idiom of *kīrtan* as a channel for the expression of Hindu nationalist political and ideological sentiments. The idioms of *rāṣṭrīya kīrtan* and *banjo* do differ significantly, however, in terms of their performance context, musical content, and the nature of their political connections. In the case of *rāṣṭrīya kīrtan*, Schultz describes a form that exists within the traditions and institutional structures of the classical music realm. As part of her field research, Schultz took part in the training that takes place within the *kīrtan* schools of Maharashtrian cities like Pune and Mumbai. *Banjo*, on the other hand, is not a classical music form, but rather a form of street performance. As such, the contexts and audiences of *banjo* performances are fundamentally different from that of *kīrtan*. One prominent difference includes the institutional system of patronage that supports *banjo* performances, namely the model of patronage derived from politically-affiliated festival *mandals* in sponsoring the public, open-air events in which *banjo* music is performed.

base by supporting the loudest events with the best bands or DJs and the most sophisticated amplification systems.

The success of a politically-sponsored festival event in attracting a sizable crowd derives not only from its sheer decibel level, but also an audience's assessment of that particular event's aesthetic value, of which loudness comprises only one facet (albeit a significant one). Clearly, the viability of these events relies heavily on the affective power of sound that is specifically musical (although in some instances certain non-musical sounds bear importance as well, most notably the sounds of firecrackers and amplified speeches). Moreover, the affective potential of festival music is further amplified by its association with both divinity and beloved contemporary popular culture, underscored by performers' carefully selected repertory that characteristically incorporates both devotionals and film music hits.

Aesthetics play a role not only in the political value a festival event represents to its patrons, but also in the social capital that the most talented musicians can extract from their musical success in order to satisfy their own interests and ends. A band that can prove its aesthetic worth is able to forge ongoing relationships with politicians and *mandals* that enable its members access to a network of favor-exchange and other strategic benefits. Throughout my conversations with them, the members of Jaideva Beats were unanimous in declaring themselves Mumbai's greatest *banjo*. One might dismiss these claims as youthful bravado had it not been for the group's tremendous popularity with crowds, their remarkable demand within the festival circuit, and their deep connections in the realm of local politics. In establishing close relationships with politicians, the members of Jaideva

Beats could not only secure more paid bookings during festivals, but also call upon their network of locally influential figures to grant favors.

In Mumbai's festival soundscape, the utilization of sound as a conduit for establishing political voice and ascendancy (rooted in ethnolinguistic, religious, and socio-economic subjectivities) connects closely to its role in asserting a particular form of youth masculinity. It is no mere coincidence that the members of *banjo* groups like Jaideva Beats are nearly always men. In fact, during nearly any given festival, one would find that men and boys comprise the vast preponderance of musicians, DJs, *mandal* workers, or any other individuals taking part in the celebrations at street level with dancing, setting off firecrackers, or drinking *bhang lassi*. Looking on from the windows and rooftops of their *chawls*<sup>2</sup>, women and girls are generally excluded from the festivities (or, alternatively, insulated from the maelstrom, as many of my informants would insist). Governed in part by a discourse of "protection" and societal notions of behavioral propriety, the gendering of festival space also suggests that certain notions of a masculine ideal inform the production of political subjects taking place during festivals. As the chapters of this dissertation will further demonstrate, festivals provide a ritual space for the aestheticized realization of a Hindu masculinity shaped in response to the political realities of ethnic and religious pluralism in modern urban India.

Although the political patronage of festivals has come to represent a crucial economic boon to Jaideva Beats and other members of sought-after "vote bank" communities, other Mumbaikars perceive the sonic effervescence of contemporary, politically-funded *sarvajanik* festivals as a nuisance, a threat to public health, and even a

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<sup>2</sup> A colonial era style of tenement building most often associated with the working-class communities that provided the primary labor force for Bombay's historic textile mills

potential silencing of marginalized voices in the city. From roughly August through March, the city's lengthy festival season has achieved notoriety for its extremely high, sustained decibel levels, due in large part to the steady torrents of loud sound from the multiple simultaneous performances of DJs and bands in the city's most densely inhabited residential neighborhoods<sup>3</sup>. Activists and medical professionals decry the loudness of festivals (using the emic designation of "noise") as a destructive force in the urban environment<sup>4</sup>, and indeed many of my musician interlocutors (including members of Jaideva Beats) agree with this assessment despite their own participation in the phenomenon.

Furthermore, some members of minority religious communities (especially Mumbai's Muslim communities) have interpreted the ever-increasing loudness of Hindu festivals as an attempt to silence non-Hindu voices from public discourse as well as the urban soundscape. In some cases, this sentiment has contributed to what has been called "competitive religiosity" in the urban soundscape, with some mosques choosing to raise the decibel level of their own amplified *azān* (call to prayer) in response to the loudness of Hindu festivals. This sonic act represents a symbolic defense and reassertion of the voice of non-Hindus within Mumbai's socio-political and audible environment.

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<sup>3</sup> The increasing loudness of festivals has contributed immensely to Mumbai's current standing as the loudest city in India, and perhaps in the world. Claims of Mumbai's standing among other cities nationally and globally on the basis of ambient decibel levels derive from studies conducted by government institutions and NGOs in the recent decades since such research has been initiated. Chapter Three of this dissertation discusses the findings and methods of these studies in greater detail, in addition to other environmental factors that contribute to the empirical measurement and subjective experience of "loudness" in an urban setting.

<sup>4</sup> Demonstrating the immense physical force of the sound that often accompanies large festival events, in 2014, a Ganeshotsav procession in Satara (a city to the southeast of Mumbai in Maharashtra) was loud enough that it caused a wall to collapse onto a group of people, killing three and injuring two of them (*Daily News and Analysis* 2014).



Despite the considerable consternation expressed over the loudness of festivals, efforts towards reducing the sonic volume of festival season are easily and systematically frustrated by Mumbai's politicians and *mandals*, who have come to rely heavily on the political value of festival loudness and who wield the institutional influence necessary to ensure its continuation. Although festival organizers and their political sponsors are very often in violation of anti-noise laws<sup>5</sup>, their positions of power offer them access to corrupt methods of avoiding prosecution and silencing detractors. Bombay High Court justices Abhay Oka and A.S. Gadkari, offering their view on the situation, were paraphrased as suggesting that:

*[F]estivals like dahi handi, Ganeshotsav and Navratri are often organized by local politicians and political groups and even anti-social elements are associated with them. It said that the common man is reluctant to complain about noise pollution "though the use of loudspeakers or musical instruments create a nuisance." Cops are reluctant to take action against influential persons involved in organization of such events. (Sequeira 2015a)*

Even if Mumbai's political elite were to acquiesce and restrict the sound of festival events to the legal decibel limits, the resulting dissipation of crowd sizes would lead to a drastic reduction in the scale of festival events and, therefore, the breadth of festival-season employment. With countless laborers having come to depend on the informal economy of festivals, silencing the festival soundscape would thereby collapse this economic ecosystem

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<sup>5</sup> The Indian Noise Pollution (Regulation and Control) Rules of 2000 specify decibel limits ranging from 40 dBA to 75 dBA depending on time of day and zoning. In Mumbai, public festival events that manage to remain under these limits are extremely rare, with events frequently exceeding 100 dBA and at times reaching levels higher than 120 dBA. Noise complaints are widespread during festivals, as are Public Interest Litigation (PIL) cases filed in the Bombay High Court against organizers of festival events who have allegedly violated noise laws. Although High Court judges often rule on the side of plaintiffs in these noise-related cases, police enforcement of noise laws remains incredibly rare, and the actual implementation of penalties specified by the Indian Noise Pollution (Control and Regulation) Rules of 2000 is truly unheard of.

and lead to a widespread economic crisis. With the system of employment surrounding festivals having reached “too big to fail” status, its perpetuation remains insulated from criticism, even if the sound of festivals presents a source of conflict and environmental harm.

### **CONTRIBUTIONS TO SCHOLARSHIP**

This dissertation offers several significant contributions to the literature of my disciplines (anthropology and ethnomusicology) as well as some key interventions with regard to ongoing interdisciplinary scholarly debates. The comprehensive ethnohistorical data laid out in these chapters represents a valuable addition to historical anthropology, as key research questions regarding contemporary phenomena are pursued through a deep exploration of the archival record. I also contribute significantly to urban anthropology in my focus on the intersections of citizenship, soundscape, labor, migration, and right-wing populism in a world city. This research holds considerable value for South Asian area studies, as it represents the first musical ethnography of *banjo* music, as well as a unique investigation of Hindu nationalist and regional chauvinist politics that emphasizes the grassroots, day-to-day acts of interpersonal interaction through which support for these political ideologies is cultivated. Moreover, my dissertation is a substantial addition to the interdisciplinary field of sound studies. In particular, I contribute to theorizations of the relationship between sound and political processes such as the consolidation of power, the formation of civic subjectivities, and the expression of economic and political agency.

The research presented here adds to scholarly discussions on urban soundscapes, and as such the term soundscape is used throughout the dissertation. The term is not

without its detractors, however. Therefore it would be useful to briefly explore the concept as well as its usefulness and limitations in the study of sound. The concept of soundscape, as it figures within the focus of this dissertation, was perhaps most notably advanced by composer and pioneering sound scholar R. Murray Schafer, who wrote that a soundscape could be “any acoustic field of study [including] a musical composition [...], a radio program [...], or an acoustic environment” (1977:7). This last example Schafer offers of a possible soundscape, that of an acoustic environment, provides the most appropriate model of soundscape<sup>6</sup> for the purposes of this study.

Schafer’s work has proven profoundly influential on subsequent scholarship on soundscape. Historian Emily Thompson modifies Schafer’s conception of a soundscape by placing greater emphasis on the role of human intervention and mediation in soundscapes. She writes that soundscapes include not only the sounds within a particular environment, “but also the material objects that create, and sometimes destroy those sounds,” as well as the varied ways in which human beings perceive and respond to auditory information (2012:117). Barry Blesser and Linda-Ruth Salter (2007) highlight the importance of architecture in understanding soundscapes, offering their concepts of *aural architecture*, *spatial acoustics*, and *cultural acoustics* in understanding the role of objects and environments in the physical diffusion of sounds, the human perception of those sounds, and the contribution of that perception in our overall understanding of the spaces and

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<sup>6</sup> The influence of Arjun Appadurai’s work on contemporary scholarship of soundscape also demands acknowledgment. In particular, many soundscape scholars have found applicability in Appadurai’s discussion of “-scapes,” wherein such “-scapes” (i.e. ethnoscaples, mediascaples, technoscaples, financescaples, and ideoscaples) represent conceptual parameters (akin to physically-unbound landscapes) that can be used to understand and analyze the complex and amorphous transnational cultural processes taking place in modernity (Appadurai 1996).

environments that surround us. This dissertation further develops these ideas introduced in the work of Thompson, as well as that of Blesser and Salter, specifically with regard to questions of the potential material impact of sound on humans and environments, the extent of human variability in perceptions of sound and soundscapes, and the complex interactions between auditory phenomena and processes of culture and politics.

Ethnomusicologist Jim Sykes (2015) identifies a tendency in which older studies of soundscape have ignored the ways that soundscapes are often contested. His critique holds particular relevance for the purposes of this dissertation, as an examination of sound and soundscape in Mumbai reveals a history fraught with conflict. From the colonial-era sectarian riots over music (discussed later in this introduction, as well as in Chapter One) to contemporary matters of “competitive religiosity” and the involvement of contentious political figures in festivals, Mumbai represents the ideal case study for the contestation of soundscape.

While I do use the term soundscape throughout this dissertation, I do not do so entirely uncritically. Anthropologist Tim Ingold (2011) has introduced some very interesting challenges to the notion of soundscape that are worth considering. Ingold notes that human perceptions of the world around us cannot be rendered discrete based upon any individual physiological sense. We do not form impressions of the world based on smell that are separate from those based on sight. Furthermore, he argues that emphasis on a particular sensory “-scape” incorrectly implies that processes of perception based upon that sense take place within its corresponding sensory organ in isolation. Rather, perception, even when relying heavily on a single sense, always involves the use of all of our sensory and mental faculties working in conjunction with one another. Ingold also

notes the tendency for the concept of soundscape to overemphasize the fixed surfaces of human activity, rather than the mutable components of our environments (such as air).

I believe that my use of the term soundscape throughout this dissertation accords with these aforementioned critiques raised by Ingold. For example, in following the work of Blesser and Salter (2007), I recognize that auditory perception in itself only provides raw sensory information which ultimately contributes to the much more complex processes of human cognition and understandings of environment. In my study of Mumbai's soundscape, therefore, I do not suggest that any particular sensory phenomena can be understood in isolation. Rather, they are situated within the complexities of Mumbaikars' experiences of urban life, and must be acknowledged on those terms. Moreover, I agree with Ingold in noting that any sphere of human activity (designated as "soundscape," "culture," "environment," etc.) has no clear boundaries marking it as discrete and countable. In this sense, the soundscape of Greater Mumbai, referenced throughout this dissertation, is not entirely isolated from the matters concerning sound on a regional or national level. As such, occasional references are made in the chapters that follow to issues that hold relevance beyond the city of Mumbai.

I would elaborate slightly upon another critique of soundscape that Ingold offers, specifically concerning his evaluation of the materiality of sound. "Sound," he writes, "is neither mental nor material, but a phenomenon of *experience*...[J]ust as light is another way of saying 'I can see,' so sound is another way of saying 'I can hear.' If this is so, then neither sound nor light, strictly speaking, can be an *object* of our perception" (2011:137). However, in physics, the term "sound" holds meaning even outside of references to human hearing. Sound waves that lie outside the frequency range of human perception nevertheless

remain sound. Sound is the passage of a wave through a medium. While the sound wave itself, therefore, is not itself material, the media through which it passes, for example air, most certainly are. It is realistic and appropriate to suggest that the gradual erosion of a sea cliff by ocean waves over time represents a material phenomenon, even though we can identify a clear distinction between the matter itself (in this case, the ocean water, as well as the cliff) and the oscillation that passes through that matter (the wave). The wave itself, strictly speaking, is not material, but rather the pattern of disturbance passing through the material medium of water. Nevertheless, discursive convention would support a discussion of the materiality and material impact of ocean waves. Sound, similarly, represents a pattern of disturbance passing through matter. Therefore, it is also realistic and appropriate to consider the effects of sound on humans and their environments to be material phenomena. The impact of sound on humans, of course, is most apparent with relation to hearing, however it is not always limited to hearing alone. This is clear in Julian Henriques's (2011) discussion of the aesthetics surrounding the corporeal experience of reggae sound systems, as well as in Michael Birenbaum Quintero's (2019) description of loudness in the city of Buenaventura, Colombia, where the human perception of loudness includes physical experiences such as sound "rattling the sternum" alongside those experiences directly tied to hearing.

Like soundscape, "noise" also represents a crucial concept in my research. In the context of my fieldwork in Mumbai, "noise" represents the principal emic designation used by various parties (including not only activists and government officials but also *mandals*, politicians, and musicians) to describe any sound-related phenomena relating to religious festivals. My chapters will demonstrate that the term "noise," within the context of

Mumbai's festival soundscape, evinces multiple, overlapping layers of meaning, all of which relate to the three discursive aspects of noise as described by ethnomusicologist David Novak (2015). As an aesthetic term, Novak explains, noise has often been positioned and defined in opposition to the category of music. In modern technological history, the term noise has conventionally signified an unwanted byproduct either with reference to mediated communication (as in "signal versus noise") or pertaining to the sounds associated with industrialized production. Lastly, Novak addresses the social contexts of the term noise. In such contexts, noise represents lines of socio-cultural difference and subalternity. Novak, citing Ronald Radano (2003), offers the example of European colonial "hearings" of black music and speaking as noise. These layered iterations latent within the concept of "noise" will all carry relevance as my chapters discuss issues in Mumbai including the denigration of street musics performed during festivals, perceptions of "noise" as an inevitable byproduct of urban modernity, and the development and legacy of colonial stereotypes of Indians as fundamentally "noisy."

My dissertation offers important new perspectives on the relationship between sound (as "noise") and citizenship<sup>7</sup>. The increasing presence of ethnic pluralism, migration, and sectarian conflict across the contemporary world has complicated the stability of the concept of citizenship. This dissertation suggests that the study of sound can contribute to our understanding of how political communities are formed and maintained. In this sense, I build upon work by Leonardo Cardoso (2017) that examines concerns over noise in São

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<sup>7</sup> Frederick Cooper (2018) offers a particularly useful definition of "citizenship" for the purposes of this discussion. He writes that citizenship fundamentally involves "a divisible and flexible bundle of rights and obligations in relation to a political entity" as well as "a framework for debate and struggle over the relationship of political belonging to religious, linguistic, and cultural difference" (2018:4-5).

Paulo, Brazil, as they relate to issues of citizenship, law, and socio-economic class in the city. Bringing this discussion into the Indian context offers the potential for numerous insights, especially in exploring connections between the development of political and civic subjectivities vis-à-vis phenomena such as urban cosmopolitanism, sectarian conflict, the legacy of a colonial discourse on “noisy natives”, and the rise of contemporary right-wing populism.

In illustrating the use of sound by those in positions of power to influence the behavior of others, my research holds significance in scholarly discussions regarding governmentality and power as they pertain to sound. In particular, I follow Michael Birenbaum Quintero’s (2019) work in Buenaventura, Colombia, which addresses the ways in which loudness can serve as an expression of power. In Mumbai, loud sound provides an avenue for the reproduction of power for those in positions of political ascendancy, while also imparting agency and a socio-political “voice” to those in otherwise low-status socio-economic positions. In fact, the word “voice” itself was employed at times by my interlocutors in discussing the significance of one’s sonic participation in religious festivals. As Amanda Weidman (2015) notes, voice is a compelling concept in part because it can simultaneously invoke the acoustic, the corporeal, and the metaphorical. The latter of these interpretive possibilities inherent in the word “voice” carries clear implications with regard to issues of power and human agency.

As individuals striving to exert agency within the context of a hostile economic situation, my informants in Jaideva Beats provide an important transnational case study in interdisciplinary discussions of the contemporary “gig economy.” This concept has drawn some scholarly attention recently. Anthropologist Ilana Gershon’s (2017) work examines



the processes by which applicants search for jobs and companies hire applicants in the United States, demonstrating how the innovations of today's economy have altered the ways in which the Self is conceptualized and presented to Others, as well as how individuals forge, maintain, and ethically navigate new kinds of workplace relationships. More recently, sociologist Alexandra Ravenelle (2019) has explored the tension between the utopian promises advanced by corporations benefitting from the gig economy (or sharing economy) and the practical realities for the laborers working within it in the United States. My work contributes to this scholarship with a much-needed example from outside the context of the West involving musical laborers in a job market that has become precarious due to a highly idiosyncratic set of historical and socio-political circumstances. In focusing on a group of *banjo* musicians, I fill a significant gap in the ethnographic literature on South Asia, which lacks any scholarship on *banjo* and will additionally benefit from an ethnographic study that emphasizes the daily activities of working-class street musicians.

This dissertation explores issues of immediate contemporary significance involving global connections between working-class underemployment and right-wing populism. In addressing today's Hindu nationalist and regional chauvinist movements, I provide a valuable perspective focusing on the grassroots cultivation of support for these movements and parties. The ethnographic data provided in these chapters illustrates that individuals such as the members of Jaideva Beats develop affinity for groups like Shiv Sena primarily through close interpersonal interactions with local party workers (often on the basis of kinship or fictive kinship), as well as feelings of economic malaise in which blame comes to be directed towards migrant workers and other ethnolinguistic minority communities.

These tendencies differ from older characterizations of Hindu nationalists, which often depict individuals whose radical politics derive from deep feelings of animosity towards religious minorities (especially Muslims).

In examining my interlocutors' day-to-day engagements with the informal economy and assertions of agency through interpersonal ties with local political figures, my work engages with Beatrice Jauregui's explication of *jugaad* in India (2014). The Hindi word *jugaad*, Jauregui explains, expresses a particular style of accomplishing goals in urban India, which frequently involves calling upon one's social network for favors, or employing methods otherwise falling within, or at least adjacent to, the ethical category of corruption. Jauregui notes that a complex relationship exists between the perceived levels of permissibility and legitimacy of *jugaad* practices and the degree to which its practitioner wields social and material influence in their community. The operations of *jugaad* are evident in the ethnographic data presented in this dissertation, such as in the exchange of favors between Jaideva Beats members and politicians or *mandals*, as well as in instances of corruption in which politicians and *mandal* members use their power and influence to silence denunciators, bribe law enforcement officers, and suppress the enforcement of anti-noise laws.

My discussion of interpersonal networking, community maintenance, and favor-exchange in Chapter Six revolves around notions of "giving respect" and "taking respect" that align closely with Christine Garlough's (2013) examination of the concepts of acknowledgment and recognition. In her detailed intellectual history of the distinction between these two concepts, Garlough explains that acknowledgment is "deeply relational" and serves as "a form of communicating care" (2013:21). Acts of acknowledgment are

thereby foundational to human interpersonal relationships involving community and morality, and in the absence of acknowledgment inequality and injustice can develop. Recognition, on the other hand, is based on identification and categorization, according to Garlough. Recognition involves placing someone or something within a preexisting framework, and therefore represents a practical necessity for ordering and understanding the world around us. However, while inequality and injustice can develop out of a persistent and systematic failure to acknowledge, Garlough notes that they can also be perpetuated by recognition itself. She cites racial profiling as an example of this injurious aspect of recognition.

In this sense, acknowledgment represents a key concept in the political and community imagination of my musician interlocutors, and subsequently in the consolidation of support for right-wing populist groups and ideologies through grassroots patterns of intimate interpersonal interaction. The development of these networks of acknowledgment give rise to feelings of having been granted a “voice” in the form of political agency, and therefore contribute directly to the modes of civic and political subject formation at the center of this dissertation.

### **GEOGRAPHICAL, HISTORICAL, AND DEMOGRAPHIC BACKGROUND OF MUMBAI AND MAHARASHTRA**

The two sections that follow will briefly provide the historical framework necessary for appreciating the socio-political and sonic issues in Mumbai to be explored within the chapters of this dissertation.

The coastal metropolis of Mumbai (known as Bombay<sup>8</sup> until 1995) sits upon the Arabian Sea in Maharashtra, an Indian state in the western and central part of the subcontinent. Sharing its border with the states of Gujarat and Madhya Pradesh to the north, Chhattisgarh and Telangana to the east, and Karnataka and Goa to the south, Maharashtra's physical location has historically made it something of a geographical and cultural gateway between North India and South India. Although it lacks much of the infrastructural and architectural antiquity of cities such as Varanasi or Delhi, Mumbai is India's largest city, with over 18.3 million people living in the Greater Mumbai metropolitan area according to the most recent Census of India data from 2011. Migration in search of employment opportunities, particularly in textile manufacturing, has historically contributed to much of Mumbai's growth into a UN-designated "megacity." Although the city's once-thriving textile industry has all but vanished in the last forty years, leaving few job opportunities for unskilled laborers, migrants continue to arrive in Mumbai each year in search of work, albeit at a diminished rate. The Census of India's sex ratio figures offer a sense of (disproportionately male) migration patterns in Mumbai, indicating that there are 853 females per every 1000 males living in the city. Vast portions of the urban population do not have access to formal housing, with around 41.84% of city residents living in slum housing (a staggering number, especially when compared to the national rate of 5.41% of Indians living in slums).

The geographical area along the Konkan coast that makes up Greater Mumbai originally consisted of the Seven Islands of Bombay (Bombay, Colaba, Mahim, Mazagaon,

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<sup>8</sup> Throughout this dissertation, the name "Bombay" is used in the context of discussing events and actions having taken place prior to 1995, when the city's name was formally changed to "Mumbai." Likewise, consistency is maintained by using "Mumbai" in the context of events that have occurred since that date.

Old Woman's Island, Parel, and Worli) along with the islands of Salsette and Trombay, where the dense suburbs north of Mumbai city now lie. During the first half of the nineteenth century, a series of landfill projects connected the Seven Islands, Salsette, and Trombay into a single landmass.

The history of European colonialism in Bombay began in the sixteenth century when the Gujarat Sultanate, which had controlled that part of the Konkan coast for much of the preceding two centuries, signed the 1534 Treaty of Bassein, transferring control over the city of Bassein (present-day Vasai) to the Kingdom of Portugal. The treaty also stipulated that the Portuguese would receive the relatively undeveloped Seven Islands of Bombay along with Bassein. In 1661, soon after reclaiming the monarchy at the end of the English Civil War, Charles II, King of England, married Catherine of Braganza, daughter of the Portuguese king, whose dowry included several of the Portuguese island holdings including Bombay Island. The remaining Seven Islands were transferred to the English soon after, and Charles II began leasing the new colonial holdings to the British East India Company. In the mid-eighteenth century, Salsette Island, which had previously still been held by the Portuguese, came under the control of the Maratha Empire, although it was given to the British several decades later in 1782 at the end of the First Anglo-Maratha War.

Under the administration of the British East India Company during the early nineteenth century, the city of Bombay served as the capital of the colonial Bombay Presidency. The various islands around Bombay were joined into one geographical mass and the city experienced considerable population growth and infrastructural development. The Company Raj period on the Indian subcontinent ended in 1858, when the British Crown assumed direct control over the colony. During this final phase of European

colonialism known as the British Raj period, which lasted from 1858 until India attained independence in 1947, Bombay became a regional center of textile manufacturing. The nascent textile industry further propelled the expansion of the urban population, as factory jobs attracted large numbers of migrants from the surrounding region, especially the rural areas along the Konkan coast to the south of the city. In 1947, immediately following the end of British colonialism and the establishment of national independence, communal<sup>9</sup> tensions between Hindus and Muslims led to the division of the country into the sovereign entities of India and Pakistan, with the contours of their new shared border being determined on the basis of Hindu-Muslim religious majoritarianism. The Partition of India resulted in widespread violence and mass migration, as millions of people sought to relocate to the country whose majority religion corresponded with their own. As a major center of refugee relocation, Bombay's population spiked in the years following Partition.

In the process of organizing a new system of state governance following independence, the colonial division of Bombay Presidency was combined with several other regions formerly under British control to form Bombay State. However, during the 1950s, large sections of state populations across India demanded that their respective states be reorganized on the basis of shared language rather than the legacy of colonial geographies. These efforts were successful, and a number of state borders were redrawn to facilitate linguistic homogeneity. Bombay State thereby ceased to exist in 1960, having been succeeded by the new state of Maharashtra, designed to integrate those regions dominated by speakers of the Marathi language. According to the most recent Census of India data, within a sample of 10,000 Maharashtrians, nearly 69% spoke Marathi as their

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<sup>9</sup> In South Asia, the term "communalism" is commonly used to describe sectarian tensions between groups on the basis of identification with a particular religion, ethnicity, or caste.

mother tongue, with other significant linguistic populations including speakers of Hindi as their primary language (12.9%), Urdu speakers (6.7%), Gujarati speakers (2.1%), and Telugu speakers (1.2%).

In Mumbai, as in much of India, Hindus represent the majority religious demographic at 65.99% of the city population (compared to 79.80% of India's national population, according to the 2011 Census). At 20.65%, Muslims comprise a greater portion of Mumbai's urban population than throughout the rest of the country (which is 14.23% Muslim). Anthropologist Thomas Blom Hansen discusses the diversity of Mumbai's Muslim communities, writing that:

*The oldest Muslim communities in the city are small wealthy trading communities, the Bohras and Khojas, both Shi'a Muslims, and the Sunni Memons, who are well represented in Karachi and have extensive family networks in Africa and across the Indian Ocean. The city also has large groups of Marathi-speaking Muslims from the Konkan region south of Mumbai, as well as smaller Urdu-speaking communities from the central plains of southern India...The majority of Muslims in Mumbai have come from North India since the 1920s, not least weavers (ansaris) who came to work in the textile mills.*

In addition to Hindus and Muslims, the 2011 Census also indicates that Mumbai's population is 4.85% Buddhist (compared to 0.70% nationally), 4.10% Jain (0.37% nationally), 3.27% Christian (2.30% nationally), 0.49% Sikh (1.72% nationally), 0.40% other religions (including, for example, Parsis<sup>10</sup> and Jews<sup>11</sup>; 0.66% nationally), and 0.26% not stated (0.24% nationally).

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<sup>10</sup> The Parsi community in India descends from Zoroastrians fleeing the Muslim conquest of Persia who arrived in Gujarat beginning in the seventh century. During the colonial era, Parsis frequently became business partners with the British, becoming integral to the early development of Bombay city (Benjamin 2001). For example, Parsi entrepreneurs were particularly active in establishing Bombay's earliest textile mills (*ibid*).

<sup>11</sup> According to N. Benjamin (2001), India's Jewish population, much of which has historically been concentrated in Bombay and throughout the Konkan region, consists primarily of three different communities: Bene Israel, Baghdadi (Indo-Iraqi) Jews, and

Examples of conflict between religious communities can be noted throughout the centuries of Indian history. However, violent communalism, particularly between Hindus and Muslims, first became a major issue on the national scale during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. That period gave rise to many prominent Hindu and Islamic fundamentalist leaders, organizations, and movements, as well as to the related ideologies of Hindu nationalism<sup>12</sup> and Hindutva, premised on the notion that India is a fundamentally Hindu nation. Tensions and violence between religious communities grew in cities across India, eventually contributing to Partition in 1947. Communalism continued to varying degrees after Partition, with relations between Hindus and Muslims becoming particularly strained during the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries. Most notably, the 1992 destruction of the Babri Mosque in Ayodhya (Uttar Pradesh) by a group of Hindu nationalists sparked deadly riots in various cities, including severe rioting in Bombay that killed hundreds of people. Ten years later, in 2002, more than a thousand people died after rioting broke out between Hindus and Muslims across the state of Gujarat while Narendra Modi (India's current Prime Minister) served as the state's Chief Minister.

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Cochin Jews. Of these three, the Bene Israel community is the largest. At times, the ancestry of this community has been claimed to represent one of the Lost Tribes of Israel, while Benjamin suggests that the earliest ancestors of the community reached the village of Navgaon (present-day Raigad District, Maharashtra) in the third century AD. Indo-Iraqi Jews arrived in India much later, during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. It is possible that Cochin Jews have been in the Indian subcontinent longer than both the Bene Israel and Indo-Iraqi communities. P.M. Jussay (2005) claims that Cochin Jews arrived in South India, specifically present-day Kerala, during the tenth century BC.

<sup>12</sup> Anthropologist Thomas Blom Hansen's 1999 book *The Saffron Wave: Democracy and Hindu Nationalism in Modern India* offers a particularly insightful historical narrative detailing Hindu nationalism's transformation from a fringe ideology into a mainstream movement carrying tremendous influence on India's national political stage. Tracing the lineage and legacy of Hindutva organizations such as the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS), Hansen explores the ways in which organizations and institutions have adopted Hindu nationalism as a basis for political action across India.



Since the British Raj period, the city government of Greater Mumbai has been administered by the Brihanmumbai Municipal Corporation (formerly known as the Bombay Municipal Corporation), or BMC. At the present time of writing, the BMC council is composed of 227 legislators, known as “corporators,” representing 24 wards across seven zones in the city. Maharashtra’s state government is comprised of a legislative council (*vidhan parishad*) and a legislative assembly (*vidhan sabha*), presided over by a Chief Minister representing the party that holds the majority in the assembly. For decades following independence, the Congress Party (Indian National Congress, or INC) dominated local, regional, and national electoral politics. However, the resurgence of communalism in the late twentieth century provided the opportunity for Hindu nationalist political parties, such as the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) and the Marathi-focused Shiv Sena, to expand their base of support. Shiv Sena and BJP had in fact formed an alliance for many years until very recently in Maharashtra, and the two parties managed to wrest control from the Congress Party over the BMC and the state legislature for much of the last 35 years. Shiv Sena currently holds the highest number of seats in the BMC, while the BJP holds both Maharashtra’s legislative assembly and legislative council.

### **HINDU FESTIVALS AND THE URBAN SOUNDSCAPE**

Hindu festivals and their central musical component occupy a tremendously important role in modern Indian society. Historically, the most significant public manifestation of festivals has been the ritual of the procession, which early twentieth century Bengali scholar Benoy Kumar Sarkar specified as “the train of persons that proceeds through a town or village, as the case may be, on the occasion of a festival with

flourishes of music, flags and buntings, elephants and horses, etc.” (1917:115). Sarkar notes ancient mentions of festival processions appearing in the *Ramayana*,<sup>13</sup> the *Skanda Purana* (eighth century to tenth century CE), the *Padma Purana* (fourth century to fifteenth century CE), and the writings of Chinese Buddhist monk Faxian, who traveled to India sometime in the early fifth century CE (*ibid*).

With regard to textual associations of festivals with music, Sarkar finds evidence for antiquity even greater than that of the association of festivals with processions, citing a passage in the *Rig Veda* (fifteenth century to twelfth century BCE) in which “Vishwamitra’s son Madhuchchanda Risi has added to the grandeur of sacrifices by making dance and music inseparably connected with them”(1917:121). Musicologist and religious studies scholar Guy Beck (2006) also cites the Vedas and ancient Hindu texts in noting the close relationship historically established between Hindu theology and music. Ferdinand de Wilton Ward, an American who lived in India as a missionary in the mid-nineteenth century, observed this connection between music and Hindu ritual, especially processions, stating that music “accompanies all Hindoo festivals, all their processions whether solemn or gay, many of their religious ceremonies, and is almost daily resorted to the country over, as an evening recreation of the social circle” (1850:219). In the modern context, music plays an undoubtedly indispensable role in the observance of Hindu processions. The public nature of festivals indeed represents a crucial aspect of Indian modernity, as historian Ian Copland suggests in writing that:

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<sup>13</sup> Ascertaining a reliable date for the writing of the *Ramayana* has proven to be a particularly difficult task for scholars, with some estimates as early as the seventh century BCE (e.g. Keith 1915), but most others suggesting somewhere between fifth century BCE and fifth century CE (Goonatilake 2014).

*[u]nlike in the West, where religion was increasingly seen as a discrete 'private' matter of 'personal' faith, in India it remained steeped in public ritual and display – intimately linked to annual cycles of commemorative festivals such as, on the Hindu side, Ramnaumi, Diwali, and Dasehra and, on the Muslim side, Muharram and 'Idu'l-Azha. (2005:61)*

In modern India, Hindu festival processions and their music carry a long history as a point of conflict and debate in Indian soundscapes and furthermore constitute a node in the development and articulation of the Indian nation as a concept<sup>14</sup>. Amid the nascent nationalist and anti-colonial movement of the late nineteenth and early twentieth century, a major contingent of social reformers sought to construct a unified Indian national identity around the Hindu religion, despite the religious diversity across the subcontinent. As ostentatious public manifestations of Hindu practice, festivals became adopted by Hindu nationalist leaders as primary vehicles of projecting Hindu unity in Indian cities. With a dichotomy between Hindus and Muslims becoming a pervasive dynamic of social life in urban India, the musical processions of Hindu festivals came to exemplify the kind of “integrative function” of public rituals described by Hermanowicz and Morgan that “allows parties in a dispute to claim positions of dominance” (1999:199).

With symbols of politicized religion like Hindu festival processions gaining prominence in a nationalized fissuring between India's religious communities, the last sixty years of the colonial period saw the rise of the pattern of violence commonly referred to as

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<sup>14</sup> Although festival processions and music associated with other religious groups, such as Muslims or Christians, have at times been the source of inter-community conflict and occasionally represent a concern of Mumbai's anti-noise activist communities, albeit to a far lesser extent than Hindu festivals, they fall outside the scope of this dissertation. In particular neighborhoods of Mumbai, Muslim and Christian festivals certainly do occur on a large scale; however the frequency and magnitude of Hindu festivals in the city has a much greater overall effect on the urban soundscape as well as the basic day-to-day experiences of living in Mumbai. Therefore, throughout this dissertation, Muslim and Christian festivals are mentioned in various contexts when relevant, though otherwise the primary focus remains on the soundscape issues surrounding Hindu festivals more specifically.

the “music before mosque” problem. Numerous sectarian riots between Hindus and Muslims across the subcontinent, including a major riot in Bombay in 1893, began over objections to the sound of Hindu festival processions disrupting *namāz* (“worship”) in nearby masjids<sup>15</sup>. Throughout colonial India, music before mosque riots occurred with staggering regularity, casting feelings of terror over festival celebrations and contributing to the intensifying schism between Hindus and Muslims.

In the late nineteenth century, political leaders in Bombay Presidency seized on the explosive potential for Hindu festivals and their music to mobilize crowds and demarcate lines of community imagination, as demonstrated by music before mosque incidents. Nationalist figures like Bal Gangadhar Tilak recognized that the nominally religious nature of festival events served as an ideal surrogate for overt political assembly, which was prohibited by the colonial government. New *sarvajanik* (public) festivals of unprecedented scale were inaugurated in Bombay Presidency, most significantly Tilak’s own reimagining of Ganesh Chaturthi (also known as Ganeshotsav or simply Ganpati), in honor of the elephant-headed god Ganesh (Ganpati), which continues to this day as Mumbai’s largest Hindu festival, observed annually for ten days. The late colonial reinvention of Hindu festivals in Bombay Presidency established the festival idiom as a useful medium for political mobilization, and augmented the role of festivals in general within local cultural practice.

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<sup>15</sup> As S. Krishnaswamy wrote in his 1966 PhD dissertation in history at the University of Chicago on the 1893 Bombay riot, “The crux of the music question which came into great prominence in 1893 was whether the Hindu processions could pass by mosques with music or not. The Muslims insisted that there should be no music near their places of worship at any time of the day or night, as it disturbed their prayer and meditation, while the Hindus argued that any break in the continuity of their music at their procession would ‘destroy all the merit of the procession’ and hence they would not stop their music even while passing by mosques” (1966:2).

The festivals celebrated most widely in contemporary Mumbai and throughout the state of Maharashtra predominantly take place during what is known as “festival season.” This phrase may be somewhat misleading, however, as this “season” in fact occupies roughly half of the year. Festival season begins with the celebration of Dahi Handi during the Hindu calendrical month of Shravana (usually in August), continuing through the festival of Holi in Phalguna (February or March), and includes events like the ten-day festival of Ganpati, nine nights of Navratri (with Dussehra on the tenth day), five days of Diwali celebrations, and various smaller Hindu festivals. In Mumbai, the season also encompasses several important non-Hindu festivals (in which many Hindus nevertheless take part) such as the Mount Mary Fair, Christmas, the Mahim Fair, New Year’s Eve, and, depending on a given year’s alignment with the Hijri calendar, Islamic festivals like Bakr-Eid, Eid-e-Milad, and Muharram. “Festival season” therefore comprises a considerable portion of the year and is densely packed with festival celebrations, and of course does not even account for the numerous festivals that take place during the remainder of the year.

Processions (or “road shows,” as they are known by some musicians) certainly represent some of the most visible, and audible, aspects of Hindu festivals. Winding along its route, a procession can transform a narrow neighborhood lane into an ephemeral discotheque, the effervescence passing only when the roving spectacle turns a corner or lurches onto the next block down the road. Larger festival processions most often commence in the evening, drawing men, disproportionately, to the center of activity at street level, with women and children more often observing the excitement from the side of the road or from the windows of residences above. The most elaborate and well-financed events might include truck-mounted lighting rigs with color-changing beams and strobes.

Disappearing into thick clouds of color pouring out of smoke fountain fireworks, revelers dance in front of flatbeds carrying towering stacks of loudspeakers and bands or DJs playing Marathi and Hindi film songs or electronic dance music, punctuated sporadically by the booming report of an M-80 or other ground salute firecracker. Among the various regional styles represented within those bands that perform during festival processions, *banjo* groups are some of the most common.

### **RESEARCH TIMELINE AND METHODOLOGY**

The central focus of this dissertation is both historical and ethnographic, with the work presented here drawing primarily upon data collected from participant-observation research, interviews, and archival sources over the course of three periods of fieldwork in India between 2012 and 2017. This research project began, in embryonic form, as my Master of Arts thesis in Ethnomusicology at the University of Wisconsin-Madison, which I defended successfully in December 2011. My MA thesis, titled *Music, Riots, and Colonial Law: The Violent Shaping of Communities and Communalism in Modern India*, focused on the phenomenon of music before mosque riots during the British Raj period. The research I conducted towards my MA thesis proved foundational for the continuation of the project as a dissertation topic. In compiling data for my master's research, I drew primarily from digitally accessible archival data, including roughly 40 Indian case law and other legal documents from as early as 1845 pertaining to the performance of music in public urban spaces and conflict over such performances, as well as over 120 Indian newspaper articles from as early as 1878.

In 2012, I received funding through the Scott Kloeck-Jenson Travel Fellowship from the UW-Madison Institute for Regional and International Studies (IRIS) to travel to India for research during the summer and fall of that year. I spent the greatest part of this trip conducting archival research at the National Archives of India in New Delhi, where I consulted over 200 government documents relevant to the topics of conflict over processional music and the regulation of religious festivals and public sound. I also spent several days reviewing multi-media archival materials at the Archives and Research Center for Ethnomusicology (ARCE) in the city of Gurugram (Gurgaon), just outside Delhi in the state of Haryana. I made two separate trips to Maharashtra in order to attend Hindu festivals in Nagpur and Mumbai. In Nagpur, I accompanied several journalists in attending the festival of Marbat, a large-scale festival celebrated exclusively in that city. I visited the Department of History at Rashtrasant Tukadoji Maharaj Nagpur University, where I was graciously received by Professor Shubha Johari and several other scholars who spoke with me at length about the history and symbolism of Marbat. I also joined my hosts in celebration of the Pola festival in a village just outside the city. A few weeks later, I returned to Maharashtra to observe celebrations of Ganeshotsav in Mumbai. It should be noted that my 2012 fieldwork trip to India occurred prior to my having obtained Institutional Review Board (IRB) clearance for human subject research. As such, the only data collected during that 2012 trip used for the purposes of this dissertation are archival materials. In all other aspects, my experiences and interactions during the 2012 trip have been treated solely as exploratory fieldwork and network building.

I returned to India during August through October 2015, having been granted funding through the John T. Hitchcock Prize from the UW-Madison Anthropology

Department. Amidst the celebration of major festivals such as Ganeshotsav and Navratri, I conducted participant-observation research and interviews with anti-noise activists, NGO members, journalists, government officials, and community members in neighborhoods where major festival processions had been routed. My participant-observation research with anti-noise activists and NGOs included day-to-day activities such as measuring decibel levels at festival events across the city, attending hearings pertaining to noise at the Bombay High Court as well as related meetings between activists and their legal counsel, meeting with community members affected by sustained exposure to festival noise, contributing to written materials for online publication by NGOs, observing free mobile hearing screenings, and attending planning meetings for mass media noise pollution awareness campaigns.

I continued this ethnographic research during my final trip to Mumbai from September 2016 through February 2017. This trip was funded by the Student Dissertation Travel Award from the UW-Madison Center for South Asia as well as the Graduate Student Fieldwork Award from the UW-Madison Institute for Regional and International Studies. This research trip encompassed nearly all of Mumbai's festival season, allowing me to maximize my attendance of various festival events. During this time, I conducted follow-up interviews and participant-observation research with activists and officials. More significantly, however, I spent these months as a participant-observer with a local *banjo* group, as well as interviewing numerous members of the *banjo* and officials from various *mandals*. As a guest member of the *banjo* Jaideva Beats, I rehearsed regularly with the group and performed with them as a drummer and guitarist at their many gigs booked throughout the festival season. I joined band members as they visited family members, ran



errands, and promoted their music. I also spent countless hours engaged in “timepass” activities with the members of the Jaideva Beats, a style of “hanging out” centered around a performative masculinity that is explored in greater detail in Chapter Six of this dissertation.

Between my 2015 and 2016-2017 fieldwork trips, I conducted unstructured and semi-structured interviews with roughly 50 different subjects, with some subjects having been interviewed multiple times. In the case of several interviews that I conducted with police and other government officials, audio recording was frequently forbidden, and therefore I have relied on detailed notes taken during those meetings in lieu of interview transcripts. My participant-observation research and interviews were conducted in English and Hindi. While at times this posed somewhat of a limitation in my work with the *banjo* members, most of whom were native Marathi speakers, enough band members spoke fluent Hindi or English to enable fruitful interactions.

My data from any aforementioned archival sources has been further augmented with materials reviewed from sources that include: numerous colonial gazetteers and various other British colonial government publications; around 110 additional Indian newspaper articles published between 1895 and 2000 and roughly another 100 published between 2000 and present; around 35 colonial-era European travelogues and other Orientalist texts, along with texts written by Indian authors during the colonial period on subjects such as Hindu festivals; various private publications written by my informants and supplied to me directly by them; over 25 reports and other documents published by the Maharashtra Pollution Control Board pertaining to the measurement of ambient urban decibel levels and decibel levels during the celebration of major religious festivals; various

reports and other quantitative materials published by NGOs and activists in Greater Mumbai pertaining to subjects such as decibel measurements during festivals, hearing screening data, etc; and publicly published comments found online on message boards and social media platforms.

### **OUTLINE OF CHAPTERS**

This dissertation contains six chapters, each of which providing a different view on the centrality of loud sound in the production of power and the shaping of citizenship in Mumbai. The narrative offered by these chapters will demonstrate that the city's festival soundscape has served as the foundation connecting various socio-political phenomena from the colonial era into the present.

Chapter One examines trends in late nineteenth and early twentieth century Bombay that contributed to the festival soundscape taking on new significance socially and politically in the city, specifically through the music before mosque phenomenon and the innovation of mass-scale *sarvajanik* festival traditions. I suggest that, through these developments, musical sound performed during Hindu festivals became a symbol of ethno-religious community identification as well as a potential weapon to be used against outsiders. The impact of music before mosque conflict and new *sarvajanik* festivals fundamentally altered how Bombayites viewed themselves both in relation to each other as members of a rapidly growing urban community, as well as in relation to British colonialism, as new ideas arose (and found expression through the sound of festivals) regarding what an Indian nation might look like and who might be included within it. Chapter One ultimately argues that these pivotal decades of the late nineteenth and early

twentieth century in Bombay therefore mark the genesis of the ongoing era in which loud sound has come to assume a critical role in the expression and consolidation of power and political subjectivities.

Chapter Two focuses on the period beginning in the early twentieth century in which changes such as mass migration and technological innovation resulted in a new kind of urban soundscape along with a new way of understanding and characterizing Bombay's acoustic environment through the cosmopolitan concept of "noise." This new conception of "noise" gave rise to changes in city residents' modes of civic engagement as well as perceptions of their urban environment. In response to these transformations, this period of time witnessed the development of an activist community that, for the first time, addressed excessively loud public sound as "noise" and devised conventional (albeit often unsuccessful) courses of action for mitigating its production that continue into the present, most pertinently with regard to noise associated with politically-backed religious festival events.

In Chapter Three, I focus on the work of Mumbai's contemporary anti-noise activists in arguing that the case of noise pollution in Mumbai simultaneously represents both a matter of intercommunity relations mapping onto cultural perceptions of sound as well as one in which sound itself, given its substantial volume and duration, can represent a physical issue of material consequence for a vast number of city inhabitants. In examining this dual character of "noise" in Mumbai, I demonstrate both the stakes of this issue for Mumbaikars as well as how sound informs perceptions of Otherness in imaginings of the urban community. I further explore how anti-noise activists have assumed a unique role in the city as adversaries to the city's most powerful political leaders, as they are among the

few public figures to meaningfully challenge the hegemony of the politicization of Mumbai's festival soundscape. This narrative thread will therefore elucidate the political significance of loudness in Mumbai.

The connection between *mandals*, political parties, and Mumbai's festival soundscape comprises the focus of Chapter Four. This chapter offers a historical narrative of the socio-political changes leading up to the late twentieth century, when politicians and parties in Bombay came to invest their energy and resources in Hindu religious festivals on an unprecedented scale. This narrative begins by explaining the significance of the Maratha community, a loose caste grouping with low-status origins that experienced upward socio-economic mobility throughout the twentieth century and came to represent the dominant voting bloc in Bombay and across Maharashtra. Following a series of events in the 1970s and 1980s and destabilized the political and economic status quo in Maharashtra, the Maratha community began to shift their political allegiance wholesale to the ethnolinguistic and religious chauvinist party Shiv Sena, who had successfully endeavored to raise their profile through intensive sponsorship of religious festival events. Having enticed the crucial Maratha vote bank and demonstrated the potential mobilizing power of festivals, Shiv Sena inaugurated the current trend in which competing politicians have transformed the festival soundscape into a socio-political battleground. With politicians now pouring funds into the sponsorship of festival *mandals*, the scale and loudness of festival events continues to increase prolifically.

Chapter Five focuses on the members of the *banjo* group Jaideva Beats in investigating issues of economics and aesthetics in the informal "gig" economy of festival music. I demonstrate the ways in which political patronage of festival events (via *mandals*)

targets members of underemployed communities (especially young, Marathi-speaking men) as a means of generating political support and augmenting the audible presence of political patrons during festival celebrations. In the context of its ethnographic discussion regarding the Jaideva Beats band members, this chapter also addresses the aesthetics of *banjo* music and discusses issues of the perception of “noise” vis-à-vis cultural modes of conceptualizing space and privacy.

Finally, in Chapter Six, I reveal how everyday acts of acknowledgment — in the sense of the word expounded upon by Christine Garlough (2013) — serve as a means of cultivating a voice (both as political agency and as sonic utterance) for those that have felt otherwise silenced in Mumbai’s socio-political milieu. By examining interpersonal, grassroots aspects of Mumbai’s political imagination through the festival soundscape (particularly with regard to the politics of Hindu nationalist and regional chauvinist movements), this chapter exposes the sources of larger trends of political community in the city. These trends specifically involve the formation of political subjectivities on the basis of discursive articulations of the category of Maratha, ethnolinguistic divisions among Mumbai’s migrant populations in the assertion of territorial “belonging” and control, and the contouring of ideas about masculinity with regard to the gendered governance of space and festival participation.

## **CONCLUSION**

By exploring the manifold social dimensions of Mumbai’s Hindu festival soundscape, this dissertation will reveal that the production of sound during the city’s festival celebrations is driven by the sonic articulation and display of political strength and

authority, beyond the stated spiritual and recreational intentions that occasion such events. Sound, and more specifically loudness, have been adopted and deployed as a strategy for securing and maintaining power, and a complex system has been developed around it, reverberating throughout the city's processes of law and governance, its economic sphere, its inter-community relations, and the most basic facets of everyday sensory and physical experiences of the urban environment. Moreover, through soundscape, individuals and communities are able to locate and assert a voice within an otherwise harsh socio-political environment that tends to drown out those without access to substantial power.

# CHAPTER ONE:

## Music Before Mosques and the Politicization of the Festival Soundscape in the Late Colonial Period

### INTRODUCTION

Matters of sound and soundscape attained unprecedented and contentious prominence in the political arena of late nineteenth century India. In the 1880s and 1890s, with hostilities mounting between Hindus and Muslims at a national level, anxiety and debate emerged across Indian cities over whether groups gathered during religious functions had a right to perform music in certain public spaces. The “music before mosque question,” as it became known, archetypically involved conflict over whether Hindu ceremonies and festivals could pass in procession near Muslim places of worship during times of prayer (*namāz*). Local, isolated disputes between religious communities over the passage of festival processions in front of mosques were not unheard of prior to the late nineteenth century, however by the 1890s and during the decades that followed, music before mosque conflict had become a primary issue in communal relations and a catalyst for recurrent violence between religious communities<sup>1</sup>.

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<sup>1</sup> Although reported cases of music before mosque violence usually involved conflict between groups of Hindus and Muslims, it should be noted that some instances of contestation over the passage of music in front of places of worship did not follow this pattern. For example, in March 1904, violence broke out between Shia and Sunni Muslims in Bombay following tense disputes over the route of several Muharram processions with music on a street with four mosques situated very closely to each other (Police Branch, India Office 1904). Furthermore, in many contexts and cases, the boundaries of identification suggested by categorical terms like “Hindu” or “Muslim” are in fact somewhat permeable with regard to belief and practice. A government report from 1914 states, “Even in matters of prejudice and superstitious beliefs Hindu and Mussulman villager are on the same level. The *Gazetteer* points out: ‘The village Mussulman of the present day employs the Hindu astrologer to fix a lucky day for a marriage, or will pray to the village god to grant a son to his wife.’ Sir John Strachey, in his ‘India: It’s Administration and Progress,’

P.K. Dutta (1990), writing about music before mosque riots that broke out in Bengal in 1926, notes that musical processions in late colonial India had become a symbol upon which a nationalizing community of Hindus could locate their unified identity, and consequently a bold line that divided them from Indian Muslims. Christophe Jaffrelot echoes this idea, suggesting that processions held a “capacity for homogenizing identities” (1998:59), while Patricia Gossman (1999) and Reece Jones (2007) highlight the power of musical processions at the center of music before mosque conflict to assert territoriality and control over public space.

Although music before mosque conflict affected India at a national level, its lasting impact on the politicization of soundscape is nowhere as apparent as in Mumbai. This chapter will demonstrate how political actors in colonial Bombay Presidency, recognizing the capacity for sonic expression in the context of religious festivals to be wielded as an instrument of communalism and community mobilization, transformed the urban soundscape into a primary venue for the contestation of sovereignty and group identity.

With this chapter, I argue that the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, marked by music before mosque conflict and the innovation of mass-scale *sarvajanik* (public) festivals, represented a critical point in the development of new ideas about citizenship formed through engagements with sound. Through the urban soundscape, Bombayites during this era would assert new claims about the contours of political

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observes: “The Brahmans have no sort of scruple in accepting Mohammedan saints as proper objects of veneration, and nothing is commoner than to see Hindus taking an active part in Mohammedan ceremonies, and beating their breasts at the Muharram like good Mussulmans” (Police Branch, India Office 1914:10). The communal tension that grew in the decades leading up to Independence and Partition did appear to increase the rigidity of boundaries between religious communities up to the present day, however it is still somewhat common to hear of individuals of one religion taking part in practices and ceremonies associated with members of another religion.



community, as well as the prioritization of religious and cultural difference as the basis of inclusion or exclusion within it.

### **MUSIC AND ISLAM**

The rhetoric of the late nineteenth and early twentieth century generally maintained that the contention surrounding music before mosques arose in part from particular interpretations of Islam forbidding music in certain contexts or forms. According to this line of reasoning, which prevailed in the public discourse of the period, conflict arose from the irreconcilable situation of Muslims demanding silence during prayer and Hindus asserting the theological necessity of effervescent musical expression in public spaces of sacred significance. More rigorous analysis, however, reveals the situation to be much more complex. Music holds a complicated place in discourses on Islamic law, or *sharia*. Sharia interpretations proscribing musical acts typically indicate political motivations, and for this reason concerns over music outside mosques articulated on the basis of theology reveal much about political processes of community imagination in late colonial period India. According to Lois Ibsen al Faruqi (1985), a scholar of Islamic music and art, despite numerous occurrences throughout history of religious and political leaders in Islamic communities citing sharia law to declare music *haraam* (sinful or forbidden), neither the Quran nor *hadith* ever explicitly forbid musical acts. One might cite a Quranic passage suggesting that “diverting talk” can cause a person to be led “astray from the way of God” or a *hadith* incident in which Muhammad “[plugged] his ears when he heard the sound of a *mizmār* [reed-pipe]” (Shiloah 1995:32), though neither appears to directly denounce music. Therefore, since the explicit proscription of musical sound does not occur

in either the Qur'an or *hadith*, the term *haraam* cannot apply. "The preferable term to be used in most discussions," writes al Faruqi, "is unfavored (makrūh), in contradistinction to permissible (halāl)" (1985:5).

Despite this strict reading of Sharia law, a large body of Islamic theological texts over the centuries has challenged the moral propriety of musical practices. For example, in *Dhamm al-malāhī* ("The Book of the Censure of Instruments of Diversion," ninth century), Arab scholar Ibn Abī'l-Dunyā presents "a violent condemnation of music, which the author considers a diversion from devotional life" (Shiloah 1995:34). The thirteenth-to-fourteenth-century Hanbali theologian Ibn Taymiyyah denounced musical forms such as *al-tasdiyah*, or percussive clapping. Ibn Taymiyyah politicized this condemnation by linking musical sound with group membership, writing that "[l]istening to such things is the *samā'* of the polytheists" (Shehadi 1995:100), in which case *samā'* refers to a primarily Sufi conceptualization of both experiencing musical sound through listening as well as the sound itself (Shiloah 1995:31). According to Aziz Ahmad, issues involving music in the Delhi Sultanate represented "the chief arena of conflict between the 'ulama' and the sufis under Iletmish [reigned 1211-1236] and Ghiyath al-din Tughluq [reigned 1320-1325]" (1969:86). The tolerance held by the Mughal emperor Akbar (1542-1605) towards non-Islamic religious practices as well as music and the arts drew criticism from the Naqshbandi reformer Ahmad Sirhindi. With regard to music, Sirhindi based his criticisms on an association between certain kinds of *samā'* and rival Sufi groups in addition to practices falling outside an anti-syncretic view of Islam (Nafi 2002:325).

Claims that the seventeenth-century Mughal emperor Aurangzeb issued a ban on music are pervasive but dubious. According to Katherine Butler Brown (2007), accounts of

Aurangzeb's alleged ban rely almost entirely on two sources, Niccolao Manucci's *Storia do Mogor* (which he began writing in 1699) and Khafi Khan's *Muntakhab al-Lubab* (which he began in 1718), both of which seem to conflict with writings of their contemporaries with regard to the issue of music. "The reports of other European travellers in India c. 1670-1700," writes Brown, "include descriptions of Muslim weddings, funerals, public processions, Muslim and Hindu religious festivals, the eclipse, and female musicians and dancers. None of these writers mention any official restrictions on Indian musical life, and all of them witnessed performances by courtesans, in many cases commissioned by eminent Mughal officials" (2007:90). "Even if we accept the veracity of Manucci's and Khafi Khan's narratives," she continues, "we can only argue that the ban was restricted to certain types of music, or that it was short lived, or that it was poorly enforced and widely flouted" (*ibid*).

Later musical proscriptions in South Asia, namely those of the colonial period, similarly tend to be accompanied by direct references to social and religious Otherness. An 1882 *fatwa* issued by Islamic legal scholars in Madras quotes seventeenth-century Mughal law forbidding "any polytheist to blow his horn" (quoted in Judicial Branch 1882:49). Influential institutions such as the Deoband *madrassa* and the Tablighi Jama'at movement explicitly condemned music and dancing (Allen 2005), the latter unequivocally framing their denouncement of musical forms in terms of their connection with the worship of "false gods" (Mayaram 2004:83), a reference to the beliefs of non-Islamic religious groups in South Asia. Such examples collectively demonstrate a tendency to associate the forbidden activity of musical production with membership in a rival social or religious group. This tendency reveals the way in which music itself, in the context of music-before-

mosque disputes, often stands as a symbol representing a constructed “Hinduness.” Within that particular context, the symbol of performing music signifies a perception of the opposition between *Ummah* and *kuffar*, Arabic terms used in the Quran and various theological and popular discourses denoting a common community of Muslims and nonbelievers, respectively.

### **MUSIC BEFORE MOSQUES: CONNECTION TO GAURAKSHINI AND EARLY INCIDENTS**

From early on, the issue of music before mosques became inextricably linked with another major source of communal anxiety and violence: the slaughter of cows by Muslims. The *gaurakshini* (“cow protection”) movement emerged in connection with Hindu revivalist movements and in concurrence with the rise of music before mosque conflicts in the late nineteenth-century, and quickly became associated with acts of violence across India between Hindus and Muslims over the killing of cows (Thursby 1975). These two issues of music and cows became connected not only in their contemporaneous prominence, but also conceptually as mirrored points of tension and retaliation marking the increasingly volatile relations between the two religious communities. Pradip Kumar Datta writes that “a hidden agenda of [the] music before mosque” issue was “to give it a status equivalent to go-korbani [cow sacrifice]” (1999:224), while Patricia Gossman mentions a series of letters published in 1895 by the *Moslem Chronicle* alleging that some Hindus were asserting a perceived right to play music near mosques as a means “to get back at Muslims for the killing of cows” (1999:74). As Yang (1980) explains, the *gaurakshini* movement swiftly gained national momentum because it managed to access deep emotions on a personal and religious level for many Hindus and subsequently

mobilize a strong sense of self-definition for the Hindu community based around the sacred symbol of the cow.

According to Copland (2005), some small amount of evidence suggests that conflicts between Hindus and Muslims regarding cow slaughter may have occurred sporadically since Islam's introduction to India in the seventh century. However, the severity of such conflicts doubtlessly surged once cow protection societies became active in the late nineteenth century. Krishnaswamy suggests that in these decades, "the Hindu cow-protection societies grew like mushrooms all over India" (1966:130), while Michael (1986) notes the significance of early support from figures like (Arya Samaj founder) Dayananda Saraswati and (political leader and social reformer) Bal Gangadhar Tilak in accelerating the rise of *gaurakshini*.

Prior to the 1860s, instances of hostility between Hindus and Muslims due to concerns over music before mosques or cow slaughter were remarkably rare, and in fact prior to the British Raj period, there are numerous examples of Hindus and Muslims taking part in each others' festival celebrations and Muslim rulers of princely states offering patronage to Hindu festivals and employment to Hindu musicians (Peggs 1832; *Reports from the Select Committee on Indian Territories* 1853). However, there were at least some tensions over these issues. A 1985 article in *Economic and Political Weekly* by Gopal Krishna mentions four riots in the eighteenth century between groups of Hindus and Muslims that allegedly began over issues of cow slaughter and Hindu festivals (in Ahmedabad in 1714, in 1719 or 1720 in Kashmir, in 1729 in Delhi, and in 1786 in the Vidarbha region), although the author provides little detail and no citations for these events (Krishna 1985). In his 1839 memoirs, the British soldier Henry Bevan wrote that

violence erupted between Hindus and Muslims in 1828 in Mangalore and in 1832 in Cuddapah on occasions when observances of the Islamic festival of Muharram and the Hindu festival of Dusserah coincided, though there is no specific mention of music or processions (1839). Similarly, Major General Sir William Henry Sleeman claimed in 1844 that riots between Hindus and Muslims were known to happen periodically every several decades, “when the calendars of the Hindus and Muslims coincided to produce the simultaneous occurrence of festivals” (Datta 1999:246), while an 1878 *Madras Mail* article suggests that a riot occurred in 1843 between Hindus and Muslims in Triplicane over objections to a Dusserah procession playing music near a mosque (*Madras Mail* 1878).

Interestingly, there are two examples from the mid-nineteenth century in which Western Christians complained of their own church services being disrupted by loud processions in public spaces. In one case, a July 1832 order had been issued by government officials in Bombay city closing off the area around Churchgate during religious services “as there had been many complaints of its interruption by processions and beating of tom-toms” (Douglas 1900:87). Another incident occurred in 1838 in Cuddalore (in present-day Tamil Nadu), when worshippers at a Christian church reported being disturbed “by a noisy rabble of the lowest class of Mussulmans, at the celebration of the Mohurrem Festival” (*The Connexion of the East-India Company’s Government With the Superstitious and Idolatrous Customs and Rites of the Natives of India* 1838:34).

Sectarian incidents between Hindus and Muslims involving processional music came to be recorded with greater frequency beginning in mid to late nineteenth century, for example in 1863 in Bengal (Dutta 1990), in 1874 and 1882 in Madras Presidency (Thursby 1975; Dutta 1990), and in 1871 in Bareilly during the concurrent celebrations of

Muharram and Ram Navami (Public and Judicial Department 1871). The 1871 Bareilly riot was in fact the culmination of decades of conflict in the city over the issue of Hindu processions. Prior to 1837, the Muslim rulers of Bareilly had forbidden the passage of Hindu processions during Islamic festivals. In 1837, however, local officials permitted a Ram Navami procession to be taken out during Muharram, resulting in a disturbance to which British troops were deployed. In the wake of the 1837 disturbance, Hindu and Muslim leaders agreed to a compromise in which “Mahomedans should abstain from [killing] kine in the bazaars on the Hindu holidays...the latter promising not to carry out...Ramnowmee, &c., during the Mohurrum,” but the arrangement was soon canceled, after a Muslim murdered a Hindu leader who attempted to plan a Ram Navami procession in 1841 (Public and Judicial Department 1871). When these festivals once again coincided in 1871, a Ram Navami procession, “with its drums and jhundees,” was “met by a shower of bricks thrown by a band of Mohurrum rioters,” leading to more extensive violence in the city (*ibid*).

Krishnaswamy (1966) writes that three significant riots had broken out in Bombay Presidency over Hindu processions playing music while passing in front of mosques: in October 1884 in Solapur, in July 1891 in Rajapur, and in August 1892 in Raver. Furthermore, in an 1883 volume of the *Gazetteer of the Bombay Presidency*, British official James MacNabb Campbell describes rioting that took place during September 1877 in the princely state of Janjira on the Konkan coast of present-day Maharashtra. The series of riots occurred after the Nawab of Janjira broke with years of established custom in the Muslim-ruled state and permitted Hindu processions with music during the month of Ramadan, so long as they refrained from passing mosques. Campbell explains that:

*the Muhammadans took bitter offence at the new rules, and getting no redress from the Nawáb, determined to prevent the Hindus from playing music in public. Between the tenth and the sixteenth of September seven disturbances took place. In some cases the Musalmáns were most to blame, entering Hindu houses and breaking idols; in other cases the fault lay with the Hindus, who were foolhardy enough to play in front of mosques. The offenders were in most cases fined and forced to apologise. The obnoxious order was withdrawn, and another order, fair to both sides, was prepared by a committee of leading Musalmáns and Hindus. (1883:450-451)*

### **FACTORS CONTRIBUTING TO THE MUSIC BEFORE MOSQUE PHENOMENON**

Several factors may have contributed to the preconditions upon which music before mosque riots tended to unfold. First, some evidence suggests that policy changes associated with the 1858 transition of rule over the Indian colony from the British East India Company to the British Crown might have had a causal relationship to the increased frequency of communal conflicts over music and cows in the decades that followed. Among the confluence of circumstances that increased opportunities for such violent conflicts to occur, one might note certain discontinuities and inconsistencies pertaining to the practice of religious customs that characterized the consolidation of administrative authority under British colonial governance. For example, one British official commenting on the 1871 Bareilly riot wrote:

*As is well known, in the Mahomedan city of Bareilly, prior to the British rule, such an event as the celebration of the Ramnowmee or Ramleela festivals during the first ten days of the Mohurram was unknown. It has only been under the favor and protection of the British Government that the Hindoos have ventured to take out their processions at such periods; and whenever the Mohurram and Ramnowmee or Ramleela festivals have come together, difficulties invariably occurred. (Public and Judicial Department 1871:10)*

The Hindus involved in the Bareilly riot reportedly asserted their right to take out processions during Islamic festivals by specifically citing Queen Victoria's 1858 proclamation, which enjoined all colonial officials to "abstain from all interference with the



religious belief or worship of any of our subjects on pain of our highest displeasure.”

Following the Queen’s proclamation, British officials attempted to defer to established custom in mediating disputes regarding religious matters such as the timing and routing of processions with music. However, this policy repeatedly exacerbated conflicts rather than resolving them. Written records rarely offered sufficient information to colonial officials, who therefore relied on often-contradictory claims from community leaders in issuing orders based on a highly dubious version of local “custom.” Copland explains that the “result was a welter of *ad hoc* local rulings, which were at once devoid of consistency, one to another, and subject to reversal as their authors moved on and were replaced by other officers of differing temperament and ideological persuasion” (2005:62).

In addition to problems arising from colonial mishandlings of matters of religious custom, a second contributing factor in the spread of music before mosque conflict involved the vast proliferation of communications and transportation infrastructure throughout India during the colonial period. By the 1890s, many commentators began to question the role of these technologies in the growing national epidemic of Hindu-Muslim violence. An 1893 letter from colonial officials to the Secretary of State for India addressed the national increase in riots between Hindus and Muslims, suggesting that:

*One of the causes to which this is due is in our opinion, beyond all doubt, the greater frequency of communication and the interchange of news by post and telegraph between different parts of the country. A riot which occurs in any place, even the most remote, is speedily heard of all over India...The natural effect is that in places where harmony has generally prevailed between the two parties, controversies arise and hostility is engendered; and the example set in some distant town may thus be followed in a dozen other places where the people, but for the suggestion afforded by the example and the manner in which it is discussed, would have continued to live in mutual amity. (Lansdowne et al. 1893:8)*

The first passenger railways and telegraph lines in India were developed in the 1850s and

both expanded greatly in the subsequent decades. The first telephone exchange systems in India were established in the 1880s, including one in Bombay, while the number of newspapers in English and South Asian languages exploded throughout the nineteenth century. With these developments in place, the dramatically increased connectedness of the late nineteenth century does seem to have set the stage for the nationalization of divisions along the lines of religious community.

These feelings of hostility and division between Hindus and Muslims on a national scale were further fomented by growing prominence of religious revivalist movements, which constituted a third factor relating to conflicts over music as well as cattle. Such revivalist movements arose, in part, as responses to colonialism. The same 1893 letter cited above to the Secretary of State for India attributes an increase in sectarian hostilities to a recent “Hindu revival” (Landsdowne et al. 1893:9). Krishnaswamy also notes the significance of religious revivalist movements in “further sharpen[ing]...the religious susceptibilities of the two communities” (1966:87). In particular, the author cites the Tariaq-i-Muhammadiyah and Wahabi movements with regard to Islam, as well as “militant Hindu communalists” like the Arya Samaj movement and the Gau Palana Upadeshak Sabha, the latter having offered their support to the controversial nationalist leader Bal Gangadhar Tilak (*ibid*).

Finally, a fourth key factor constituting the preconditions of music-related conflict involved patterns of urbanization with particular relevance to Bombay. According to the Indian Census, from 1871 to 1891 the percentage of Indians living in towns of 20,000 people or more increased from 4.5% to 4.84% (a difference of just under 1 million people with the total Indian population listed as 287.25 million in 1891). In Bombay, however, the

population increase during these two decades was disproportionately great. The 1871 Census lists Bombay as the second largest city in British India, with a population of 644,405, while in 1891 Bombay had grown to be India's largest city with a population of 821,764. In twenty years, the city's population had grown by more than 27.5%. Cities that experienced population growth like Bombay at the end of the nineteenth century also saw an increase in the construction of mosques and temples. By the early 1890s, there were 90 mosques and 400 Hindu temples in Bombay (Krishnaswamy 1966). Reece Jones (2007) notes that the rise of Islamic revivalist movements in Bengal helped drive a further increase in numbers of prayer attendees at mosques and therefore a demand for new mosque construction, and such a pattern would have been entirely likely in Bombay as well<sup>2</sup>.

The late nineteenth-century growth of industries like textile mills in Bombay, compounded with severe famine affecting villages across the Deccan region, drove many migrants to the city. Initially these migrants tended to live in urban enclaves based on their religion and caste, but this became difficult by the end of the nineteenth century with the city's population rapidly rising, and migrants began settling in increasingly dense and communally heterogeneous neighborhoods (Krisnaswamy 1966). Muslims and Hindus not only lived side-by-side in these neighborhoods, but also erected new mosques and temples right beside each other in many cases (*ibid*). Bombay's new urban residents would have

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<sup>2</sup> One colonial travelogue author, credited simply as "Mrs. Guthrie," described the Hindu temples she encountered in Mahabaleshwar, a town in Satara District about 230 kilometers from Bombay. Guthrie wrote that "[m]ost of these halls had been mosques, but it was now the turn of the Hindoo" (1915:439-440). This suggests that, in some cases, buildings used for the religious services of one community could later be acquired by a different religious community and repurposed to serve their needs in response to demographic shifts within a given neighborhood.

been accustomed to their native village's own idiosyncratic system of managing public rituals involving loud sound, and in many such villages Muslims and Hindus would have likely lived in areas separated by some distance. In late nineteenth-century Bombay's poly-communal neighborhoods, with such disparate public expectations of how to govern music and processions, it would have been impossible to ascertain anything constituting a broadly recognized established custom.

In August of 1893, a riot broke out between Hindus and Muslims in Bombay over the sounds of Hindu ritual music being played while Muslims prayed inside the city's Jama Masjid. This riot came to have a long lasting impact on politics, sectarian relations, and religious festivals in Bombay. The 1893 Bombay riot is also significant as it presents a case in which all four aforementioned factors contributing to music-related conflicts were relevant to some degree: 1) inconsistencies in British colonial policy with regard to religious practices; 2) nationalized channels of communication turning local events into items of mass news media consumption and subsequently points to be exploited within the rhetoric of increasingly fundamentalist religious leaders; 3) Increasing prominence of revivalist movements that combined religion and political ideology; and 4) patterns of urbanization and the subsequent development of religious infrastructure.

### **BOMBAY RIOT OF 1893**

Prior to 1893, Bombay city had been relatively unaffected by sectarian conflict. Some exceptions existed, of course, most notably two violent outbreaks in 1851 and 1874 between Parsis and Muslims, but Hindu-Muslim violence in Bombay remained uncommon. In 1893, however, tensions between the two religious communities were mounting

uncharacteristically. Groups of Hindus and Muslims had submitted an unprecedented number of petitions to local government that year raising concerns about cow slaughter and music before mosques respectively, and in June 1893, two Bombay organizations, the Go-Rakshaka Mandali (Society for the Preservation of Horned Cattle) and the Gau-Palana Upadeshak Sabha (Society for the Propagation of Cow-Protection), launched a new and aggressive campaign against the slaughter of cows by Muslims (Krishnaswamy 1966).

Friction between Hindus and Muslims in Bombay only increased that year following reports on the outbreak of violence in Prabhas Patan, a coastal town in the nearby princely state of Junagadh (present-day Gujarat). For centuries, Prabhas Patan had been exceptionally rife with Hindu-Muslim turmoil. This culminated in the late nineteenth century when the British Raj effectively sided with the Muslim ruler of Junagadh in a lengthy struggle for control over Prabhas Patan against the Hindu-ruled princely state of Baroda. On the occasion of the Ram Navami festival in 1893, a group of Muslims in the town caused an uproar by killing a cow in a place considered sacred by local Hindus. 2,000 Hindus responded in July of that year by attacking a procession celebrating the Islamic festival of Muharram and desecrating a mosque (Krishnaswamy 1966).

The Bombay riot of 1893 stands apart among music-related sectarian riots because the festival music in question was not being performed in procession while passing a mosque, but rather inside the Hindu Mahadev temple located just beside the Jama Masjid, the largest of Bombay's 90 mosques at the time (although one account [Michael 1986] suggests to the contrary that a Hindu procession was indeed involved). The original Jama Masjid in Bombay was actually in a different location closer to the East India Company's fort. That mosque was taken down and rebuilt two times throughout the mid-eighteenth

century, eventually being relocated in the early nineteenth century to Shaik Memon Street near the Hindu neighborhood around Hanuman Lane, where the Mahadev temple was also located<sup>3</sup>.

On Friday, August 11<sup>th</sup>, 1893, a group of Hindus played drums and other instruments inside the Mahadev temple while about 6,000 Muslims were gathered inside the Jama Masjid for *jumma namaaz*, the Friday mid-day prayer traditionally practiced in congregation inside a town's main congregational mosque (Jama Masjid). Krishnaswamy speculates that the *khutbah*<sup>4</sup> delivered by the *imam* that Friday likely addressed the music happening in the Mahadev temple and expressed feelings that "'one of the pillars of Islam' [i.e. prayer] was seriously impaired by this disturbance," or even that the "worshippers who had gathered at the Juma Masjid this day were told by these leaders that it was their

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<sup>3</sup> Stephen Meredyth Edwardes's 1902 book *The Rise of Bombay: A Retrospect* includes a note attributed to Khan Bahadur Fazlullah Latfullah which reads, "[e]xcept the *Jamá* Mosque none of the mosques of Bombay claim any great antiquity. The date of the construction of the *Jamá* Mosque is derivable from the chronogram...*Jahazi-akhirat* or 'the ship of the world to come' in allusion to the structure being erected over a tank, and the value of the letters – *jahaz* and *ákhirat* – amounts to (H) 1217 = A.D. 1802. The tank over which the mosque was built formed, it is said, part of an old temple which stood near the mosque. It was transferred by Government to a certain influential headman of the rich *Jamá-at* of butchers, whose name was Nathú Pattell. It was at first too small to with justice lay claim to the title *Jamá* or *Jámi* [,] the mosque which collectively can hold the prayer-saying faithful of a town. It was re-built, it is said, in the mutiny year by the non-Konkani Musalmans, chiefly with the help of the butchers. It was again repaired and extended and enlarged in 1837, at the expense of Mr. Muhammad Ali Roghay. A storey was added to it and shops to serve as the demesne of the mosque added. The income of all the properties with which the mosque is endowed amounts to no less than Rs. 50,000 annually...Besides this, the chief of *Jámi* Mosque, there are the Sât-Tár Mosque situated in the quarter of that name near Masjid Bander, with an annual income of Rs. 11,000, the Zakariyyah Mosque built by Haji Zakariyyah, the great Memon philanthropist, at Khadak near Mandvi, with an income of Rs. 5,000, the Ismail Habib Mosque near Paidhownie (Rs. 4,500). There are, besides these, many small mosques, each street and community generally having a mosque of its own" (quoted in Edwardes 1902:62).

<sup>4</sup> A sermon

religious duty to launch a *Jihad* on the infidels in order to prevent them from doing any further injury to their faith” (Krishnaswamy 1966:64).

Even if the *khutbah* that Friday did include some call to action from those attending prayer at the Jama Masjid, apparently police officials in Bombay had caught word of a rumor a day earlier suggesting that some Muslims were already planning to emerge from the mosque following prayer and destroy the Mahadev temple (Krishnaswamy 1966). In a letter to G.C. Whitworth, Secretary of the Government of Bombay, Bombay Police Commissioner R.H. Vincent wrote, “What gave special weight to this rumor was that in the same city, and from the same Jama Masjid, the Bombay Muslims had launched ferocious attacks twice before – once in 1851 and again in 1874 – on the wealthy community of the Parsis” (quoted in Krishnaswamy 1966:11-12). Anticipating the threat of sectarian violence, Vincent had therefore already posted police to the Jama Masjid at the time of the mid-day prayer.

After emerging from prayer from the mosque, a group of Muslims with sticks appeared to be headed to the temple to cause a disturbance. The police responded by forcing them back in the mosque, allowing only a few people out of the mosque at a time (Krishnaswamy 1966). Those that had exited the mosque reportedly gathered on a side street, presumably out of view of the police, where they began attacking passing Hindus and Hindu shopkeepers. These attacks began a three-day riot across the city that left 80 people dead, 600 injured, 1000 arrested, and 2.5 lakh rupees worth of damage. Of the 80 dead, there were 46 Muslims, 33 Hindus, and 1 Jew (who was accidentally killed by police gunfire). R.H. Vincent estimated that 15,000-20,000 Hindus and 2,000 Muslims were actively involved in the riots. The riot became particularly deadly because Hindus

apparently mobilized very quickly to retaliate violently against Muslims throughout various other parts of the city, with Krishnaswamy (1966) and Michael (1986) both noting in particular the involvement of Maratha Hindu textile mill workers in this wave of retaliatory violence. While the Mahadev temple was not actually destroyed during the riot as the group of Muslims from the Jama Masjid had allegedly planned, about sixty other Hindu temples around Bombay were looted and vandalized (*ibid*).

In R.H. Vincent's account of the events, along with those of other officials as well as numerous Indian and international newspapers, blame for starting the riot was placed squarely on the Muslims who had gathered outside the Jama Masjid. According to Lord Harris, Governor of Bombay, "the first resort to violence must be laid at the door of the Mahomedan community" (quoted in Krishnaswamy 1966:19). Several Muslim-operated publications around Bombay attempted to offer context to the actions of those behind the attacks outside the Jama Masjid, with many references to sound being a direct catalyst for the violence. A editorial from September 4, 1893 in the *Muslim Herald*, for example, suggested that "[t]he Muhamadans would not have attacked [the Hindus] if the latter had not disturbed them in their prayers; the Mahomedans are very loyal [to the British] and never create a disturbance, but they will never allow others to interfere with their religion" (quoted in Krishnaswamy 1966:60). An article in *Musalman of India* from August 20, 1893 similarly claimed, "the immediate cause [of the attack] was the beating of drums and ringing of bells in the Mahadev temple" (quoted in Krishnaswamy 1966:60). The pamphlet *Fasana-i-Bombai* wrote, "the Hindus loudly rang the bell...before the summons for prayer [...]... [thereby causing] a disturbance in the prayer," while the pamphlet *Insasuavi-e-kufr-ton* similarly claimed that "the hellish pujaris in the temple were ringing the bell" inside the



Mahadev temple, thus inciting reprisal (quoted in Krishnaswamy 1966:61). The same pamphlet continued, “[t]he Muhammedans never approve of things not sanctioned by their Prophet, and every man likes his own religion. If one’s religion and devotion is interfered with, of what use is the same [religion and devotion]?” (*ibid*).

The *Musalman of India* claimed that prior to 1893 the Hindu worshippers at the Mahadev temple had always been respectful in refraining from playing any music during prayer at the Jama Masjid, but that “since they received the tragical and one-sided accounts of Musalman atrocities in Prabhas Patan, they, it seems, as a measure of retaliation, commenced sounding their drums at the temple exactly at prayer times in the mosque” (quoted in Krishnaswamy 1966:202-203). The article also alleged that the Hindus, having anticipated an inflamed response from the Muslims from the masjid, had prepared to commit acts of retaliation by gathering piles of stones inside their homes to throw at the Muslims (*ibid*). The author claims:

*At the same time, as an act of prudence, [the Hindus] appear to have sent word to the Police Commissioner that the Musalmans might attack Hindu quarters in the vicinity of the mosque. Evidently, their object was to get the Musalmans on the road between their houses with police pressing them from both sides and themselves hurling at them dangerous missiles from their safe positions. When the Musalmans were engaged in their solemn worship, the bells in the temple of Mahadev were rung and the drums sounded – a stratagem well-calculated to bring out some of them from their sacred house and thus at once to dub them as traitors, give them a thrashing, and further send the police at their heels. The stratagem succeeded. A number of Musalmans, to whom such disturbance was more dreadful than death, issued forth to chastise their tormentors. (quoted in Krishnaswamy 1966:205)*

R.H. Vincent seemed to confirm that Hindus did not play music near the Jama Masjid prior to 1893, stating that the popular practice that Hindus abided by prior to 1893 in the city of Bombay was to refrain from playing music near mosques, not just during times of prayer but at any time at all. However, one cannot determine with certainty whether the music

that was played on August 11<sup>th</sup>, 1893 at the Mahadev temple during the Jama Masjid's mid-day prayer was a deliberate act of retaliation on the part of the Hindus in response to Prabhas Patan, or if the Hindus in the neighborhood, many of whom would have been migrants from other parts of western India, were simply unfamiliar with the dominant practice of refraining from performing music near mosques in Bombay city. It is also clear to see how the negligence of the established practice on the part of newly arrived Hindu migrants in Bombay might be still interpreted by Muslim locals as deliberate malice within the turbulent atmosphere of late nineteenth-century sectarian relations in India.

A few commentators actually explicitly denied there being any music happening in the temple at the time of the Friday prayer leading up to the riot. Bombay Police Superintendent, Harry Brewin, insisted that he had "no hesitation" in disputing the involvement of music in the Mahadev temple attacks, stating that, "[m]y men, both European and Native were about the place. Nothing of the kind happened, nor would it have been permitted" (quoted in Krishnaswamy 1966:71). The *Bombay Gazette* seemed to also favor this alternate account of the riot, printing that "at the time the Mahomedans created the disturbance, there was no music in the vicinity of the Juma Masjid" (quoted in Krishnaswamy 1966:72).

Some editorialists and officials attributed blame to members of the cow protection movement for initiating the riot. The newspaper *Akbare Islam*, for example, wrote on September 17, 1893 that "the disturbances in Bombay were solely due to the cow-protection movement," and the *Musalman of India* claimed that "the riots were due to the machinations of the of the so-called agents of the cow-protection societies who had been going about, preaching the necessity of purchasing and otherwise monopolizing the cows,

so as to disable the Muhammedans from slaughtering these animals” (quoted in Krishnaswamy 1966:159).

In its immediate aftermath, the 1893 Bombay riot prompted particularly fervent editorializing from the Marathi-language newspaper, *Kesari*, especially from the publication’s founder, Brahmin leader Bal Gangadhar Tilak. Tilak had been gaining considerable distinction regionally during the prior decade not only for his work with *Kesari* but also his aggressive positions towards matters of social reform, Hindu religion, and British colonial policy. In an August 15<sup>th</sup>, 1893 piece in *Kesari*, Tilak claimed that British colonial officials had been offering undue favor to the Muslim community on the issue of music near mosques, protecting Muslim interests by limiting the rights of Hindus while refusing any comparable protections for Hindus with regard to the practice of cow slaughter by Muslims (Michael 1986:189). In the atmosphere of heightened emotions and communal sentiments following the riot, Tilak began a substantial new campaign that would utilize his position as a public figure with access to a wide-reaching media outlet to realize his ambitions of establishing a blueprint for the foundation of a new socio-political identity based on the Hindu religion and public ritual.

#### **GANESH CHATURTHI AND CONFLICT IN BOMBAY PRESIDENCY**

Less than six weeks after the 1893 riot in Bombay, Tilak joined other local Brahmin leaders in Bombay Presidency to begin planning an unprecedented, large-scale public event. Their plan involved a grand reinvention of Ganesh Chaturthi, the festival in honor of the elephant-headed god Ganesh, the remover of obstacles, whose image offers an auspicious beginning to any new undertaking. The occasion of Ganesh Chaturthi, also

known as Ganeshotsav or simply Ganpati, had traditionally been observed primarily in domestic spaces over the course of a day and a half with clay idols of the deity. On the second day, local communities would hold small, neighborhood-scale ceremonies to immerse their idols in a nearby body of water. The Italian orientalist Count Angelo de Gubernatis described his impressions of Ganesh Chaturthi celebrations during his 1885 trip to Bombay:

*I followed with the greatest curiosity crowds who carried in procession an infinite number of idols of the god Ganesh. Each little quarter of town, each family with its adherents, each little street corner I may almost say organises a procession of its own, and the poorest may be seen carrying on a simple plank their little idol of plaster or of paper mache... A crowd, more or less numerous, accompanies the idol, clapping hands and raising cries of joy, while a little orchestra generally precedes the idol. (Quoted in Cashman 1970:351)*

Ganpati's popularity in the region increased during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries as certain Brahmins, particularly the Chitpavans (Cashman 1970), gained political and social prominence in the politically and culturally significant city of Poona (present-day Pune, just 140 kilometers from Mumbai in Maharashtra). However, Ganesh Chaturthi traditions remained relatively modest, consisting of private observances and localized community immersions (*visarjan*) until Tilak's intervention. One exception to this modesty, and precursor for Tilak's reinvention of the festival as an extended public spectacle, was the Peshwa iteration of Ganpati observance in late eighteenth-century Poona, which involved a twelve-day installation of a Ganpati idol followed by a *visarjan* ceremony accompanied by a military parade and music. British soldier and writer Edward Moor described the uncharacteristically lavish celebration in the final years of the eighteenth century, writing:

*He (the Peshwa) has a very magnificent room in his palace at Poona, called the Ganes room, in which, on particular festivals in honour of Ganes, he receives numerous*

*visitors; I have seen more than a hundred dancing girls in it at one time. At one end, in a recess, is a fine gilt figure, I believe of marble, of this deity, and many other mythological decorations around it; the other end of the room, bounded by a narrow strip of water in which fountains play, is open to a garden of fragrant flowers, which, combined with the murmuring of the fountains, has a very pleasing effect.* (quoted in Gokhale 1985:722)

Tilak's effervescent Ganpati reimagining, set to be inaugurated in 1894 in Poona, introduced some key innovations to the celebration of the festival. Rather than involving each household providing its own small, clay *murtis* (idols), the revitalized Ganesh Chaturthi would use large *sarvajanik* (public) Ganpati *murtis*, each installed inside *mandaps* (elaborately decorated shrines) in prominent public spaces within neighborhoods for maximum visibility to all local residents. The festival's duration was extended to ten days, with a massive *visarjan* ceremony planned for the final day. The costs of the festival, for example the construction of the *murtis* and *mandaps*, would be covered by collecting donations (*vargani*) from local residents and businesses. During the *visarjan* ceremony, each *murti* would be accompanied by a *mela*, a singing party composed of anywhere from dozens to hundreds of boys and young men (Cashman 1970). The *mela* concept had its roots in long standing regional traditions, though the *melas* planned for the 1894 Ganpati celebrations had some novel and noteworthy elements. The members of each *mela* carried decorated bamboo sticks ("*mela* sticks") and were attired in elaborate outfits. These were often in imitation of the uniforms worn by the soldiers in the army of Shivaji, the seventeenth-century Maratha *chhatrapati* (king) whose legacy was increasingly invoked (and perhaps contorted) in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century as a symbol of Hindu nationalism, regional chauvinism, and resistance to perceived invaders (most notably Muslims and the British).

With its innovative elements presented in such a way as to highlight their connection to Hindu tradition and the region's Maratha past, Tilak's Ganpati exemplifies Hobsbawm and Ranger's notion of an "invented tradition" (1983). Formal references to Shivaji within the festival, for instance, demonstrate that, as Hobsbawm writes, "insofar as there is [...] reference to a historic past, the peculiarity of 'invented' traditions is that the continuity with it is largely factitious. In short, they are responses to novel situations which take the form of reference to old situations, or which establish their own past by quasi-obligatory repetition" (1983:2).

Tilak's strategic motivation behind initiating a *sarvajanik* Ganpati was manifold. A large-scale gathering on the nominal basis of religion held considerable value as a vehicle to generate political solidarity, since it offered a convenient circumvention of colonial laws prohibiting public assembly for explicitly political purposes. Tilak also believed that a politicized religious festival would help to form connections among Hindus that would transcend lines of caste and bridge the gap between non-elites and the coterie of (mostly Brahmin) regional political leaders. As Biswamoy Pati explains, Tilak's Ganesh Chaturthi derived inspiration from a "rather modern appreciation of the ancient Greek Olympic festival," in which Tilak conceived of a "basis for spreading a national culture that created national cohesiveness. In the Indian context he saw the revival of religion – most obviously Hinduism – which could create this spirit" (2007:56). In this sense, Tilak's Ganpati festival seems to correspond with those "invented traditions" that, according to Hobsbawm, seek to "[establish] or [symbolize] social cohesion or the membership of groups, real or artificial communities" (1983:9).

Moreover, the recontextualization of the Ganpati festival as the basis of a public display of Hindu solidarity also served to “[protest] against alleged government partiality for Muslims” (Cashman 1970:349). The anti-Muslim undercurrents of the public Ganesh Chaturthi found more overt expression in Tilak’s calls in 1894 for Hindus to boycott celebrations of Muharram (Ashura), the annual Islamic festival commemorating the death of Hussein ibn Ali at the Battle of Karbala. 1894 Muharram observances were to take place from July 5 to 14, just weeks before the planned celebration of Ganeshotsav in September of that year. Prior to 1894, Hindus regularly participated in Muharram, contributed money to local groups’ collections to fund festival events, and offered their services as musicians in Muharram processions or in constructing *tazias* (miniaturized reconstructions of Hussein’s mausoleum; also known as *tabuts*). A government report from 1895 even claimed that up until 1894, there had been “more Hindu than Muhammadan Tabuts, and on the last day (the day of immersion) by far the greater part of the procession was entirely Hindu” (Public and Judicial Department 1895:2). In 1894, however, Tilak implored Hindus to reject their usual involvement in Muharram, remarking:

*For the last two or three hundred years, some of us, even though professing Hindu faith used to make vows to Muslim gods or heroes during the Muhurram festival. It was because we saw God in all beings. But, Muslims, forgetting our long-standing friendship, played into the hands of undesirable people and begun a regular campaign of harassing Hindu religious mendicants. That inevitably led to estrangement. (quoted in Krishnaswamy 1966:221)*

Although Tilak’s message resonated with mounting feelings of hostility in the Hindu community towards Muslims, getting many Hindus to forgo participation in Muharram took some special incentivizing. Tilak and his collaborators “were shrewd enough to realise that they could prevent the Hindu masses from ‘fraternising’ with the Muslims at the Muhurram,” writes Krishnaswamy, “only if they found ‘an outlet for the love and

enthusiasm for festivity and merry-making among them” (1966:222). Through its timing and design, Tilak’s Ganesh Chaturthi represented an ideal way to lure Hindus away from taking part in Muharram. In addition to presenting Hindus with this alternative to Muharram, the *sarvajanik* Ganpati festival also provided compensation to Hindu musicians and artisans for work lost as a result of the anti-Muharram boycott. As Stanley Wolpert writes, with Ganesh Chaturthi, “[i]nstead of playing music for Muslims, Hindu musicians were given more work and better pay in the service of Lord Shiva's son” (1962:68). Similarly, a Public and Judicial Department report suggested that the “unusual ostentation” of the 1894 Ganpati festival would serve “as a counter blast to the Muharram, and to compensate the musicians and others who had lost money by not taking part in that festival” (Public and Judicial Department 1895). The strategy proved successful. Following Tilak’s call for a boycott, Hindu participation in 1894 Muharram celebrations plummeted, the starkness of their absence indexed by the fact that Hindus constructed only 25 *tazias* in Poona that year, as compared to 100 *tazias* in 1893 (Michael 1986). An 1894 petition from members of Poona’s Muslim community related the extent of the Muharram boycott:

*The Brahmans not only prevented the Hindu musicians from playing music before tabuts, and the dancing girls from singing Marsias [elegies sung before the tabuts], but they went to the extent of preventing any labourers or bullock carts being made available for carrying the tabuts. The municipality [in which the Brahmins were dominant] also stopped the supply of water at the cisterns and water pipes by the side of the road by which the tabut procession was to pass. (quoted in Krishnaswamy 1966:232)*

A crucial aspect of Tilak’s marketing of Ganeshotsav as a replacement for Muharram involved the design of key elements in the festival to directly mimic those of Muharram.

S.M. Michael describes some of these imitative components of Tilak’s Ganpati:

*Tilak made the festival almost an exact counterpart of Moharram. Moharram is celebrated traditionally for ten days in the subcontinent; banners and paper models of*



*the graves and mausoleums of the martyrs of Karbala are taken out in procession; they are accompanied by parties of sword-dancers and fencers who give a display of warlike manly sports; in port towns they wend their way towards the sea where the models were submerged on the last day. All these features were adopted by Tilak in organizing the Ganapati festival; only Ganapati's image was substituted for the paper models of mausolea. (1986:192)*

Even the incorporation of *melas* as a central component in Tilak's Ganesh Chaturthi recalls preexisting Muharram traditions. A hand-bill that circulated around Poona in 1894, titled "Do No Make Dolas," indicates that *melas* were already recognized by Hindus as being a part of Muharram observances. The hand-bill tells Hindus that the *melas* they would miss out on by boycotting Muharram will instead "go about at the time of the Ganapathi processions, and excellent songs also have been prepared for the occasion. In this way, by celebrating the Ganapathi Chaturthi with more and more pomp and by entertaining a pride for his own religion, every Hindu should give up his fondness of an alien religion" (quoted in Krishnaswamy 1966:224). Unlike the *melas* of Muharram, however, *melas* in the 1894 Ganpati festival innovated on the concept by focusing their repertoires around polemical songs often featuring unequivocally anti-Muslim lyrics. One song, for example, echoes the "Do Not Make Dolas" hand-bill in asking:

*Oh! why have you abandoned today the Hindu religion?  
How have you forgotten Ganapati, Shiva and Maruti?  
What have you gained by worshipping the tabuts?  
What boon has Allah conferred upon you  
That you have become Mussulmans today?  
Do not be friendly to a religion which is alien  
Do no give up your religion and be fallen.  
Do not at all venerate the tabuts,  
The cow is our mother, do not forget her. (quoted in Thursby 1975:89)*

Cashman writes that the antagonistic style of *melas* included in Tilak's Ganesh Chaturthi held great potential to incite violence, even before the festival began. "It was an impossible task for the police of Poona...to effectively supervise the activities of the *melas* which

marches more or less at will through the streets of Poona for weeks before the procession,” he explains. “Communal clashes were inevitable when some of the *melas* chose to march through the Muslim quarters of the city chanting verses which the residents regarded as objectionable” (1970:367).

As the beginning of the festival drew nearer in 1894, the songs of the *melas* were not the only things to rouse communal tensions in Poona. The city simmered with anxiety over music near mosques. In October 1893, just weeks after the Bombay riot, Poona residents received news of another riot in Yeola (a town to the north of Poona in Nashik District) that occurred after a Hindu festival procession played music while passing by a masjid. After the riot, many of the town’s Hindus organized a boycott in which Hindu merchants refused to sell goods to Muslims (Krishnaswamy 1966). A government report suggested that the Bombay and Yeola riots had a pronounced effect on feelings of communal hostility in Poona leading up to the 1894 Ganpati festival, describing the effect of those two riots on the socio-political climate in Poona as “a kind of backwater agitated by [Poona’s] local associations” (Public and Judicial Department 1895:4). In June of 1894, police in Poona allowed a Hindu procession to pass by a mosque during prayer under the condition that its musicians cease playing as they approached the mosque. One of the musicians, however, disobeyed this order and began playing a drum. When a group of Muslims emerged from the mosque with potentially violent intent, police officials managed to convince them not to attack the procession and return back inside the mosque (Krishnaswamy 1966). Then in August, shortly after the unusually tense observance of Muharram without the support or participation of Poona’s Hindu community, a group of Hindus began planning for another festival with the intention, according to Poona’s District Superintendent of Police, “to

provoke the Mahomedans by passing in procession in front of their masjid with music” (quoted in Krishnaswamy 1966:233). Before the procession could be taken out, however, the police issued an order blocking it from passing the mosque, and “arrested certain persons who attempted to defy the order” (*ibid*).

Emerging out of this rancorous communal atmosphere, the inaugural *sarvajanik* Ganesh Chaturthi celebrations presented an occasion for the outbreak of violence in Poona from their very outset. The festival drew a crowd of 50,000 people who immersed roughly 100 Ganpati *murtis*, accompanied by 75 bands and 70 *melas* (Cashman 1970). Late in the evening on September 20, 1894, one of those Ganpati *melas*, comprised of 50 to 70 singers and led by one Hari Ramchandra Natu (aka Tatiasaheb Natu), set out in procession singing songs “of a decidedly objectionable character and calculated to stir up religious animosity between the two sects” (Public and Judicial Department 1895). The *mela* passed by a mosque without incident, but then returned past the same mosque just after midnight. The timing of the procession’s return would have been later than the usual night-time prayer (*Isha salat*), however a group of Muslims had gathered in the mosque to pray after midnight in observance of Bari Wafat, the death anniversary of Muhammad (*ibid*). Police officers near the mosque ordered the musicians in the procession to stop playing (Cashman 1970). According to Poona’s District Superintendent of Police, the musicians:

*obeyed momentarily, but struck up again against the remonstrances and efforts of the police, and on nearing the mosque the whole mela sent up a shout in defiance. It happened to be a Mahomedan festival and some 35 Mahomedans were in the mosque at the time. They dashed out and a riot commenced, the Hindus being driven back at first, but other melas were evidently in readiness close by, and in a few minutes, some thousands of Hindus had collected, armed with sticks and stones, and the Mahomedans were put to flight, those taking refuge in the masjid being very severely beaten, one dying on the following morning. The Hindus then entered the masjid, breaking all lamps and everything they could lay hands on, tearing up the stone tombs and unroofing the building, and were only prevented from setting fire to the masjid by the*

*efforts of the police, several of whom were by this time badly hurt.* (quoted in Krishnaswamy 1966:235)

Some of the Hindus involved in the altercation carried “*mela sticks*,” which were “bamboo sticks ornamented with coloured paper and tinsel...with small bells attached” (Public and Judicial Department 1895:18) that served as makeshift weapons once the violence broke out. A report from government officials following the riot suggested that the *mela* party had violent intentions in passing by the mosque two times that night, concluding that:

*there was so much of malevolent imitation in the tactics adopted, such as the careful training of the 'melas' and impertinence in the conduct of the persons forming them, and their unnecessary obtrusion into parts of the city frequented by Muhammadans, that it is impossible to be satisfied that the intention was wholly innocent...[rather] there were incidents in the abnormal Ganpati procession deliberately arranged for the purpose of annoying the Muhammadans.* (Public and Judicial Department 1895:1-2)

A court later found Tatiasaheb Natu and thirteen other Hindus not guilty of any charges relating to the riot, on the grounds that the Muslims from the mosque, according to the judge, had failed to adequately demonstrate that they had been assembled inside the masjid for religious purposes. As such, the judge declared that the performance of music by the *mela* members did not constitute an illegal act or an act inclined to lead imminently to violence, therefore the police had no legal authority to order the music to stop in the first place (Public and Judicial Department 1895:45).

In the aftermath of the riot, Tilak convinced the Poona Sarvajanik Sabha (PSS) to draft a memorial to government stating that it was inappropriate for government to forbid music in procession near mosques as a general rule, and should rather limit any prohibitions only to “all loud and noisy music, likely to disturb worship during the prescribed hours of worship” (quoted in Wolpert 1962:70), though it is unclear from

Tilak's suggestion how "loud" and "soft" music might have been uniformly distinguished.

Tilak wrote:

*To say that the Hindus should stop all music at all times of the day before each and every mosque is an extraordinary demand, and no reasonable person can give his consent to it...We, therefore, appeal to our Muslim brothers to give up their too sweeping demand of stopping even soft music. If Muslims cannot bear the music at the time of prayers in the mosque, how do they offer their prayers in trains, ships and shops? Apart from that, their scripture prescribes that a Muslim should offer prayers at sunrise, noon and sunset, wherever he may happen to be. It follows, therefore, that it is wrong to say that music before a mosque interferes with their prayers or that music is blasphemous or irreligious. These wrong ideas must have been impressed on them by some self-seeking and mischievous agencies. It is easy to settle this question of music before mosques for all time, if Muslims adopt a reasonable attitude. It is no use feeling puffed up by the Government's partiality or preferential attitude. When the time for a real trial comes both Hindus and Muslims will be equally insignificant and relentlessly put down. (quoted in Michael 1986:194)*

The PSS held local importance as an intermediary to represent popular interests in dealing with colonial authorities, a role that would come to be filled by the Indian National Congress after its first meeting in Bombay in 1885. According to Wolpert (1962), the PSS memorial endorsed by Tilak had serious consequences. Maintaining that the "compromise" of allowing "soft" (*chota*) music was insufficient, the Muslim PSS members resigned in protest, leaving fewer moderate voices within the group and allowing the Sabha to drift further towards Tilak's more extreme ideology.

In 1895, the second annual public Ganpati festival featured notable additions. 30 more *melas* formed in Poona, and the festival expanded as events were organized in other cities throughout Bombay Presidency. 35 *melas* were established in Bombay (increasing to 68 in 1896), and major celebrations were also held in Nasik, Ahmednagar, Satara, and Dhulia (Cashman 1970). When celebrations unfolded that year in Dhulia, the notion of "soft" music advanced by Tilak and the PSS became a crucial point of local debate.

In Dhulia (present-day Dhule), a city 300 km northeast of Bombay city in the Khandesh region of Bombay Presidency, a group of Hindus requested a license from the police to organize a Ganpati immersion procession that would pass by the city's Juma Masjid on Monday, September 2<sup>nd</sup>, 1895. Local Muslims protested the plans for the procession, so the Dhulia Superintendent of Police, attempting to reach a compromise between the two parties, issued an order allowing the procession to pass the mosque under the condition that it would include "no other music except *zung* (cymbals) and *mordung* (a small drum), which are considered necessary musical adjuncts of a Hindoo religious procession" (*Times of India* 1895c). Any instruments not conducive to the performance of "soft" music would be prohibited from inclusion in the procession. The city's Muslim community remained opposed to the procession, even under these conditions. They insisted that the prevention of disturbance in the area around the mosque would be particularly important on the day of the Ganpati immersion, since it was also the observance of Mawlid, the commemoration of Muhammad's birth, and larger crowds than usual were expected at prayer in Juma Masjid. The mosque had been the site of a similar dispute a few months earlier, when a group of Muslims plotted an attack on a different festival procession that was passing outside. Police responded by placing a chain outside the door to the mosque, preventing anyone from leaving as the procession went by. This police action later attracted criticism from members of the Muslim community who complained of feeling "cooped up like so many rats in a hole" (*Times of India* 1895c).

There exists some inconsistency between sources regarding the events that occurred on the day of the procession, however most accounts agree on certain details. On September 2<sup>nd</sup>, 1895, the Dhulia police, anticipating a possible disturbance at the Juma

Masjid, stationed around 50 armed officers around the mosque, along with a large contingent of the Bhils Corps. The Bhils Corps were formed as part of the Khandesh police force in 1825 under a directive from Mountstuart Elphinstone, then Governor of Bombay (Ramsay, Pollen, *et al* 1880). The Corps comprised around 800 men, mostly from the Bhil *adivasi* (tribal) community, especially Tadvī Bhils, though members came from various ethnicities, castes, and religious groups. Only a portion of the Bhils Corps was present outside the mosque in Dhulia that day, with higher estimates suggesting it may have been as many as 350 Bhils (Michael 1986). The police perhaps strengthened their presence after hearing about an alleged rumor that had spread around Dhulia the day before, suggesting that a small group of Muslims had been encouraging others to arrive at the mosque prior to the Ganpati procession's arrival to "defend their religion, on pain of being treated as eaters of hog's flesh" (*Times of India* 1895c). It was later confirmed that many cudgels, stones, and other projectiles had been gathered inside the mosque, seeming to indicate a premeditated attack (*ibid*).

As the Ganesh Chaturthi procession approached the mosque, with musicians playing the "soft" instruments of cymbals and small drums, some Muslims from the mosque began throwing stones at them and, by some accounts, at the police as well, injuring several of them (*Times of India* 1895b; 1895c). The District Magistrate went to the entrance of the mosque, entreating the Muslims there to stop their attack. When they refused, the District Magistrate apparently attempted to start arresting one of them, who responded by hitting a police officer with a stick. The District Magistrate then tried to seize a stick from a different Muslim in the group, leading to "a tug of war...in the course of which the District Magistrate was dragged inside the mosque" (*Times of India* 1885b). Some members of the Bhils Corps

witnessed the District Magistrate being pulled into the mosque, Depending on accounts, these Bhils, either attempting to intervene or perhaps misinterpreting the District Magistrate's struggle to free himself as a signal to open fire, began shooting at the crowd of Muslims around the mosque. At one point, the District Magistrate reportedly held up his arms to indicate for the Bhil Corps to stop firing, but they misapprehended this as an order to continue shooting. According to one account of the massacre:

*The moment the badmashes ["ruffians"] saw that fire was opened, they caught hold of the men who were comparatively weaker than themselves, and placed them in front of them to bear the brunt of the attack. Many young persons, who could not hold their own in such a large crowd, were thus used as so many shields of protection, and they were riddled in many places, mostly in the upper portions of their bodies. (Times of India 1895c)*

By the time the shooting stopped, nearly an hour after the procession started approaching the mosque, thirty-two Muslims were shot, five fatally (*Times of India* 1885b). Since the most violent part of the disturbance was occurring just outside the mosque's door, many members of the Ganpati procession continued on without fully knowing what was transpiring and so, "[e]ventually the procession, the cause of this unhappy *contretemps*, went its way, music and all" (*ibid*).

The Ganpati festival's reputation for conflict over *melas* and processions continued for several more years. For example, in Kalian (Kalyan), a city in Thane District just outside Bombay, violence broke out during Ganpati celebrations in September of 1899 when a group of Muslims complained about their prayer being disturbed by a *mela*, prompting the members of the *mela* to beat them severely (*Times of India* 1900c). The songs of Ganpati *melas* also appear to have retained their controversial character in the decade or so following the festival's 1894 establishment. One resident of Bombay city complained of the Ganpati *melas* in 1907, writing:



*Having had the opportunity of hearing those hymns, I was surprised to find that they were nothing but praise of some of the extremist parties in the Congress. I do not quite understand what makes them associate political Indian affairs with the Feast [Ganesh Chaturthi]. They profess that their hymns are strictly within the bounds of religious principles, while they are not. These 'Ganpati Mellas' hymns are simply teeming with politics and serve only to instill into the mind of young Hindus the notions and aspirations for which they are not yet ripe. Such a state of things should be checked, otherwise it will do harm. (Soonderrao 1907)*

Enthusiasm for Ganesh Chaturthi began to decline in the early 1900s, according to Cashman (1970), and during these years the festival's organizers began to infuse *melas* and events with themes that expressed more explicit and militant opposition to the colonial government. Government officials came to view these changes unfavorably, Cashman writes, and began to suppress festival events. By 1910, hardly any *melas* were left in Poona where the festival had been inaugurated and thrived in prior years (*ibid*).

## **CONCLUSION**

The communal violence associated with Ganesh Chaturthi tapered somewhat in the early twentieth century, though music before mosques remained a volatile issue in India for decades, precipitating numerous riots, especially in the 1920s<sup>5</sup>. Thursby (1975) even suggests that Tilak's efforts with Ganpati inspired other regional political leaders throughout India to introduce similar innovations into festival celebrations, producing

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<sup>5</sup> Some examples from the 1920s include several music before mosque disturbances that occurred in and around Calcutta during Durga Puja celebrations in 1924, violence in Nagpur in 1926 following a Ganpati procession passing in front of a mosque with music, and a 1927 Shivaji Jayanti procession in Surat that was attacked by a group of Muslims after members of the procession play cymbals and other instruments and sang hymns while passing a mosque where funeral services were being conducted (*Times of India* 1924c; 1926b; 1927). Additionally, in 1924, during the celebration of Marbat, a local festival unique to Nagpur in which social evils taking the form of large effigies called *marbats* and *badgyas* are expelled from the city, a procession was routed in front of a mosque, resulting in fighting between Hindus and Muslims that left one Muslim dead (*Times of India* 1924a).

similar results in the inflammation of communal relations. As such innovations were introduced, Thursby writes, the “potential for violence was heightened due to the popular esteem in which most festivals were held and due to the difficulty in many localities of determining what in fact constituted traditionally accepted practices” (1975:89-90).

“Conciliation boards,” tasked with resolving disputes regarding music before mosques between communities, formed in various cities throughout India in the early twentieth century, with varying degrees of success. Such boards typically enlisted the help of local Hindu and Muslim leaders to advise police officials on matters involving customary practice with regard to the routing and timing of festival processions. Conciliation boards had actually been established as early as the 1880s with mixed success. For example, a conciliation board formed in 1885 in Jullundur (present-day Jalandhar, Punjab), as well one formed in 1886 in the Nimar District (present-day Madhya Pradesh) during the concurrent celebrations of Muharram and Dusserah, both had some success in mediating local conflicts over music and processions. However, other early conciliation boards, such as a Muharram/Dusserah board convened from 1883-1887 in Delhi, reportedly failed to resolve disputes between Hindu and Muslim communities (Police Branch 1915). As this chapter has demonstrated, since any singular established custom with regard to processions was so often impossible to determine in Indian cities due to patterns of recent urban migration, the inconsistent achievements of conciliation boards would have been unsurprising.

Despite the mixed results of conciliation boards, the phenomenon of music before mosque riots itself did in fact eventually subside, even as relations between Hindus and Muslims remained volatile in the years leading up to and following Partition in 1947. As with the onset of music before mosque violence, its decreasing prevalence might be more

accurately attributed to a confluence of factors rather than any singular cause. One such factor, for example, might involve eventual adjustments and accommodations in cities to the conflicting systems of managing processional music brought by newly urbanized communities of migrants. Additionally, with regard to Bombay, Krishnaswamy (1966) suggests that the 1893 Bombay riot drove Hindus and Muslims apart spatially in the city, into communal enclaves, which would have similarly alleviated some disputes over processions, despite perhaps having less favorable effects on overall communal sentiments. Furthermore, Jaffrelot notes that communal riots in general decreased, albeit only temporarily, in the decade following Partition. “The trauma of 1947 and Nehru’s vigilant secularism,” he writes, “are among the main explanations for this state of things.” (1998:71).

The threat of violence over music and processions never disappeared completely from Indian cities, however, with isolated occurrences taking place in the post-Independence era<sup>6</sup>. For example, Hyderabad State reportedly experienced a spike in music before mosque riots in the late 1940s (Ministry of States 1949), and violence between Hindus and Muslims broke out over festival processions in Bhiwandi (Maharashtra) in 1970

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<sup>6</sup> In 1987, members of the Indian government’s National Integration Council (NIC) proposed a national ban on public religious processions, providing certain exceptions (*Times of India* 1987). Although the ban never went into effect, the mere suggestion from the NIC prompted vociferous responses from political and religious leaders. Bal Thackeray, founder of the Shiv Sena party, called the proposal “foolish thinking” and said that a ban on religious processions would be “bound to spark communal riots” (quoted in *Times of India* 1987). Similarly, Madhukar Deoras, *sarsanghchalak* of the Hindu nationalist organization Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS), argued that “Religious processions have been going on for hundreds of years and they passed places of worship like churches, temples and mosques. Imposing any ban will be absolutely wrong and will not help” (*ibid*). Religious leaders, such as Roman Catholic archbishop of Bangalore, Alphonsus Mathias, suggested that religious processions pose no risk in the absence of those politicians that use them for their own objectives (*ibid*).

(Noorani 1981), Jamshedpur (present-day Jharkhand) in 1979 (*ibid*), and Bhadrak (Orissa, now Odisha) and Saharanpur (Uttar Pradesh) in 1991 over Ramnavami processions organized by local BJP party leaders (Engineer 1991).

Significantly, the legacy of the music before mosque phenomenon endures to the present in Bombay, even if the riots themselves no longer represent the kind of national social epidemic they did during the late nineteenth and early twentieth century. The conflicts over music during the late nineteenth and early twentieth century turned Bombay's urban soundscape into a crucial platform for political action and permanently altered the social role of public religious festivals as a fulcrum for the formation and articulation of political subjectivities. Later chapters of this dissertation will show that in the late twentieth century, Bombay's political elite would once again utilize Hindu festivals as a means for power to be heard, building upon and even exceeding the model of provocative *sarvajanik* events developed by their forebears decades earlier.

## CHAPTER TWO:

### The Development of Noise Consciousness and Anti-Noise Activism in Twentieth Century Bombay

#### INTRODUCTION

The half-century between 1891 and 1941 saw Bombay's population double from just over 800,000 to more than 1.6 million due to large-scale migration. This pattern of rapid growth continued into the post-Independence period, with the city population reaching 3 million by 1951, accelerated by the resettlement of refugees following the Partition in 1947<sup>1</sup>. As the city transformed technologically, politically, and demographically, the basic experience of physically being in Bombay in the early twentieth century became entirely unlike that of only several decades prior. This was due to the sheer volume of newcomers taking up residence in the city, in conjunction with the rapid development of new infrastructure and housing as well as the introduction of electric trams and automobiles. Although cars became much more widespread in Bombay during the 1940s when India began manufacturing its own vehicles, imported automobiles were already abundant enough by the 1930s to fundamentally alter the dynamics of public space

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<sup>1</sup> The Census of India population figures cited for Bombay include all persons living within the area designated "Greater Bombay," which includes the island city of Bombay (what is now known as South Mumbai) as well as the areas to the immediate north of the city that would come to make up the Western and Eastern suburbs. This is a comparable area to the 2011 Census's demarcation of "Greater Mumbai," which includes the island city along with those suburbs administered by the Brihanmumbai Municipal Corporation (BMC). The 2011 Census lists the population of Greater Mumbai as 12.4 million. That year's Census also specifies areas that are not part of Greater Mumbai, but are part of the Mumbai Metropolitan Region. These areas with separate municipal administration represent an additional 6 million people, and include Thane, Kalyan-Dombivli, Navi Mumbai, Mira-Bhayandar, Ulhasnagar, Ambernath, and Badlapur.

usage. All of these factors contributed to a radical change in the basic composition and decibel level of Bombay's soundscape in the early twentieth century.

Chapter One demonstrated how Bombay residents had already developed an idiosyncratic and often tense relationship to sound in public spaces by the end of the nineteenth century, as music before mosque conflict played a profoundly disruptive role in day-to-day urban life and inter-community relations. Beginning in the earliest years of the twentieth century, however, discourse about soundscape in Bombay began to shift away from being dominated solely by concerns over musical sound as a symbol of communal discord. The new century inaugurated a new way of thinking and talking about soundscape in Bombay that continues in many ways in the present day.

This new awareness of soundscape was characterized by the primacy of "noise" as a concept framing the production, reception, and classification of unwanted urban sounds. While of course the word "noise" was not uncommon in English parlance before the twentieth century, the deployment of the term in Indian discourse about soundscape changed markedly during this period. One would be more likely to encounter the term in the nineteenth century being used to describe an isolated and fleeting sound produced in a particular instance, such as "the noise made by a horse," or in figurative reference to a person's persistent prattling, for example "politicians making noise about X." Beginning in the early 1900s, and with increasing prevalence over the next several decades, "noise" became a way to describe a fundamental sonic quality of urbanization and modernity<sup>2</sup>.

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<sup>2</sup> For further discussion regarding the new ways of hearing and listening to soundscapes that came to characterize modernity in geographic contexts outside of South Asia, see Emily Thompson's 2002 book *Soundscape of Modernity: Architectural Acoustics and the Culture of Listening in America, 1900-1903*.

“Noise” formed part of the essential state of the city<sup>3</sup>. In the terms of R. Murray Schafer’s work on soundscapes, “noise” came to represent a *keynote sound* of twentieth-century Bombay, rather than being any number of discrete *signals* introduced into the city’s acoustic environment<sup>4</sup>.

“Noise” framed the popular consciousness of soundscape in early twentieth-century Bombay. The sounds collectively made by the modern city were categorized as “noise.” It became an all-encompassing term: the religious sounds that had aggravated some city residents for decades fell under the designation of “noise,” but so did the new and secular sounds of technological modernity, such as the ringing of bells on the electric tram, the honking of automobile horns, or the raucous music accompanying cinema shows. “Noise” became a sonic monolith. As mechanically-produced sounds proliferated throughout

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<sup>3</sup> In Hindi and Marathi, the word *dhvani* has come to be recognized as an approximation of the concept of noise, though more often appearing in this sense as *dhvani pradūṣan* (“noise pollution”), and to some extent the words *śor* or *āwāz* might also be found in some contexts to refer to “noise.” Significantly, however, the English word “noise” seems to have been adopted first to describe this particular experiential phenomenon of the modern city, with words like *dhvani pradūṣan* appearing later, and the word “noise” remains the most common in discourse about Mumbai’s soundscape, much of which continues to take place in English.

<sup>4</sup> Schafer identifies *keynote sounds*, *signals*, and *soundmarks* as three categories of audible features within a given soundscape. *Keynote sounds*, Schafer explains, comprise a soundscape’s fundamental acoustic ambience, often remaining in the background outside of a listener’s immediate consciousness, though nevertheless playing a crucial role in shaping the overall character of the soundscape and perhaps even holding “a deep and pervasive influence on our behavior and moods” (Schafer 1977:9). In general, *keynotes sounds* are often shaped by geography and climate, and might be associated with the “natural” environment. *Signals*, according to Schafer, are discrete sounds that occur sporadically and that can be easily distinguished from any *keynote sounds* contributing to the overall continuous acoustic environment. Examples of *signals* include alarms or whistles (*ibid*). Lastly, Schafer defines *soundmarks* as those sounds which are unique to a given soundscape and its community of listeners, and which are “specially regarded or noticed by people in that community” (1977:10). A modification of the word “landmark,” *soundmark* refers to sounds that require special attention and even protection, since they “make the acoustic life of the community unique” (*ibid*).

Bombay, complaints and disturbances over the sound of Hindu festivals started being represented less often as their own kind of predicament and more often as part of the same greater issue of “noise” that included car horns and other street sounds. With secular and communal sounds alike contributing to an overarching category of “noise,” this new acoustic phenomenon quickly and decidedly became marked as a problem by commentators in the press and local government. The word “noise,” as it appears in the newspapers of the early twentieth century onward, finds exclusively pejorative use. In this discourse, “noise” poses a threat to urban life, as immediate and tangible as crime or disease, and calls for its reduction or elimination become commonplace.

In this chapter, I argue that the “noise consciousness” of twentieth-century Bombay transformed the way urban residents perceived their acoustic surroundings and constructed basic expectations about citizenship, cities, and sound. Frequent comparisons of Bombay’s “noise” against that of Western cities placed Bombay residents within a global conversation about soundscape, making this new “noise” discourse highly cosmopolitan and evincing an aspect of modernity rooted in notions of “global citizenship.” At the same time, the set of soundscape issues affecting Bombay remained idiosyncratic and localized. The observance of religious rituals in public spaces, especially Hindu festivals, remained a perennial point of debate, even as physical violence over music before mosques became less common several decades into the twentieth century. Furthermore, the highly Indianized usage of certain sound-making technologies to this day, particularly car horns, demonstrates that technologies that are global in distribution are not necessarily uniform in habits of operation. The twentieth-century phenomenon of “noise” thereby also



contributed to the generation of local ideas regarding citizenship on the national and civic scale.

This chapter will offer a comprehensive history of how the concept of “noise,” throughout the twentieth century, contributed to Bombay residents’ day-to-day experiences of the city and influenced their view of Bombay’s place within the world more generally. I will trace a lineage of activists working towards the cause of noise abatement and examine shifts in their motivations and ideas. Establishing an understanding of this period’s discourse surrounding “noise” is crucial, as it helped to shape cultural perceptions of the urban soundscape and provided the foundation upon which contemporary actors conceptualize Mumbai’s festival soundscape through the framework of “noise.”

### **THE CONCEPT OF “NOISE”**

Scholarship and popular sources broadly accept a definition of “noise” as “unwanted sound” (Bijsterveld 2001; Keizer 2010). This is an appropriate definition, and one with a long period of historical usage going back to the thirteenth century (Schafer 1977), although some further elaboration is useful when considering this complex concept. Historian Peter Bailey provides some clarification, describing the phenomenon of “noise” as “a broad yet imprecise category of sounds that register variously as excessive, incoherent, confused, inarticulate or degenerate – the insistent pejorative comes with the word itself which derives from the Latin *nausea*, originally meaning sea-sickness” (1996:50). R. Murray Schafer differs on Bailey’s last point regarding this etymology of the word “noise.” To the contrary, Schafer links the word “noise” to related terms in Old French and Provençal dialect (1977). Bailey also writes:

*In technical terms, noise can be distinguished from other sounds by its lack of any exact or discrete pitch, its lack of what musicologists identify as tone. In communication theory, noise is the general villain, denoting anything that interferes with an intended signal. In social terms its various properties are perhaps best summarized as disorderly. Thus to echo Mary Douglas (1966) on dirt as 'matter out of place,' we might call noise 'sound out of place.' In any hierarchy of sounds it comes bottom, the vertical opposite of the most articulate and intelligible of sounds, those of speech and language and their aesthetic translation into music. (1996:50)*

Bailey points out that the process of distinguishing “noise” from other kinds of sounds is inherently subjective. A particular sound might irritate some people while others might enjoy it, or fail to actively perceive it at all. Because of this subjective quality in the identification of noise, Bailey finds that noise has no necessary relation to the objective measurement of decibel level. A sound at a particular volume that might cause a person considerable irritation in one situation might very well go unnoticed at the exact same volume under different circumstances.

Noise stands apart from other forms of sensory nuisances, as humans lack any mechanism to actively prevent its perception (Bailey 1996). In his eccentric treatise *The Hatred of Music*, Pascal Quignard emphasizes the involuntary nature of hearing, which is not deliberate or selective like vision (2016:71). We can shut out unwanted sights simply by closing or averting our eyes, but turning our heads fails to repel unwanted sounds. Furthermore, we can focus our eyes on discrete objects in our field of vision, rather than passively receive undifferentiated optical information. While humans are somewhat adept at picking out and giving attention to individual sounds, such as the voice of a conversation partner in loud surroundings, every vibration that reaches our ears can be affected by the greater range of sounds and thus can be drowned out if not adequately audible.

Since subjective ears determine what is or isn't “noise,” the censure of allegedly “noisy” things or people is always highly prone to biases based on politics of identification

and otherness. As Mack Hagood points out, “the perception of noise is socially constructed and situated in hierarchies of race, class, age, and gender” (2011:574).

### **NOISY CENTURY: NEW WAYS OF HEARING BOMBAY**

While the invocation of “noise” as a way of describing acoustic phenomena in Bombay exploded in prevalence during the twentieth century, some examples do exist of the term being similarly used during the late nineteenth century. Bombay’s earliest textile mills were established in the 1850s and 1860s, and by the twentieth century textile manufacturing was already a significant source of employment in the city, as well as a significant source of loud sounds. One disturbed British resident complained of the use of steam whistles in mills, writing:

*Some time ago I was living about two miles away from one of [Dinshaw Maneckji] Petit’s Mills, situated in Lall Bagh, and even at that distance the sound of the huge whistle was deafening...That the mill industry has brought much wealth to Bombay is, of course, patent to everyone; but the whistle nuisance is a very great one, and totally inexcusable. The mills also result in other nuisances, such as smoke, dust, noise, and are the cause of large over-crowded, ill-ventilated, and unsanitary chawls<sup>5</sup> being erected in great numbers in Bombay. Natives are entirely callous to such trivialities as these, but to most Europeans they are a source of annoyance. (Times of India 1888)<sup>6</sup>*

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<sup>5</sup> A *chawl* is a colonial era style of tenement building most often associated with the working-class communities that provided the primary labor force for Bombay’s textile mills.

<sup>6</sup> Throughout this dissertation, and this chapter in particular, a considerable amount of archival data has been drawn from the *Times of India*. While other South Asian newspapers have also been consulted and cited for relevant information both digitally and in microfilm, the digital availability of the *Times of India*’s extensive archive is unparalleled. Through *ProQuest Historical Newspapers*, items published in the *Times of India* between 1838 and 2008 can be accessed digitally. As an English-language publication, the *Times of India*’s readership historically has consisted of English-educated (and therefore generally privileged) Indians, as well as Britons living in India during the colonial period. While over-utilizing any single resource for research purposes opens up possibilities for bias, I have attempted to mitigate this potential in the historical portions of this dissertation by also examining other newspapers and archival resources as well as conducting interviews whenever possible and relevant.

The newspapers of the 1880s and 1890s yield a few other such examples of prototypical concerns over “noise.” One editorial from 1885 recommends the implementation of wooden pavement (known as Nicolson pavement) in Bombay. Apparently London had recently replaced the cobblestone of some of its streets with wooden blocks, and this resulted in reduced noise from horse hooves (*Times of India* 1885). The issue was raised once again in an 1898 editorial, with the suggestion that the Bombay Municipal Corporation (established ten years earlier) offer tax incentives to those that install wooden pavement or rubber tires on carriages. “It needs no very refined sense,” the editorialist comments, “to appreciate the pleasures of a silent drive through the wood-paved London streets, gliding over the ground to the accompaniment of the jingling bells on the horses’ ears, and with every facility for conversation” (*Times of India* 1898). Another early instance is a letter from 1892 complaining of late-night construction sounds emanating from somewhere below the author’s apartment in Bombay’s Fort district. “Such a state of things would not for a moment be tolerated in London or anywhere else,” they write (*Times of India* 1892).

What all of these early examples share with the discourse of the twentieth century, aside from their explicit reference to these urban sounds as “noise,” is their conspicuous understanding of “noise” through a globally comparative frame. The “noise” of Bombay is considered insofar as it relates to the “noise” of London. In the overwhelming majority of such cases of comparison, Bombay’s “noise” is found to be unfavorable and excessive when evaluated against that of London or Paris or New York, or practically any other (always Western) city.

As the decades progressed into the twentieth century, this trend only intensified. One critic of Bombay's railways compared them unfavorably to the Central London Railway, suggesting that in London, "[t]he trains run smoothly, at twice the speed of the [Bombay] Metropolitan Railway, and with one-fourth of the noise" (*Times of India* 1900a). In another instance, a traveler that visited Bombay felt so aurally disturbed during their trip to the city that they were driven to write a letter expressing their grievances:

*May a visitor to Bombay be permitted to draw attention to a serious defect in the arrangements of your beautiful city? I refer to the large amount of unnecessary and preventable noise caused by the public vehicles, while all the other large cities of the world are doing their utmost to minimize the noise of their streets by laying down wood pavement and by other devices. Bombay appears to exert all her energies in the opposite direction. Not only the trams but the railway carriages and bullock gharries have bells attached to them, or if not bells, a string of brass rings; anything to make a jingle. It may be urged for the trams that the bells are necessary to draw public attention to them, but, as a matter of fact, the sound is so frequent that it has evidently ceased to be associated with the idea of making way, and the driver is compelled to blow his whistle at every point where there is any slight increase of traffic. (*Times of India* 1900b)*

Again, this author frames "noise" within a larger cosmopolitan consciousness involving how modern cities *should* sound. Also interesting to note is the way the apparent use of bells on horse-driven trams according to this 1900 account might seem familiar to anyone accustomed to the idiosyncratic usage of car horns in contemporary Indian cities such as Mumbai.

Other examples of this comparative noise paradigm abound. One commentator questions why police in the Apollo Bunder neighborhood do not issue penalties for nighttime noise disturbances, as do their counterparts in English cities (*Times of India* 1906). Another author, writing in 1907, the debut year of the first electric tram in Bombay, notes that the British Medical Association issued warnings to British railway operators "as to the injurious effects of their whistles," and wonders why no similar precautions are

taken in India, given that across the world “there are no tram bells that quite equal those of Bombay” (*Times of India* 1907). A writer for *Kaiser-i-Hind*, discussing the dangers and nuisances of motorists in Bombay, asks why there is hardly any outrage in that city over the loud honking of motor cars, even as a group of mothers in England had recently petitioned the Queen to implement stricter regulations over motor vehicle noise (*Kaiser-i-Hind* 1910). Taking note of efforts in France to reduce the noise from motor horns, another commentator submits that “the Bombay Police might take a leaf out of the book of Paris in this respect” (*Times of India* 1926a). And an editorial from 1917 references a case in which the British Home Secretary George Cave apparently prohibited whistling and making other sounds to hail taxis in London, citing the Defence of the Realm Act of 1914 as justification for the ban. Unlike in England, the author laments, in Bombay “[t]he nerves of persons not concerned in the making of noise are of no account. No one protects them; there is no kindly Home Secretary supported by dread horrors of the Defence of the Realm Act to come to their rescue” (*Times of India* 1917a)<sup>7</sup>.

This discourse asserting Bombay’s noisiness vis-à-vis the relative tranquility of Western cities like London found reinforcement through regular commentary by Westerners themselves living in India. A visit to Bombay prompted one Herbert Kendrick

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<sup>7</sup> London’s imposition of restrictions on certain kinds of sounds was referenced again the following year in a letter to the *Times of India* editor concerning hawkers in public streets. “Hawkers and street vendors shouting out their wares, which comprise newspapers, old keys, brushes, fruits, vegetables, photo frames, electric bells, baskets, blinds, and other commodities, are a source of annoyance to several European residents on the Cooperage,” the editorial states. “Last Sunday, a new cry was heard: ‘Ducks.’ A hawker was offering live ducks for sale, the poor bird was exhibited by him held up to view by the legs, the others being confined in a small basket. Surely a case for the police or the R.S.P.C.A.?...In the resident parts of London there are restrictions on street cries while in a great many towns on the continent they are strictly prohibited” (*Times of India* 1918).

to reflect unfavorably on the sounds of the city. "It is with sorrow that I add that for continuous, gusty and unnecessary horn-blowing, and for devilish, noisy, rasping gears, Bombay motor cars need fear no rivals. But in the name of my poor nerves I wish they wouldn't!" reports Kendrick. "Talking of noises, why are your venerable crawling horse victorias allowed to clang a bell like a fire engine on urgent business? Is it their bell of doom to signify: 'I am passing hence, brother?'" (1926a). Another British writer maintains that his compatriots "are truly a patient and long-suffering race[:] silent regarding many objects which may appear to us eyesores, comforting ourselves with the thought that some good or useful purpose is being served by them...We sink our prejudices and 'grin and bear it.'" (*Times of India* 1917b). Despite this unconvincing expression of forbearance, however, the writer finds himself unsettled by the loud sounds of motor vehicles in Bombay, where "the demeanour of the drivers who cannot drive and have very little mechanical knowledge has become more insolent [and] the frequency with which the noises have made night hideous have been multiplied" (*ibid*). Bombay resident G.R. Warwick complained in 1914 that he and his wife were experiencing insomnia and subsequent health problems due to groups of Hindus in his neighborhood "beating drums and tin cans four times a week starting from about 10 p.m. and ending at about 5 a.m." (1914). Warwick, who reported the noise to be egregious enough that "[e]ven my servants complain that they cannot sleep at nights," asked how it might be that India should lack any rules governing acceptable hours for public musical performance (*ibid*). A letter from another Westerner who recently relocated to Bombay from the "mofussil" (countryside) expresses its author's frustration at the regular disruptions to the services he attends at M.E. Church on Clare Road in Byculla. "The

preacher's voice," he explains, "is almost inaudible to me through the clangorous noise made by passing trams" (*Times of India* 1920a).

Clearly, the preponderance of grievances about noise in Bombay during the early twentieth century came either from members of the literate, English-educated, middle- and upper-middle-class community of city residents who were worldly enough to draw reference to the soundscapes of faraway cities in the West, or from Westerners themselves living in India. It may seem unsurprising, then, that such accounts often exuded varying degrees of haughtiness with regard to socio-economic class and "respectability." These classist overtones register, for example, in one statement rebuking certain boisterous groups on Colaba Causeway "shouting and hustling" late at night, during the hours that "*respectable* citizens seek sleep" (*Times of India* 1906; emphasis added). In another case from 1928, Bombay's Chief Magistrate delivered a judgment in favor of plaintiff Merwanji Kaikushru Alpaiwalla ordering vegetable sellers to cease attempting to sell their products in Alpaiwalla's neighborhood near Grant Road Station. The area was said to be "a locality inhabited by *respectable* persons [emphasis added]," and therefore unfit for the *sabziwala's* "shouting and yelling and [...] use of abusive language" which, according to reports, "was nerve-racking and nerve-shattering, causing headaches and nervous prostration. It was certainly an offence to the sense of hearing and injurious to health" (*Times of India* 1928a).

The allusion to health and illness in the Alpaiwalla case against the vegetable sellers actually exemplifies a trend that constituted a core component in Bombay's emergent "noise consciousness" in the early decades of twentieth century. During this period, critiques of Bombay's noisy soundscape started to become articulated within and justified by concerns over public health. In 1907, newspapers in Bombay reported on the



proceedings of the Committee at Home on Physical Deterioration, which emphasized a direct relationship between urban noise, insomnia, and detrimental effects on one's health (*Times of India* 1907). A *Kaiser-i-Hind* article titled "The Rest Cure" echoed this sentiment a few years later, stressing the need for rest despite a growing noise problem in Bombay in order to maintain various aspects of individual health. "We live in an atmosphere of noise and bustle," the article states, "and it leaves its impress upon our minds and bodies even when we are unconscious of it" (*Kaiser-i-Hind* 1913).

The rhetoric of the 1920s was even more forceful in asserting a link between noise and public health, and more keenly engaged with international trends in biomedicine having to do with the effects of noise on health. "Noises make us ill," writes one editorialist. "At last, modern medical science says they do. If this is true, it is somewhat remarkable that the death-rate in cities like Bombay and Calcutta is not higher than it is" (*Times of India* 1923). This kind of rhetoric represented quite a new register for talking about sound for the time period, as it attempted to establish a clear causal relationship between noise and illness:

*The time has assuredly come when the physician and the educational worker should take cognizance of the fact that noise is an element to be considered as a cause of disease and that the prevention of unnecessary noise is as much a duty as the prevention of unnecessary dirt. The reasons, briefly stated, are three in number: because it is certain that noise increases the rate of sickness by hindering sleep; because it increases the death-rate by destroying the vital and recuperative powers of the sick; and because it dulls and brutalises the nervous system. (ibid)*

In a letter from the 1920s, a Bombay doctor writes of their concern over "religious noise" affecting the wellbeing of the elderly and the sick:

*Do those living in the peaceful localities of Nepean Sea Road know of the constant and nerve-breaking nuisance that is caused to the residents of roads like the popular Sandhurst Road? There are about five hospitals and nursing homes in this locality, and yet in the very midst of it, almost every night about fifteen to twenty grown-up men*

*meet with their drums, bells and organs and shout lustily at the top of their voices till late after midnight. It is supposed to soothe the gods or frighten the devils away, but there is not the slightest sympathy or fellow-feeling for the sick and unhappy around them. One sadly wonders if these good Hindus consider it their religion to so mercilessly torture invalids of these 'Homes' or their respectable neighbours, night after night. And then, the approaching Devali! These god-fearing Hindus will start with their brain-racking and health-shattering fireworks till three o'clock in the morning and start again before the break of day... In England and other civilised countries, the public is well looked after by law, and no noises are allowed after ten p.m. even in the poorest localities. (Times of India 1929a)*

This passage is notable as the doctor who wrote it expresses their particular concern for those who cannot afford to live in the more upmarket and serene neighborhoods like Nepean Sea Road. In highlighting the health of those with lesser financial means, it anticipates a commonly stated objective among present-day anti-noise activists in Mumbai. The letter is also significant in its invocation of “England and other civilised countries,” which demonstrates a particular kind of globalized understanding of the function of modern government that presupposes that governments are responsible for protecting the health of their citizens.

As public health concerns came to occupy a more prominent position in debates about Bombay's soundscape in the early twentieth century, the jargon of medicine and disease, employed as metaphors for the noise problem, also began to permeate these discussions. It became common to see references to noise as a “plague” or “epidemic,” recurring comparisons between noise and malaria as crises facing the city, and meditations on what might be the “antidote” to this sonic affliction (*Times of India* 1915a; 1928b; 1928c). This pattern of medicalizing noise discourse sought to diagnose noise as a symptom of global modernity, unyielding to the boundaries of nation state, just like any other infectious disease.

This perception of noise as an inextricable part of the greater malady of modern urbanism inspired some with proclivities for Romanticism and Luddism to enter the conversation. "Listen – all ye who live in crowded thoroughfares: screaming children, a bus grinding its gears, two radio sets, two gramophones, sledge-hammer blows from a building under construction – that's all outside," writes one such anonymous critic. "And inside? Plates clattering in the kitchen, the *hamal* dragging a piece of furniture, an eager vendor at the back-door. Is it any wonder that half of us who live in cities are nervous wrecks? Well, it's the price we pay for our civilization, for our radios and gramophones and fine buildings" (*Times of India* 1935a). The author seems to subscribe to a global (particularly Western) strain of Romanticism rejecting modernity and technological advancement as agents of noise and chaos, and calling for a return to the tranquil joy of antiquity. "If we want calm and quiet for our nervous systems," she continues, "let's go back to the year dot, to rural delights, with the only sounds to disturb our placidity the humming bee and the bleating lamb. But if it's motor cars we want, well, we must have noisy horns too" (*ibid*). Another writer, similarly conceiving of Bombay's noise as an inevitable byproduct of the modern city and its new technologies, writes that "mechanical or artificial noise" bears "a distinctive weariness to the flesh," and therefore "the increase of this machine-made cacophony...claims a high place among the penalties of modernity" (*Times of India* 1926c). The Archbishop of Bombay, in a 1938 radio broadcast called "A Message of Hate," condemned "hooters" who overused their car horns, called for the establishment of silence zones around hospitals and places of worship, cited psychologists and doctors in highlighting the adverse effects of noise on the human nervous system, and made reference to anti-noise organizations being founded "all over the civilised world." (*Times of India*

1938). The Archbishop asserted that “our machinery had gotten completely out of hand. From the servant it had become the master. Designed to add to human happiness, it had enslaved the race” (*ibid*).

The Archbishop’s special disapproval reserved for “hooters” in Bombay typifies a larger sentiment of the period, which actually continues to the present day. Complaints of the unusual loudness of car horns in Bombay, and in fact throughout India, appear frequently almost as far back as the introduction of the automobile itself in South Asia. Contemporary Westerners who spend time visiting Indian cities commonly complain about the volume of car horns, as well as their seemingly peculiar and liberal usage. A few factors exacerbate the cumulative effect of car horns in Indian cities like Mumbai. First, a common feature of streets in Indian cities is the relative closeness between pedestrians and vehicular traffic, as pedestrians often favor walking directly on roads rather than walking on sidewalks, which are frequently obstructed or in disrepair. Second, the design of architecture and indoor ventilation in the warm climate of most of the subcontinent typically aims to provide ample air (and therefore sound) permeability. Third, and perhaps most significantly, India offers a fascinating case in which the ubiquitous technology of the car horn, generally thought to be universal in application, finds a culturally specific learned usage.

A horn blown in a US city, for example, most often indicates the user’s desire to express frustration at another driver or to call other motorists’ attention to an imminent hazard. In most Indian cities, however, a horn can announce one’s approach to other drivers as well as pedestrians, among other things. This usage has been rendered iconic by

the signs requesting “Horn OK Please” which adorn the back of so many Indian trucks<sup>8</sup>. Given the high number of cars and pedestrians (among other vehicles and moving objects) on the congested streets of India’s more populous cities, the aggregate of so many courtesy honks can be very loud. And within the established traffic system of many Indian cities, in which horns indicate a vehicle’s approach, road safety has come to partly depend on the issuance of a honk. This technological idiosyncrasy was in fact codified by law in Bombay as early as 1915, when the Bombay Motor Vehicles Rules determined that “[e]very person driving a motor vehicle shall have ready and available for immediate use a suitable deep-toned horn, or, in the case of a heavy motor vehicle, a suitable gong, capable of giving audible and sufficient warning of his approach or position and shall sound the same whenever expedient to prevent danger to any of the public.” There is also evidence that horse-driven trams at the beginning of the twentieth century were already using their bells with similar purpose and effect (*Times of India* 1900b).

Some commentators in the early twentieth century, while recognizing the potential for irritation caused by the frequent honking, concluded that the practice was necessary for the safety of others. “It’s better to toot an erring pedestrian out of the way to safety,” according to one Bombay driver, “than to run him over in silence” (*Times of India* 1935a). Another motorist, contemplating the choice between blowing their horn and preserving the public peace, settles ultimately on honking as the more prudent option since, in the event of a collision into a pedestrian, “I can at least triumphantly tell the court, ‘Yes, I did hoot’” (*Times of India* 1929b). Others, however, seemed less convinced of the necessity of horn

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<sup>8</sup> Due in large part to the efforts of anti-noise activists like Sumaira Abdulali of Awaaz Foundation, the use of “Horn OK Please” signs was actually banned in the state of Maharashtra in 2015, although many trucks with signs predating the rule can be found on Maharashtrian roads.

honking. “More than half the blares, blasts, toots, and terrifying alarums that shatter the nerves by day and murder sleep by night are entirely unnecessary,” one Bombay resident complains (*Times of India* 1929c). Another wrote that:

*There is probably one driver in five hundred in Bombay to-day...who makes a rational use of a motor horn. The others seem to regard it either as a plaything given to them by Providence or as a spur to the efforts of the engine. Only thus can their constant application of pressure to the bulb be explained. We have watched the horn-blower at work. One driver, in a distance of half a mile, blew his horn eleven times. Only once was the operation necessary. Another had a blast ready for every hundred yards of a two mile drive. (Times of India 1926d)*

Other similar complaints over gratuitous horn usage abound during the period (e.g. Blake 1917; *Kaiser-i-Hind* 1915; *Times of India* 1920b; 1935e).

Not all loud sounds of the new century came exclusively from mechanical sources like car horns, however. It demands emphasis that the crux of the emergent “noise” problem was its rejection of the compartmentalization of various categories of public sound. “Noise” assumed prominence as the favored way to understand and describe the increasingly loud urban soundscape, regardless of source. Bombay residents issued complaints about noise from Hindu temples (*mandirs*) right alongside those about the honking of motorists. In a 1915 letter titled “Night Noises,” one disturbed citizen wrote, “[p]articularly obnoxious have become the so-called Hindoo ‘Bhajans’ (prayer chants), and a most effective illustration of this is furnished by Nana Shanker Temple at Tardeo Road” (*Times of India* 1915b). “Here, night after night,” the author continues, “until the small hours of morning, the dhobies<sup>9</sup> who reside there as well as parties of outside Ghatis<sup>10</sup> and

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<sup>9</sup> Dhobis, as referred to in the passage quoted above, are members of a Scheduled Caste who traditionally practice the profession of washing clothes. As handling dirty laundry implicitly involves contact with traces of excreta and other human bodily fluids, this occupation has traditionally been regarded as a low-status form of labor and has historically been associated with the concept of “untouchability.”

others get drunk, quarrel and abuse each other or in their drunken revelry invoke God's help to the detriment of the health of a large and respectable neighbourhood" (*ibid*). This author, like others of this period complaining about noise, employs coded markers of class to express their feelings of disturbance (i.e. drunken "Ghatis" causing irritation to the residents of a "respectable" community).

Similar themes pervade a contemporaneous account of sounds coming from a *mandir* at night:

*The illiterate section of Indians have a penchant for noises and noise of the worst description to the discomfort of their neighbours; one specialty of noise is the 'Mandir' howling and screaming. The founders of these Mandirs, led probably by their wily Brahmin priests, have taken to this novel pastime. A block of stone daubed liberally with red is set up in a room of a dwelling house; an ochre coloured rag is hoisted; and hey, presto, the room emerges a brand new 'mandir,' ostensibly a place of worship. Here fellows of the lowest type, after a heavy supper, adulterated with intoxicants, herd together and give free rein to their assorted vocal powers, to the vamping and jarring hand bells, Indian drums, tin canisters, et hoc genus omne. The yelping and discord not only make night hideous but disturb the erstwhile peaceful area to an alarming extent. These orgies commence as a rule when respectable people are thinking of retiring to rest, and the infernal din is prolonged to the small hours of the morning and not once in a way, but three or four times in the course of a week. They say the Devil rejoices in noise. It is apparent. They call such howling, screaming, and the crashing of nondescript instruments a Bhajan which may mean anything at all. That the congregation has unimpaired lungs and a percentage of maudlin brains cannot be gainsaid.*

*...The multiplication of these so-called mandirs is progressing charmingly. As new buildings spring up so do these new ephemeral Mandirs sprout, a room being sequestered for the purpose, and it would not be far fetched to say, that in the course of time Bombay will become an agglomeration of Mandirs. I submit before the disease assumes unwieldy proportions the surgical knife be used.*

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<sup>10</sup> "Ghati" is a term of abuse derived from the South Asian geological descriptor, *ghat*, with particular reference to the Western Ghats, a mountain range that extends along the western parts of several states including Maharashtra, Goa, and Karnataka. When used in Mumbai, the derogatory term "ghati" is somewhat akin to the English word "hillbilly," and is most often intended to disparage the intelligence, refinement, and socioeconomic status of migrants from certain rural areas, such as the Konkan region to the south of Mumbai.

*...Besides being a nuisance the infernal din must bring about nervous breakdown. No one cares to have his sleep broken, say, every alternate night. In the accredited temples, the devotional hours do not run into the night, nor are the singing and accompaniments prolonged. I would suggest that all the hybrid mandirs be registered. The owner of a Mandir, violating the hour limit, should be prosecuted. (Times of India 1914)*

This author openly exudes class-based contempt for the so-called “illiterate section,” and once again the gravity of the matter is justified through its impact on “respectable people.” This passage also carries a fascinating subtext about migration, ethnicity, demography, and population density in early twentieth-century Bombay. The period yields many complaints over nighttime nuisances attributed to new *mandirs*, which were being established at the time at a rate proportional to a surge in migration to Bombay from other parts of present-day Maharashtra, especially areas such as the Konkan coastal region. The city’s growing community of migrant laborers was largely composed of members of the Maratha caste. These laborers, at work by day, often only found time for religion and socializing late in the evenings.

A 1915 editorial responding to complaints about *mandir* noise addressed the role of migration in this pattern, assuming a sympathetic position towards evening *bhajan* singing:

*The origin of the offending noise in Bombay is almost always the same – one of the night bhajans which constitute the one relaxation in Bombay of the Maratha’s daily life. These bhajans are chants, partly secular, partly religious, sung to the accompaniment of tinkling cymbals and sounding drums and castanets, and they have probably been in vogue ever since the Maratha population first came to the city. Now that most of the labour of Bombay is done by Dekkani and Konkani Marathas, the bhajans have naturally increased in number and the energy with which they are sung after a long day’s work in the docks or the mills is not the least remarkable feature to be noted concerning them. Those who take part in the singing are, after their fashion, carrying out the instruction of the Psalmist that we should praise God upon the cymbals; but perhaps they are more careful to execute that praise upon the loud cymbals than upon the well-tuned instruments which the thoughtful Psalmist enjoined as necessary. And if they choose for their praise a time when all honest citizens should be asleep, it must be remembered that the day-time is with them fully occupied in earning their daily bread. (Times of India 1915c)*



The author then frames the issue in the context of inter-class relations, urban planning, and space:

*Labour has its rights, and the right to sing is one of them. Wholesale prohibition of bhajans, performed inside their own chawls, might very well be regarded by the lower classes as grossly oppressive and tyrannical and it could moreover only be obtained by such a number of visits from the police as would be most undesirable. It will be seen therefore that the right of the lower class to sing is in conflict with the right of the upper and middle classes to sleep free from annoyance. The two come into conflict, however, not because they are by nature diametrically opposed, but because they have been brought into strange contact with each other by the absence of planning in the city. The narrow width of the island and the haphazard way in which the residential and manufacturing areas have been permitted to grow up together without any plan regulating their development, have resulted in all classes being jumbled up together, except in one or two districts, so that the decent building fronting a main thoroughfare and occupied by professional or business men may be, and often is, backed by a chawl or group of dirty chawls inhabited solely by Marathas or other lower class people. Here comes the difficulty. The professional Hindu in the house with the frontage wants to sleep, the Marathas in the hidden chawl at the back want to sing, and the Police are expected to satisfy both parties. (ibid)*

#### **EMERGENCE OF ANTI-NOISE ACTIVISM AND ANTI-NOISE LAW IN BOMBAY**

By the end of India's colonial period in 1947, several interventions had been made in Bombay to combat the city's mounting noise issue. In October 1929, Bombay's Motor Vehicles Rules were amended, adding a rule that prohibited drivers from using their horns "wantonly in such a manner as to cause nuisance or inconvenience to the public," and in 1935, Bombay's Police Commissioner initiated a campaign to suppress hawking and street cries (*Times of India* 1935f). These measures yielded only limited success, however, as they were enforced very inconsistently, and the handful of arrests that they did lead to had little effect on curbing the rising decibels of Bombay's streets (*ibid*). The legal efforts of these years initiated what would become an enduring pattern of anti-noise law in the city, in which new laws are established but fail to ever get sufficiently enforced.

Amidst this sluggish response of local police to the problem of noise, a nascent anti-noise activist movement began in the offices of the Western India Automobile Association. The W.I.A.A. was founded in 1919 by a group composed of both Westerns and Indians in Bombay. They operated separately from any government organization, but having been granted some degree of authority in administering driving tests, issuing driver's licenses, and providing other motor vehicle services. In 1935, the W.I.A.A.'s president, H.E. Ormerod, an English mechanical engineer who had previously founded an automobile showroom in Bangalore and served as the first president of the Indian Roads and Transport Development Association, held a press conference to announce that the W.I.A.A. would be initiating an 'anti-noise' campaign (*The Straits Times* 1952; *Times of India* 1935c; Menon 2017). The organization had already formed a sub-committee to deal specifically with issues of noise in late 1934, which would continue to provide a system for receiving and reviewing noise complaints, as well as begin a "propaganda" campaign aimed at changing the honking habits of drivers (*Times of India* 1935c; 1936a). One sub-committee member, J.M. Cursetjee, recommended a blanket prohibition on the use of car horns after 10 p.m.. She also suggested that the courts and police were partly to blame for gratuitous honking, since they held drivers liable for accidents if they failed to adequately sound their horns prior to a collision with a pedestrian or other vehicle (*ibid*). The sub-committee was also awarded a Rs. 500 grant to conduct noise measurements in the city. Out of this study, the sub-committee successfully petitioned the Commissioner of Police to establish experimental "silence zones" in certain areas of Fort, where police were to charge drivers for unnecessary horn blowing. Within two months, these charges led to almost 30 prosecutions and 5 convictions (*ibid*).

Concurrent to the activities of the W.I.A.A., an organization called the Safety First Association of India also took up the cause of combating noise in Bombay. The group first convened in late 1931 in the Sewri neighborhood of Bombay as the Safety First League of India, modeling themselves after similar organizations recently formed in the West. They resolved to deal with issues like the prevention of automobile and mill accidents as well as household hazards such as electrocution and oil stove mishaps (*Times of India* 1931a; 1931b). In their second meeting, having changed their name to the Safety First Association of India, the organization elected a board entirely of Englishmen: G.C. Seers, Managing Director of General Motors India, Limited, would serve as chairman, with a W.B. Burford serving as secretary and W.T. Griffiths as treasurer. The Western-chaired organization was unsurprisingly Western-facing, working to “do in India what has already been successfully accomplished in Great Britain, on the Continent of Europe and in the United States” (*Times of India* 1932). By 1937, the group’s agenda formally included tackling the noise issue in Bombay, establishing a committee that year to address the problem of noise from car horns (*Times of India* 1937). This committee held a public demonstration of various car horns in the garage of the Bombay Electric Supply and Tramway Company (B.E.S.T.), where they measured the loudness and frequency of different horns and assessed their acceptability for Bombay’s roads. The Safety First Association’s other noise-related activities included successfully petitioning the Bombay Police to purchase an imported noise meter to measure sounds in the city (*Times of India* 1936b) and conducting a study which concluded that Bombay was, by their measurements, the noisiest city in the world (*Times of India* 1941).

The efforts of the early anti-noise movement in Bombay found limited success. It was apparent by the 1940s that the noise situation was beyond the control of police and courts. One author remarked that in Bombay, “[t]here is a rule prohibiting the use of horns of more than a certain intensity, but like every other motor rule it is observed in the breach” (*Times of India* 1941). Boman Chothia, assistant traffic superintendent of the motor vehicles department in Bombay, said that although police conduct routine inspections of the volume level of motor horns, “within half an hour of the inspection of cars by the police, motorists [get] the intensity of the horns raised” (*ibid*). A police official, discussing the silence zones established a few years earlier, said that police were aware of rampant violations but had been allocated insufficient resources to provide any enforcement (*ibid*). In the years immediately following the Second World War, India began importing more American automobiles. Allegedly, the horns of these American imports were significantly louder, prompting the Bombay Police Commissioner to issue an order in 1947 for owners of American cars to adjust the level of their horns to avoid causing further nuisance (Currim 1947).

The celebration of Diwali, the Hindu festival of lights, had long incorporated bursting firecrackers as part of the festival tradition. Before the twentieth century, however, people in India could only buy firecrackers imported from China or the West. The inflated prices of imported products ensured that crackers remained a limited, though cherished, feature of Diwali celebrations. By the early twentieth century, with factories in Calcutta starting to manufacture firecrackers, more Indians of increasingly modest means were able to burst crackers during Diwali. This trend escalated greatly during the 1940s and 1950s, when the South Indian city of Sivakasi (in present-day Tamil Nadu) became a

hub of firework manufacturing, flooding Indian markets with a more affordable domestic product.

Along with this increase in firecracker bursting, however, came a corresponding wave of noise complaints in Bombay. “Instead of a festival of lights,” writes a D.G. Tendulkar, “Diwali is fast becoming a festival of the unbearable noise of dangerous crackers and loudly played gramophone records. Cannot the State arrange a public fireworks display and stop the saturnalia practised during Diwali?” (1955). Another Bombay resident complained in 1956 that, “During the last two years the Diwali season has been a nightmare. Instead of people celebrating it in a dignified manner they vie with each other in making the greatest noise. Let us hope the police will ban the dangerous and ear-splitting varieties of crackers” (Vacha 1956). A Westerner living in Bombay also admonished Diwali revelers, asking rhetorically “whether the Government’s having permitted the use of gigantic explosives is just another way of gaining sales for aspirin” (Goldsmith 1958).

In this atmosphere of persistent public objections to noise in 1950s Bombay, twenty years after the inception and failure of the first wave of anti-noise activists in the 1930s, an organization called the Noise Abatement League of Bombay formed to address the city’s noise problem. The Noise Abatement League’s activities date back as early as 1955, when, according to league member S.Y. Gunye, the Bombay State Chief Minister responded to the group’s demand to impose a ban on loudspeaker use by stating that “such a ban would only deprive the poor people of Bombay with inexpensive entertainment” (Gunye 1971). From its outset, the Noise Abatement League made a priority of reducing noise from firecrackers during Diwali, advocating for a ban on the sale of louder varieties of crackers (Gupte 1956). By the decade’s end, the league’s efforts were at least partly successful, as the Bombay

Police issued “a ban on the import, manufacture, sale, possession or firing of that beastly little imp of a cracker called, with onomatopoeic vividness, the ‘putputia,’” also known as the “atom bomb” (*Times of India* 1959). The police, in their press release notifying the public about the “putputia” ban, enjoined civilians to report acts of noncompliance. This prompted one editorialist to quip that “whatever else its deficiencies, the putputia has a keen realisation of its responsibilities under the law: as soon as it explodes, it makes its own report” (*ibid*).

In their few short years of activity, the Noise Abatement League organized various meetings and symposia addressing various aspects of noise issues in Bombay. A symposium in February 1957 focusing on noise and its impact on public health was held in the Town Hall building in Fort (known at the time as “Tondal,” a heritage structure which now houses the Asiatic Society of Mumbai) (*Times of India* 1957a). Participants in the symposium included Deputy Police Commissioner S.M.A. Pathan, a Bombay Municipal Corporation Public Health Engineer S.V. Desai, an E.N.T. specialist from J.J. Hospital named Dr. R.A.F. Cooper, as well as psychiatrist Dr. K.A.J. Lalkaka and Thana Mental Hospital Superintendent Dr. Shanti Sheth who were invited to address the effects of noise on mental health (*Times of India* 1957b). The symposium concluded with its participants suggesting a campaign towards public education about the hazards of noise, the introduction of a new system of silence zones in the city, zoning regulations to limit industry in order to keep industrial noise from pervading residential areas, and a ban on the use of radios in restaurants. Symposium chair and Noise Abatement League member M.D.D. Gilder also announced that his organization would draft an “anti-noise code” in response to the symposium (*ibid*).

The following year, the Noise Abatement League declared the final week in February to be Bombay's first "Anti-Noise Week" and organized a week long conference focused entirely on noise. Bombay mayor M.V. Donde spoke at the inaugural ceremony, advocating for stronger legislation to reduce noise but also emphasizing the need for "social consciousness [to be] developed in the minds of the people" (*Times of India* 1958a). The league hosted the conference at the Bombay Electric Supply & Transport building, inviting members of the general public to sessions on special topics like the "engineering and architectural aspects" of the city's noise problem (*Times of India* 1958b). M.S. Karinamwar, Bombay's health minister, delivered a speech on the final day of the conference in which he said that "since prevention [is] always more important than cure and more feasible, every step must be taken to bate [*sic*] the torture that a town dweller has to suffer through avoidable and unnecessary noise" (*Times of India* 1958c).

The Noise Abatement League lost momentum by the early 1960s, however. One journalist, taking note of the league's lack of enduring efficacy and declining vitality, wrote, "It is not surprising that the still, small voice of the Noise Abatement League finds it difficult to rise above the deafening din against which it seeks to protest" (*Times of India* 1960). Even the group's own convenor, V.V. Gupte, had taken a defeated and crestfallen tone by that time:

*Unfortunately, all the League's appeals and activities are falling on noise-deafened ears. With more support and encouragement from the press, the enlightened citizen in general and from the Municipal Corporation in particular, the Noise Abatement League would feel more hopeful in tackling this onerous task.* (Gupte 1960)

Gupte would later reflect on the hurdles faced during his years with the Noise Abatement League, recalling one incident in which the league, attempting to present government officials with suggestions for anti-noise policy, "were literally laughed out of court. A Chief

Minister said that they could not be implemented as the common people loved loud noises” (1972). The Noise Abatement League, along with Bombay’s anti-noise movement more generally, fell silent over the next decade, even as the city’s soundscape grew louder.

During the early 1970s, the global circulation of environmentalist ideas reached an unprecedented peak. Out of this discourse of environmentalism arose the concept of “noise pollution” as a model of understanding soundscape as it relates to humanity’s relationship to environment. The term “noise pollution” already appeared in mass-mediated English language discourse by the mid-1960s (e.g. *Daily Mail* 1963; WPA Film Library 1963), and its early usage typically emphasized the view that a sound qualifies as a “pollutant” when it results expressly from “man-made” processes (*New York Times* 1964). Furthermore, historical environmentalist definitions of “pollution” itself intrinsically link the phenomenon to humanity, sociality, artificiality, and modernity, while positioning the concept in stark binary opposition to nature (Whyte 2013:392).

Within several years of the earliest written usage of “noise pollution,” a corresponding discursive shift occurs in Bombay’s mass media, with soundscape issues now being more frequently framed in reference to environmental harm. “We have so zealously gone industrial that not only is our natural environment being dangerously polluted, but there is a mounting decibel assault on our ears,” says one author of Bombay in 1970. They continue, “many feel fagged out as evening falls, others lose their sense of hearing, and a few literally go mad – factories humming with productive activity, buses roaring on roads which are constantly cut up by pneumatic drills, planes shrieking overhead” (*Times of India* 1970). Another account, citing a report from the Indian Merchants’ Chamber, warns that “noise pollution is assuming serious proportions of late.



Research has indicated that prolonged exposure to sound above a certain reasonable limit is highly dangerous to human well-being. In fact, sound could be much more dangerous than other forms of environmental pollution since it damages the human system permanently before it can be detected” (Cooper 1975). A 1977 article advised Bombay residents about the health hazards of manmade sound pollutants, albeit in an exaggerated, conjectural, and alarmist tone:

*A 62-year-old woman was visiting Santa Cruz airport in Bombay with her son for the first time. As she watched a Caravelle aircraft land, she suddenly went into spasms and started pulling at her hair. Her spasms passed with the aircraft noise. Some time later, a middle-aged couple went to [a] doctor's clinic with the complaint that both of them were developing hearing difficulties. Inquiries revealed that their suburban house lay directly below the flight path of jet aircraft. Recently, the Santa Cruz police reported that a man had fatally stabbed another in a quarrel over the high-pitched blaring of a radio.*

*All these three incidents are dramatic manifestations of a new form of pollution. While air, water and environmental pollution have received sufficient attention, the 'recognition of noise as a pollutant is rather new,' says Dr. Rashmi Mayur, a noted environmental scientist.*

*It has been reported that menstrual bleeding among women in Vile Parle [a Bombay suburb near Santa Cruz airport] lasts generally longer than usual – about eight days. A local doctor said this was probably due to continuous exposure to high-intensity noise from jet aircraft. Dr. Rajaram says that noise hastens the appearance of the first menses in urban girls and earlier than in their rural sisters. However, he says, the worst effect of noise is on the growing foetus. It leads to premature births and children fail to gain weight, as has been noted among Japanese families living close to airfields. Dr. Mayur quotes an environmental expert to say that, if the present noise levels continue, most metropolitan dwellers may be deaf by 2,000 A.D.! (Times of India 1977)*

While even Bombay's mayor, Manohar Joshi (1976-1977), championed the cause of approaching noise pollution as a commensurate and equally immediate problem as air or water pollution (*Times of India* 1976), the environmentalist-inspired rebranding of noise had some critics. “The best way to bury a problem (not solve it, mind you) is to give it a catchy name or tag a slogan to it,” remarked one such skeptic. “Thus we have population

explosion and zero population growth, ecotage and biosphere pollution, *gharibi hatao*<sup>11</sup> and what else. ‘Noise pollution’ is a good as any; just sufficiently attractive to let the authorities feel they don’t have to do anything about it” (*Times of India* 1972c).

Nevertheless, this discourse designating manmade sounds as potential pollutants resonated with many Bombayites, and soon galvanized a new wave of anti-noise activists motivated and unified under the banner of environmental protection. One organization, called the Society for Clean Environment (SOCLEEN), had formed a noise pollution sub-committee by 1979 (Gogte 1979). Founded in Bombay a decade earlier in 1969 by scientists working at the Bhabha Atomic Research Centre, SOCLEEN initially focused primarily on air and water pollution (SOCLEEN 2016). By the time SOCLEEN became involved with issues of sound, they had already become well established as an environmental organization with a successful funding model (including annual funds from the Bombay Municipal Corporation), a systematic approach to research and outreach, and a network of contacts in the media, government, and scientific communities (*Times of India* 1982a). The organization gained enough momentum in the 1970s that in 1974 they formed SOCLEEN chapters in Poona and Hyderabad operating alongside their Bombay flagship (*Times of India* 1974a; 1974b).

SOCLEEN’s approach to “noise pollution” in the late 1970s and early 1980s set a precedent for conducting anti-noise activism that continues to be followed by contemporary activists in Bombay. Equipped with sound meters, SOCLEEN members recorded decibel levels in various public spaces throughout the city and during loud events,

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<sup>11</sup> Indira Gandhi used the phrase *Garibi hatao* (“Remove poverty”) as a campaign slogan leading up to her reelection as Prime Minister of India. She later used the slogan in connection with several poverty reduction programs she initiated during her term in office.

especially religious festivals. Accumulating a broad sample of quantitative data, SOCLEEN then submitted their readings to government officials and the press. The group held meetings with police officials and initiated outreach programs to raise public awareness about noise-related issues (*Times of India* 1980a; 1983a). Their efforts were often aimed at school children, holding lectures at schools on the dangers of noise pollution, taking students along to conduct surveys with decibel meters around the city, and organizing anti-noise poster competitions for students. At one lecture event, a speaker from SOCLEEN told the audience that extensive anti-noise laws were already in place, but that without public awareness legal mechanisms would be ineffectual (*ibid*). With SOCLEEN, for the first time the principal strategy of Bombay's anti-noise movement had shifted away from efforts to effect change solely through legal interventions and other top-down methods, moving towards prioritizing a grassroots approach to noise abatement.

Early on in their engagement with noise, SOCLEEN developed a special loathing for the use of loudspeakers during Hindu festivals. They conducted surveys to measure decibel levels from loudspeakers and issuing warnings to the public about the adverse health effects of exposure to loud amplified sound (*Times of India* 1981). Of course, loudspeakers by no means represented a new technology in the 1980s. Various religious functions in Bombay had already been employing loudspeakers for several decades, from Hindu festival organizers blaring film music to mosques amplifying *azān* and prayers (*Times of India* 1940). Following a ban on loudspeakers in mosques during the Emergency years (1975-1977), the government of Maharashtra formally permitted masjids to use mosques for their call to prayer in 1977 (Malhotra 1977). At the same time, the increasing prevalence and affordability of loudspeakers in Bombay made them a ubiquitous and defining feature of

Hindu festival events, and a preferred target for the perennial disapproval of anti-noise activists<sup>12</sup>. A 1983 SOCLEEN report warned of drastically increased decibel levels during the annual celebration of the Ganapati festival, with averages up around 20 dB since 1980 Ganesh Utsav celebrations, and overall levels in the city 30-40 dB higher than outside the festival season (*Times of India* 1983b). The group recorded sounds over 110 dB at Ganapati events across the city, noting an increase in the use and volume of loudspeakers. One high decibel reading in particular, they claimed, was taken just outside a hospital in Tardeo where a police official had been posted, apparently unfazed by the flagrancy of the violation. The Bombay High Court had in fact reprimanded the police for their inaction regarding unsanctioned loudspeaker use only one year earlier. A petition filed by a Santa Cruz resident alleging that police failed to respond to loudspeaker violations during 1982 Navratri and Diwali festival celebrations prompted the court to issue an order directing officers to enforce noise rules accordingly (*Times of India* 1982b; 1982c).

In public statements, SOCLEEN members often maintained highly speculative claims about exposure to noise being a direct catalyst for violent behavior. This comprised a significant part of their rhetoric in the 1980s. For example, amidst a 1980 noise awareness campaign, SOCLEEN reported that “[v]iolent incidents can take place when noise enrages people” (*Times of India* 1980b). In 1983, following the murder of an autorickshaw by a police officer, SOCLEEN members suggested that the officer had been driven to brutality after being posted to a *mandal* where loudspeakers were blaring music. The group concluded that the officer had been “exposed to noise levels of more than 110 decibels for a

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<sup>12</sup> Chapters Four, Five, and Six will examine other major trends that further contributed to a significant increase in the audibility of Hindu festivals in Bombay’s soundscape during the late twentieth century.

long time on the night of the shooting. This, coupled with the fact that he had consumed alcohol and was separated from his wife whom he had married in March...may have unbalanced him temporarily" (*Times of India* 1983c). Though clearly spurious, these kinds of claims possessed a sensationalism that likely appealed to journalists who may have otherwise held tepid feelings about covering noise-related stories. This may have contributed to the more considerable media coverage given to SOCLEEN when compared to their predecessors in the Bombay anti-noise movement, which helped to raise the organization's profile as well as awareness of the issues they addressed.

Alongside SOCLEEN, pediatrician Yeshwant Oke became one of the most prominent and consequential anti-noise activists of the 1980s, having been inspired to action after attending a presentation at the Santa Cruz Rotary Club by an ENT doctor from King Edward Memorial Hospital on the health effects of prolonged exposure to noise. Oke's professional background as a doctor corresponds to a pattern apparent with the generation of Bombay anti-noise activists beginning with SOCLEEN. The preponderance of these activists came from backgrounds as doctors or scientists, citing public health and environmental concerns as their primary motivation for becoming involved in the anti-noise movement.

Oke first engaged with noise issues as a plaintiff in lawsuit filed against a factory situated opposite his housing society that allegedly caused disturbance to residents. Oke contributed arguments about the harmful potential health effects of noise exposure, and the housing society won the case. In the early 1980s, Oke, who had himself once been a member of a SOCLEEN chapter operating in the Chembur suburb of Bombay, formed the Anti Noise Pollution Committee in collaboration with a group of other doctors and lawyers. They wrote and published articles about the impact of noise on public health, specifically

liking the production of sound from loudspeakers and during the celebration of religious festivals with an overall increase in Bombay's noise levels (Ghanekar 2014). They also collected over 700 complaints about noise from all across Maharashtra, which they submitted to government officials. In 1985, Oke filed public interest litigation (PIL) with the Bombay High Court seeking to block the use of public areas for festival celebration and ban the loudspeaker use in evenings after 8 p.m. Oke and the other petitioners expressed particular concern over the volume of festivals like Ganeshotsav, citing a 1980 World Health Organization publication with guidelines for safe levels of sound exposure. "Various festivals and functions," the petitioners argued, "[have] been converted in recent years into commercial enterprises by certain 'vulgar' elements with the active or passive support of the state government or the corporation" (*Times of India* 1985a). The court responded to the petition by ordering the formation of a committee to study patterns of noise in the city and offer subsequent measures for abatement. In personal conversation, Oke also suggests that his case prompted members of Indian Parliament to include noise as a "pollutant" under the Environment Protection Act passed the following year in 1986. The act specifies that violations are to carry the severe penalty of a fine of Rs. 100,000 or a five-year prison sentence, or both. "In 1951, [with] the Bombay Police Act," Dr. Oke told me, "noise is mentioned only as a nuisance. It's when we started in 1985, the Environmental Protection Act came in 1986, and for the first time, labeled noise as a 'pollutant.' That makes a lot of difference, something as a 'nuisance' and something as a 'pollutant.' Because pollutant means it directly affects your health, and that is why the penalties are very high."

## CONCLUSION

The discourse of “noise” throughout the twentieth century in Bombay ushered in new ways of hearing and interpreting the sounds of the city, and subsequently new ways of conceiving of oneself as a part of that urban community. Furthermore, this period gave rise to a coterie of activists, motivated by concerns about public health and the environment, who would become central figures in the contemporary issues surrounding the sound of politically-backed Hindu festivals that represent the focus of this dissertation. From the early twentieth-century emergence of conceptualizations of “noise” as a mass noun describing a fundamental quality of the urban soundscape, critiques of noise and calls for its abatement circulated largely within communities made up of Bombay’s English-educated socioeconomic elite, as reflected in the prevalence of the English word “noise,” the cosmopolitan experiences contributing to expectations about soundscape, and the occasional undercurrents of class-based scorn found in early twentieth-century complaints about loud sounds throughout the city. The next chapter of this dissertation will introduce the leading members of contemporary Mumbai’s community of anti-noise activists, and will examine to what extent “noise” in the city represents an *objective* crisis of significance to public health, as opposed to a *subjective* matter involving the expression of conflict between communities.

## CHAPTER THREE: Anti-Noise Activism in Contemporary Mumbai

### INTRODUCTION

This chapter asserts that matters of “noise” in Mumbai bear twofold significance, as both a problem of socio-economic and cultural difference in intercommunity tensions over the management and designation of sonic phenomena, as well as an issue involving measurable, material, and injurious effects from high decibel sound for many residents of the city. In demonstrating these two aspects of the “noise” phenomenon, I will draw upon my ethnographic field research conducted with members of the city’s contemporary anti-noise activist community.

In my participant observation work with anti-noise activists in Mumbai, I joined these activists as they engaged in various tasks such as taking decibel readings at festivals and other events, participating in legal proceedings at the Bombay High Court or discussing ongoing litigation with their lawyers, attending or presenting during conferences and seminars on public health or environmental issues, conducting outreach activities and planning media campaigns, meeting with police and other government officials, giving interviews to journalists, or organizing free audiological screenings in local communities. In some cases, I met with activists who had been involved in the historically significant NGOs discussed in the previous chapter. A few of these elder activists were retired or semi-retired, but some still set out into the streets during festivals and rallies on occasion, decibel meter in hand.

The following section of this chapter will provide descriptive detail on a sampling of Mumbai’s most prominent anti-noise activists and their work. From there, I will address



the dual character of the designation of “noise” in Mumbai, as both a social phenomenon and an empirical one.

### **CONTEMPORARY ANTI-NOISE ACTIVISTS**

Any discussions about anti-noise activism in Mumbai over the last decade seem to invariably yield a mention of the name Awaaz Foundation. Awaaz (Hindi for “noise”) has been at the center of debates over noise in Maharashtra and throughout India since its founding in 2006 by the NGO’s convenor and sole officeholder, environmentalist Sumaira Abdulali<sup>1</sup>. Among politicians and government functionaries, Abdulali’s renown (or, for some, her notoriety) inspired one official to bestow her with the moniker “the Minister of Noise” (Dias 2016). Abdulali’s career as an anti-noise activist began three years prior to the founding of Awaaz, when she joined Yeshwant Oke and her uncle Saad Ali as a member of the Bombay Environmental Action Group (BEAG) in 2003. Abdulali, acting with BEAG, successfully petitioned the Bombay High Court to block the use of loudspeakers in silence zones (Deshpande 2016). The same year, Abdulali also managed to “[get] a mosque near my home in Bandra to stop using loudspeakers during their morning prayers” (quoted in Ghanekar 2014). Since then, she has gained prominence for persistently measuring decibel levels at religious festivals, mosques, and political rallies; publicly distributing her findings and frequently filing litigation against individuals and organizations responsible for noise limit violations. Awaaz’s anti-noise awareness campaigns have achieved extensive visibility

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<sup>1</sup> The activists I interview who are discussed here all specifically requested that I use their real names rather than ethnographic pseudonyms. As one of them explained to me, their activities are already a matter of fairly high-profile public record, and being recognized publically by name, rather than being kept anonymous, can serve as a form of protection itself.

and recognition in Mumbai, and the organization's legal victories have impacted the city soundscape in ways that, while limited, have proven to be consequential and quantifiable. For example, 2016 saw an overall reduction in the decibel averages of festival celebrations, attributable in part to activism at a legal and grassroots level, particularly the contributions of Awaaz (Chatterjee 2016d). That same year, following an expansive anti-honking campaign by Awaaz, the number of honking violations issued by police soared (Natu 2016).

Abdulali's home is nestled in one of Mumbai's most serene and upscale residential suburbs, where landmarks like the palatial properties of cricketers and Bollywood stars guide visitors over the neighborhood's undulating hills and meandering roads. In my visits out to Sumaira's home to conduct interviews or convene before going out and taking decibel readings during festivals, I would often think about how her house seemed to me like one of the most tranquil places I had been to in all of Greater Mumbai. The odd noise that might find its way into her living room was always more likely to be along the lines of a bird singing by the window, or Western classical music playing gently on the stereo. I recall one instance in which Abdulali's daughter, addressing her own partiality for the ebullient renditions of Hindi and Marathi film songs played by street musicians and DJs during festivals, teased her mother for rejecting Indian popular music in favor of the works of the European common practice period.

While most members of the anti-noise activist community balance (typically white-collar) professional careers with their activism, Abdulali commits herself full time to her work with Awaaz. She comes from a family of environmental and political activists, a lineage that includes former Bombay High Court judge and Indian National Congress president Badruddin Tyabji (1844-1906). Abdulali spent several years of her childhood

and several more of early adulthood living in Japan, a fact which at times led me to wonder what impact these formative years outside India may have had on her perception of Mumbai's soundscape. Commenting on the differences she perceived between Japan and India with regard to sound, she said:

*Japan of course doesn't have this level of noise at all. But it's a pretty different culture, you know, the Japanese are very close to nature in many ways. So, I do have that somewhere in me, the Japanese attitude to nature. Of course, India has it too. Meditation and stuff is very Indian. So, India has, knowingly or unknowingly, quite a relationship with silence, too. Because, you can't meditate unless there's silence, and we have all these Vipassana centers where you can't talk. You know, so we do have a close relationship with silence. But perhaps it's more visible in day-to-day life in Japan.*

Abdulali once told of her father's passing after an extended stay in Jaslok Hospital, situated on Pedder Road in close proximity to several Ganpati mandals. The sounds of loud music and firecrackers at night from the mandals, Abdulali explained, became an incessant source of torment for her ailing father and other patients in the hospital. "Now, it's okay to be told that it's a festival, what can you do, it's only one day a year," she said. "But if it's your parent, or your relative, who is dying in that hospital, then that one day a year is the most crucial day of the year." Abdulali's consideration of the impact of noise on the sick and elderly seems to have contributed to a reorientation of Awaaz's institutional identity and rhetorical approach to unwanted sound. While the NGO still holds environmentalism as the core motivation for its objection to noise, its public rhetoric has increasingly looked towards issues of public health. I once accompanied Sumaira to a 2015 function on noise issues at Nair Hospital, where she addressed a group of audiologists, E.N.T. doctors, and other medical health professionals. "We have always thought of noise as an environmental hazard," she told them. "I think we need to change our way of communicating about noise, and make it more about health. It's only when people realize that their own health is being

affected, when their children are being directly affected, that they are going to get more enthusiasm to implement noise rules.” She asked the group for their help in a PR effort to recast noise as a health risk in a contemporary public discourse that had come to view it with some indifference as primarily an environmental problem. “I have been talking to some newspapers to inspire them, hopefully, to change their reporting of these festivals to make them [...] more health-based, more health-oriented,” she said.

In the years since that Nair Hospital event, Awaaz has vigorously maintained that health-based message. They partnered with the Indian Medical Association in 2016 for an anti-honking campaign highlighting the fictitious malady of “Horn flu.” “Our campaign,” states Abdulali, “seeks to establish the dangers of honking on health by making honking itself a disease. We tell people about the ill-effects of ‘horn flu’ and how they can save themselves from it. It speaks to them in a complete medical and serious language” (quoted in *Times of India* 2016a). A prestigious Mumbai advertising agency developed the Horn Flu campaign with Awaaz, offering their services pro-bono to the NGO. Abdulali has also worked on several occasions with the audiological charity AURED, for whom Abdulali’s cousin serves as director. I joined Abdulali and AURED technicians as they administered free hearing tests to children in low-income areas and traffic police<sup>2</sup>. These screenings seemed to reveal alarmingly high rates of possible hearing loss among these populations,

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<sup>2</sup> In conducting hearing tests, the technicians from AURED used a method called otoacoustic emissions (OAE) testing. This form of testing works by using a device to generate sounds and then measure the inner ear’s own acoustic response to those sounds. Measuring otoacoustic emissions holds particular value in conducting neonatal screenings, or in working with other patients that are unable to communicate their responses during audiometric screenings. In the context of AURED’s mobile screenings, OAE testing was selected for its speed and portability over audiometry. While OAE is useful, it may be less effective than audiometry in indicating hearing loss (see, for example, Helleman *et al* 2018). For that reason, in the case of subjects whose OAE screenings indicated possible hearing loss, AURED technicians recommended further audiometric testing to confirm results.

whose increased risk for hearing loss reflects significantly higher levels of noise exposure. Of the 3,000 hearing screenings given to children from slum areas, AURED reported signs of hearing loss in nearly half<sup>3</sup>, with rates just as high among the traffic police who received screenings (Chatterjee 2016a). In the case of the children, living in informal housing (“slums”) may present greater exposure to and less architectural protection from street level noise, while the traffic police may find their routine exposure to traffic noise exacerbated by frequently working under flyovers, where sounds can become greatly amplified. Mumbai’s traffic police joint commissioner, Milind Bharambe, at one point himself acknowledged the scope of the problem, stating that “1,500 traffic policemen are battling health ailments daily due to noise” (Chatterjee 2016d).

Another activist, Dr. Mahesh Bedekar, shares Abdulali’s concerns about the impact of noise on public health, and also points towards traffic police as an example of an at-risk population. He suggests that the threat that noise poses for police officers could someday become a strategic asset for the cause of anti-noise activism. Traffic police, he told me, “should realize that [noise exposure] is harming them. Then only will they start telling people, ‘please, don’t honk.’” He mentions a different study on the rates of hearing loss among Mumbai’s traffic police in which “I think forty to fifty percent of them had serious [hearing loss]. Because you must be seeing that these poor policemen are standing on the road without any [hearing protection]. It’s horrible. I don’t know how they stand on the

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<sup>3</sup> To compare these numbers with rates of hearing loss among children in the United States, a CDC study conducted between 1997 and 2005 found 5 out of 1000 children between ages 3 and 17 to have signs of hearing loss based on a survey submitted by their parents (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention 2019; Boulet *et al* 2008). Another study from the United States, published in 1998, found that 14.9% of children ages 6 to 19 showed signs of at least slight hearing loss at some point in time (Niskar *et al* 1998).

road. So much honking, so much traffic, so much pollution. But if [a police officer] is sensitized that, 'no this is hazardous,' maybe he can become an activist."

Bedekar works as an obstetrician and gynecologist in the Mumbai suburb of Thane, where he runs a small hospital that his grandfather founded in 1950. Bedekar entered the world of activism out of frustration with the increasing noise around his hospital. "Every day, there used to be processions out here in the afternoon," he told me, explaining that wedding and festival processions with bands and DJs would routinely pass directly in front of the hospital. He made several unavailing requests to the organizers of the processions and to local police to curtail the decibel level outside the hospital, which, he explained to them, serves patients like expecting mothers and newborn infants who might be especially sensitive to loud sounds. "Two years we were fighting, every day," he says, but the police failed to take action. This indifference on the part of the police led Bedekar to believe that he had no legal recourse to improve his situation. After doing some research, however, Bedekar eventually came to learn that extensive laws governing noise actually did already exist, but were merely being left unenforced. "To my surprise, courts give very good rulings, but the police don't know about it." He decided to file public interest litigation (PIL) in 2009, which succeeded in blocking processions from passing near his clinic. Since then, he claims, the area surrounding his hospital has become the quietest place in all of Thane.

Bedekar is emphatic in insisting that he holds no ill will towards religion in his opposition to loud religious festival processions, nor towards any particular political party in objecting to their sponsorship of those processions. He maintains that his work is "absolutely apolitical" and "not connected to any political party," even when filing litigation against festival organizers puts activists in direct conflict with political party leaders. In

fact, Bedekar says that by now he has “gone against each and every political leader in Thane.” He tells me that he, as a devout Hindu, “follows every festival,” but feels that the use of loudspeakers in festival events is fundamentally “against religion.”

Since 2009, Bedekar has filed several more PILs that, he contends, have attracted enough media interest around Thane as to engender a substantial increase in public awareness about the health risks of noise and heighten the pressure on police officials to know and enforce noise rules. Bedekar’s lawyer, like that of Awaaz, works with him on a pro-bono basis for his anti-noise cases. He suggests that his success in securing top counsel to represent him can be attributed in part to the social capital associated with his family’s name around Thane. “[My lawyer] is from Thana, he knew our family because for seventy years we’ve been here,” he explains. “That helped me a lot. Otherwise he doesn’t have time, won’t talk to anybody. He’s very busy. You know how lawyers are...He said, ‘You are Dr. Mahesh Bedekar, no? I know your family, you are good people...’ So he took my first PIL, then it went on...But without him, it was not possible. Impossible, I tell you. So I was lucky that all these things came together.”

Activist Ajay Marathe lives in the planned suburb of Navi Mumbai. Inside his apartment, several floors up in his building, he took me over to his window to point out a masjid, a church, a school, and a sports club, all situated directly beside his home and all making various kinds of loud sounds throughout the day. The mosque amplified *azān*, the church rang its bells before masses, the school held various festival events, and the sports club was regularly rented out for wedding receptions. Standing at his window, Marathe produced a small digital video camera with a flip screen, zooming in on the mosque so I could see the loudspeakers. He bought the camera, he explained, so he could start

documenting noise rule violations in his neighborhood with video and audio evidence for the court. Typical for any household in urban India, a plethora of sundry sounds pervade the apartment: cars horns on the street below, of course, but also the constant drone of construction equipment, birds, children playing outside the school, and the elevator chimes inside the building, which played the tune of “Twinkle, Twinkle, Little Star” every time the doors opened on his floor. Commenting on the construction sounds we heard, Marathe explained that his sector in Navi Mumbai is rapidly developing, with many new towers being constructed. We spoke about how so many of the units in these new high-rise buildings around the Mumbai Metropolitan Region remain unoccupied after construction is finished. Apparently, according to Marathe, their owners keep them merely as investment properties rather than residences, seemingly a particularly callous decision in a city where nearly half the population lives in slum housing.

Shifting his attention to the sounds of birds outside the window, Marathe told me how his passion for animals first compelled him to get involved in anti-noise activism. A decade earlier, he began filing complaints against the use of fireworks during Diwali celebrations, stating his concern that the sounds would negatively impact the health of birds and other animals. As Marathe explained this to me, the mosque across from his building began amplifying their *azān*, loudly enough that our conversation was rendered inaudible on my voice recorder. Marathe guided me around the rooms of his apartment to introduce me to his five cats, along the way also introducing me to his wife and son. When he first noticed the sensitivity of neighborhood cats and dogs to loud sounds over a decade ago, he says, “then I realized the impact of noise.” At that time, he began contacting anti-noise activists like Yeshwant Oke and reading court judgments on cases having to do with



noise. “I read, in some court, that a lady – a girl – was being raped, and she was shouting for help and there was some function going on with either loudspeaker or crackers. Nobody could hear her shout. It is the worst thing that can happen.”

Marathe’s approach to anti-noise activism differs slightly from that of, for example, Abdulali or Bedekar. He calls himself an “RTI activist,” referring to Indian Parliament’s Right to Information Act of 2005, which established a protocol for individual citizens to request and receive government records. Amidst his substantial pile of Xeroxed public records, Marathe pulled a file containing documents from several Mumbai Metropolitan Region police stations which demonstrated varying levels of police inaction towards noise, some in direct violation of orders from the high court. In the years since first becoming an activist, Marathe has become adept at knowing what materials to request and how to locate information contained within that might build an effective case for public interest litigation. In fact, he now trains other activists in a weekly session devoted to offering advice on the RTI process. Marathe explained that he leaves for his job as a chemical engineer in South Mumbai at about 8 am each day and returns around 7 pm, finding time for his activism early in the morning and late into the evening. Like Abdulali, he also drives around during festivals to measure decibel levels. He playfully points out, however, that unlike Abdulali, he doesn’t have a personal driver, so usually his wife takes the wheel while he operates the decibel meter.

A train leaving from Dadar station in Mumbai takes just over an hour to reach Ulhasnagar, a city of a half-million in Thane District. There, Ulhasnagar’s resident anti-noise activist, Sarita Khanchandani, runs a small NGO called Hiral Foundation. Although Ulhasnagar constitutes part of the Mumbai Metropolitan Region, Khanchandani’s work

with Hirali operates somewhat outside the immediate social orbit of activists like Abdulali, Bedekar, or Marathe, only occasionally involving direct interaction with those in Mumbai and its nearby suburbs. Ulhasnagar developed rapidly as a city after it became a site for the relocation of thousands of Sindhis following Partition in 1947. Khanchandani, a Brahmin polyglot, counts herself among the hundreds of thousands of Sindhis who now constitute the largest ethnic group in Ulhasnagar. The political ascendancy of Sindhis in Ulhasnagar, a unique case in Maharashtra, has at times forced local representatives of the state's major political parties to reassess and reconfigure their wonted strategy of ingratiating themselves exclusively with Marathi speakers to consolidate votes (Waghmode 2017).

Khanchandani, a science teacher by day, started working as an environmental activist ten years prior to our first conversation, shifting her focus to noise pollution a few years later after deciding that her contributions might yield a greater impact proportionally when applied to noise issues rather than, for example, air pollution. "[E]specially I took up [the cause of festival noise], because festivals are of you and me," she asserts. "See, I cannot go and stop a factory. I cannot go and stop a construction worker. There will be fights. But if it is my festival, if it is your festival, if it is our festival, we should understand [our personal responsibility]." Khanchandani began specifically targeting the use of plastic membrane drums and firecrackers during religious festivals, citing her mother's heart condition as a motivating factor. "I'm very angry at people. Because even educated people are [making noise during festivals]," she states. "I'm angry at the authorities. They know that it's a problem. I don't know what is the reason, maybe corruption, or the authorities are scared to speak against God, but I think it is very easy to speak to people. *Ganpati mera hai*, it is

mine. I have to change it, it's that simple. It's my festival, and I'm responsible towards my mother nature."

In her campaign against festival noise, Khanchandani, with the help of her husband, a practicing advocate, filed RTI requests with the local police, fire brigade, and electricity board. She specifically searched for evidence that some particularly boisterous festival *mandals* might be operating without the necessary permissions for their events. She found in her research that only 327 of local *mandals* (13% of the total) had received such permits from the Ulhasnagar Municipal Corporation, while the rest operated informally. After reporting the situation to the police, an officer attempted to dissuade her from filing petition against the offenders by appealing to her piety as a Hindu, saying, "Madame, it's God's religion."

### **NOISE, CLASS, AND MATERIALITY**

Much of the existing secondary literature on transnational debates about "noise pollution" suggests that historical complaints over noise often serve as a proxy for class conflicts. Peter Payer (2007), for example, finds a proliferation of noise complaints from middle-class citizens of Vienna about sounds associated with the city's lower classes during the late nineteenth and early twentieth century, as demographic shifts brought these different classes into closer physical proximity. "It was clearly the acoustic expressions of the lower classes – their crying and shouting, their uncouth behavior, or even their unsophisticated way of playing the piano – that especially met with disapproval," Payer writes (2007:785-786). "Thus the discourse about noise camouflaged a class struggle, in which the middle classes strove to dissociate themselves from the so-called brute and

unruly behavior of the proletariat” (*ibid*). Similarly, Lilian Radovac notes how efforts on the part of New York mayor Fiorello La Guardia and the city government in the 1930s to combat noise frequently targeted the sounds of “the street-based economy, including itinerant musicians, pushcart sellers, and junkmen” (2011:754).

Ronda Sewald argues that many historical studies of urban sound subscribe to an influential theoretical model first advanced by Jacques Attali, which holds that noise represents “a language of resistance used against hegemonic powers to bring about social change,” and that “efforts to regulate noise must, by definition, constitute political repression of an underclass” (2011:763). Sewald observes that this model pervades the work of numerous sound studies authors, who perceive “a power structure in which a rising middle class attempts to insulate itself from intrusive clamor through a combination of regulation and imposed social etiquette” (*ibid*). In some cases, the application of Attali’s model seems to collapse the possibility for more nuanced views of complex social relations, favoring instead an interpretive approach that prioritizes “resistance” as a central analytical framework. This tendency recalls Michael Brown’s (1996) critique of the over-reliance on the concept of “resistance” as an explanation for group behavioral dynamics and motivations in his contemporaries’ humanities and social sciences writing<sup>4</sup>. As a counter-example to the Attali paradigm, Sewald offers the case of sound trucks used for political campaigning and advertising in the early and mid-twentieth-century United States.

In such cases, Sewald writes, “the operators were not members of a disempowered poor

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<sup>4</sup> Brown (1996) critiques a trend arising in anthropological literature of the late twentieth century in which numerous authors attempt to locate meaning in otherwise mundane aspects of social life by arguing that such practices represent examples of acts of “cultural resistance” against hegemonic power structures. Brown cites “cross-dressing, tattooing, women’s fashions, dirty jokes, and rock videos” as examples of day-to-day activities and practices taken to be acts of “resistance” by such scholars (1996:729).

seeking to challenge the established order but members of the political elite seeking to capture the attention of the working man” (2011:767). She notes that much of the opposition to public loudspeaker use during this period originated in the health sector from medical professionals concerned that noise exposure could “put people at risk of developing one of various diseases lumped together under the rubric of ‘neurasthenia’” (2011:762). Garret Keizer (2010) likewise expresses some degree of skepticism towards scholarship that frames class conflict as the primary motivating force behind noise complaints. Keizer emphasizes that while issues relating to noise have a subjective, social aspect, noise also possesses a measurable, objective quality, as high-intensity sound waves can cause negative health effects in humans.

As such, the phenomenon of noise offers a unique contribution to discussions in the social sciences and humanities about materiality and human engagement with non-human objects and environments (e.g. Riggins 1994; Vannini 2009; Appadurai 1986). Clearly, sound (especially “humanly organized sound,” i.e. music) holds a significant cultural dimension, and its production and reception are subject to variable semiotic processes of interpretation. This represents the dominant theoretical approach in ethnomusicology, which holds the human organization of sound to be a cultural activity in which sound-producing practices and sonic forms themselves carry fluid meanings situated in particular cultural and historical contexts. However, sound is also a physical phenomenon: sound waves move through matter as a medium, and sounds at high intensities can have a whole range of biomedical effects on human bodies. Debates over urban “noise,” therefore, can simultaneously carry both an “objective” dimension (loud sound as a phenomenon with material consequence) as well as a “subjective” one (inter-community tensions underlying

conflicts purported to be about noise). The case of noise in Mumbai cannot be explained solely through reductive arguments of anti-noise crusaders as benevolent protectors of public health and the environment, nor through a critique of the NIMBYism of disgruntled members of the elite classes seeking to ensure the tranquility of their own posh localities at the expense of the rights of the less privileged. A number of interrelated factors demand thorough examination in order to approach an accurate representation of the complexity surrounding and comprising Mumbai's soundscape.

### **NOISE AS EXPRESSION OF INTERCOMMUNITY CONFLICT IN BOMBAY**

Historical, and occasionally contemporary, discourses about noise in Bombay have at times carried clear undertones of antagonisms between groups separated by socioeconomic class, religion, or ethnicity. For example, in 1972, new rules established under the Greater Bombay Police (Regulation of Playing of Music in Streets or Public Places) Act targeted sound sources marked by class and caste rather than by volume, as it specifically empowered police to punish panhandlers, hawkers, and street performers for making noise on city streets (*Times of India* 1972a; 1972b). Such measures would have done little to suppress Bombay's highest-decibel sound sources, opting instead to silence the poor in public spaces. The act also stated that the use of bands and instruments in religious processions, exempting funeral processions, would require written permission from police officials to be taken through public areas, setting the stage for a situation in which institutions in positions of power and influence, such as political parties, would come to have an advantage in obtaining a monopoly on the organization of festival processions (as detailed in the subsequent chapters of this dissertation).

Further evincing the tendency to portray noise as a function of socioeconomic class, a letter written by a Bombay resident in 1970 emphasizes that “the educated section of citizens” would be the ones to take an initiative in acting against noise in the city (Louis 1970). An editorial from 1990 employs far less ambiguity in its characterization of class.

The author writes:

*In the low income, uneducated colonies, where there is virtually a blind and unquestioning faith in religion, the use of loudspeakers for religious purposes is not unwelcome. In their abysmal lives, it becomes a source of solace and hope and for so many early risers works as a sort of alarm.*

*In the middle income colonies, where people are more educated and aware (although still very religious), there is a more discerning attitude. Reactions include irate frustration, indifference replacing irritation due to habitual exposure, pretense of positive approval or inadvertence and among many, a real approval.*

*In the affluent, posh colonies, where people are well educated, active and voluble, denouncement of indiscriminate loudspeaker use reaches a peak. They correctly realise that a call for a more discriminatory use is not unreligious or communally biased in its implication. The colony people organise themselves into groups and put sustained pressure on the police (whose intervention is very often resorted to) and the shrine functionaries, resulting in the daily indiscriminate use reaching a relative low.*

*...Perfunctory curtailment of its use during examinations, violation of meditative sensibilities and lamentable quality (‘trash’ said some irate residents) of the music played sometimes, were common grievances. (Ananda 1990)*

Despite this author’s evident prejudices, he accurately notes a pattern in which members of anti-noise activist circles tend to come from elite backgrounds. Westerners predominated Bombay’s earliest anti-noise activism in the late colonial period, while later activists were frequently well educated with professional careers in fields such as science, engineering, medicine, law, and education. Furthermore, many contemporary and historical anti-noise activists in Mumbai favor the use of Hindi and English languages over the local Marathi and come from ethnic communities with roots outside Maharashtra, positioning this community as incongruous in composition, and at times conflicting in interest, with the

Marathi and Maratha chauvinist populism that dominates the Maharashtrian political landscape.

The Ananda passage quoted above also yields a significant example of a pattern in which objections to noise from musical sources are accompanied by disparagements of, as Ananda phrases it, the “lamentable quality” of the music in question. The most generous interpretation of this pattern suggests that such judgments about the quality of musical “noise” merely constitute irrelevant, but ultimately benign, statements of taste. A more cynical perspective might bear the suspicion that noise complaints fixating on the formal and stylistic qualities of musical sound rather than its decibel level might perhaps conceal more substantial social biases. As Pierre Bourdieu (1984) points out in his work *Distinction: A Social Critique of the Judgment of Taste*, cultural capital, presented in the form of taste, often holds the power to legitimize and reproduce socio-economic categories and divisions. A letter by a mid-twentieth-century Marine Drive resident describes its author’s vexation from the sound of “cheap cinema songs” played at night during festivals in the area (Patuck 1953). The letter’s aesthetic devaluation of popular music is reinforced when it asks rhetorically, “[a]re we, who live in such expensive flats, to undergo days and weeks of torture and get no redress?” (*ibid*), as if a home’s property value somehow correlates to its inhabitant’s susceptibility to irritation. A different letter from the same period presents a similar attitude towards “low culture” musical forms, insisting that “radio sets broadcasting silly film songs of no poetic beauty are a nuisance of the worst type, and their mass production and propagation must stop in the interest of our culture” (Gupta 1949). At times I even detected this manner of condescension in passing remarks by some of my informants with higher socioeconomic status backgrounds. Upon encountering a *banjo*



during a festival playing drums and *bulbul tarang*, one of my informants turned to me and asked cheekily, “Isn’t it hideous?” In a different instance, in reference to a similar style of *banjo* performing in procession with drums and amplified keyboard, an informant declared, “It isn’t even nice, it’s just noise.”

In general, when compared to their predecessors throughout most of the twentieth century, contemporary anti-noise activists seem to possess more awareness and sensitivity towards issues of social difference. In 2003, a SOCLEEN member commented on noise from firecrackers, saying, “[f]or me, Diwali changes Mumbai into several different entities. Communities in various parts have their own characteristics. And factors such as population, traditions and even income levels of a locality will determine how noisy that community is. In my experience, the very rich and very poor make the most noise” (quoted in Kelkar 2003). While this statement may demonstrate insufficient nuance and perhaps even an erroneous assignment of causation in explaining varying levels of firecracker noise in communities differing in class, religion, or ethnicity, it certainly does not bear the same egregious sort of tone-deafness apparent in much of the previously cited twentieth-century anti-noise discourse. One might argue that anti-noise activism is intrinsically paternalistic, or find the anti-noise community inherently elitist and insular due to its overrepresentation of those with economic privilege, English-medium educations, advanced degrees, and higher-caste status. However, the tensions and fissures manifest on any of several planes of social identification and difference in Mumbai cannot comprehensively provide a sufficient explanation for why people continue to complain and take up activism against noise.

Similarly, another facet of the noise phenomenon in Mumbai and throughout India can be located in a pattern of discourse arising during the colonial period that advances a stereotype of Indians as “noisy” in comparison to Westerners. This stereotype had already emerged by the early nineteenth century, propagated in British travelogues and various other accounts of Westerners writing about the unfamiliar sounds they heard in Indian cities. The Scottish naval captain Basil Hall, while landed in Madras during Dasara in 1818, reported hearing “the indescribable din [of] terrified animals [,] the trumpeting of sundry elephants, and the noise of half a dozen Indian bands, all playing tunes at full pitch!” (Rawlinson 1928). Robert Grenville Wallace, a soldier who spent fifteen years in various parts of India, described his impression of a South Indian temple in his 1824 memoirs, writing, “the wild sounds of shrill instruments of music, and the roar of great drums and conch shells, with the disfigured faces of the worshippers, and the abstracted appearance of the Brahmans really bewilder the senses” (1824:331). The English author Emma Roberts, renowned in her time for her Orientalist travel writing, included a passage recounting her auditory experience of Delhi in her 1836 book, *Scenes and Characteristics of Hindostan*:

*No great man – and Delhi is full of personages of pretension, – ever passes along in a state without having his titles shouted out by the stentorian lungs of some of his followers. The cries of the venders of different articles of food, the discordant songs of itinerant musicians, screamed out to the accompaniment of the tom-tom, with an occasional bass volunteered by a chetah, grumbling out in a sharp roar his annoyance at being hawked about the streets for sale, with the shrill distressful cry of the camel, the trumpeting of the elephants, the neighing of horses, and the grumbling of cart-wheels, are sounds which assail the ear from sunrise until sunset in the streets of Delhi.* (1836:158)

During his ten years in India as a missionary in the mid-nineteenth century, an American Presbyterian reverend named Ferdinand de Wilton Ward complained of the “discordant sounds and inharmonious airs” performed daily by musicians at Hindu temples

(1850:223), while Sir Walter Roper Lawrence wrote of “the horrid din of the temples” in reflecting on a trip to Beawar during his years in the Indian Civil Service from the 1870s through the 1890s (1928:41). James Douglas chose similar words in a warning he issued in 1900 to fellow Westerners visiting Bombay, informing them that their nights will “be made hideous by the infernal din of tom-toms” from religious celebrations (1900:294). Another Westerner living in early twentieth-century Bombay offered a more detailed and vivid description of sounds bringing them nightly aggravation:

*It is at night that the gharry drivers become most vociferous, insolent as the sons of Belial, and that one finds it most difficult to escape from what Elia called ‘the measured malice of music.’ One may fly from the bands and gramophones of the Apollo Bandar neighbourhood to the distant fastness of Byculla, but only to hear there the monotonous tom-toming of a band of inexpert Indian musicians. Each quarter of the town has its own peculiar night noises from which there is no escape; even the most secluded corners of Malabar Hill have to endure some noise, if only the snoring of the watchman asleep on the verandah. And at break of dawn there is to be heard the sound of bells calling to the devout and waking the loud voiced crows from their dyspeptic dreams of plunder and gluttony. (Times of India 1912)*

Generations of colonial writers and other public figures sustained this discursive portrayal of Indians as raucous, excitable, and disorderly, gauged against an implied Western propensity for measured composure. In a manner analogous to that described most famously in Edward Said’s *Orientalism* (1978), such recurrent representations could have plausibly undermined public confidence in Indians’ own capacity for rationality and self-governance and contributed to a greater sense of colonial rule as legitimate and just. “Although this is the age of noise do not let us descend to the level of children,” wrote a 1935 editorial (*Times of India* 1935b). “There is nothing a child likes better than making a noise whether it be by shouting or by beating a drum” (*ibid*). Such statements equating noisiness with immaturity correspond with a notable pattern of infantilizing entire

populations of colonial Others as a rhetorical strategy of imperial domination (Nandy 1983; Stella 2007)<sup>5</sup>.

Although Western writers of the colonial period spawned this stereotype as a projection of their essentialist views of cultural difference onto the Indian soundscape, by the early Independence period many Indians themselves seemed to have internalized it, articulating it as an audible component in the imagination of a shared national identity. For example, a 1955 editorial addressing high noise levels during festivals like Diwali assigns blame to a perceived fundamental characteristic of all Indians, asserting that “[a]s a people we tend to be rather insensitive to noise” (*Times of India* 1955). According to another mid-twentieth-century author, Indians “just do not seem to have any anti-noise-consciousness. If we had, we would not talk as loudly as we usually do, not let our children create the pandemonium they normally raise, nor let our radios blare at full-volume or blast our car-horns unnecessarily, nor fire those deafening ‘A-Bomb’ crackers during Diwali” (Bhamgara 1960). “By now I am convinced that we are frankly deaf in this country,” admits a different commentator (Gauba 1966). “We *like* to speak loudly and at great length, never waiting for the others to finish...We take every available opportunity to rig up a loudspeaker, and we invariably turn on the radio at top volume, to share our Carnatic music and *qawallies* and ‘pop’ with our neighbors” (*ibid*). Gauba concludes that, for Indians, “[n]oise in the house, restaurant, road, park is considered good company by most of us, an insurance against loneliness” (*ibid*). In yet another example, a writer holds that “Marshall MacLuhan said

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<sup>5</sup> Such characterizations of colonized populations by colonizers are certainly not limited only to the dynamics of colonial India, and as such, similar examples can likely be found in other geographical and historical contexts as well.

shouting is a form of violence. And we [Indians] seem to relish it a lot" (*Times of India* 1971a).

Some members of older generations of Bombay's anti-noise community would occasionally invoke the "noisy Indians" leitmotif, both in interviews with me as well as in their own past publications and public statements. In a self-published work, one such activist had written:

*Indian culture is essentially very noisy. There is no parallel in the world to the noise pollution generated during festivals and religious celebrations in India. Another point is uncivilized social environment in which our children are brought up. We spit and put red spray after chewing paan and tobacco anywhere on road. We urinate and at times even defecate in public places at our convenience. (We never thought it necessary to build enough public toilets). The worst part is, we don't feel much ashamed of our behaviour. Perpetrators of noise always feel that the people around should bear with them, though inconvenienced! Such is our selfish thinking.*

Such manifestations of this stereotype very frequently include direct comparisons between a perceived Indian sonic obtrusiveness versus a Western disposition toward restraint and repose. Another elder activist, who gained prominence in the anti-noise community during the 1980s and lived for several years of his life in England, described returning to India with de-acclimated ears, where "I felt uneasy about the noisy atmosphere, having been used to quiet life in UK. I remember asking my niece to speak in a little softer voice!" Similarly, one contemporary activist once said "I have travelled to various places overseas where honking is not tolerated and is in fact considered to be rude. One of the European nations had noise as a subject in its election manifesto. In India, we have least concern towards noise," while another activist commented, "I have been to the most developed countries like the US and the UK, and did not hear a single horn anywhere. There, honking is like using bad words. They blow the horn only during an emergency."

Very often, I spoke with individuals in Mumbai who made remarks implying that the impact of noise pollution from country to country might represent a function of linear social progress or national development. For example, I often heard comments about how India “falls behind” Western countries in implementing noise abatement policies, and received questions asking me if there is *still* as much noise pollution in the United States as there is in India, or whether a particular U.S. city had *already* taken steps to reduce noise. Interpreted in one way, such statements seem entirely innocuous, especially when considering noise pollution to be a matter of public health and, therefore, of development. A different interpretation, however, especially in acknowledging a history of “noisy Indian” stereotyping, might suggest that such a view is founded on an almost Hobbesian presupposition of urban populations as inherently obstreperous, subdued only through the exercise of institutional apparatus strengthened through the tide of progress.

#### **NOISE AS AN ISSUE OF EMPIRICAL SIGNIFICANCE**

While “subjective” elements do not appear to be entirely absent in discourse regarding noise in Mumbai, several material factors do in fact contribute to an intensification of decibel levels in the city. First, as mentioned in the previous chapter of this dissertation, the idiosyncratic use of automobile horns in India, compounded by the vast number of cars in populous Indian cities like Mumbai, yields a tremendously loud feature of urban Indian soundscapes. Second, religious festivals play a unique and substantial role in Mumbai’s social and political milieu. In the late nineteenth century, religious festivals provided a platform for Indian political leaders to circumvent British colonial laws prohibiting public assembly, thereby establishing festivals as a core

component of political strategy and, in turn, further expanding the prominence of festivals in day-to-day urban life. Subsequent chapters of this dissertation will examine in greater detail how, over the years, this situation has cultivated a system in which various interests depend politically and financially on the occurrence of several prolonged, elaborate, and increasingly loud festival periods. Third, certain structural qualities of Mumbai may tend to exacerbate the intensity of noise in the city. The growth of Greater Mumbai's population less than one million at the beginning of the twentieth century to nearly twenty million today has transformed the architectural landscape, especially on the densely populated 26 square-mile island of South Mumbai, where new high-rise buildings seem to be built just as rapidly as vast slums are expanding alongside them<sup>6</sup>. Dr. Rashmi Mayur, former head of the Urban Systems Centre at the National Institute for Training in Industrial Engineering (NITIE) recognized this in the mid-seventies, commenting that "[m]ost of the acoustic problems [in Bombay] arose from haphazard and unscientific designing of cities and buildings" (*Times of India* 1976). Similarly, an anti-noise activist informant once told me:

*Within Mumbai, a number of localities are located under flyovers or in areas that are very compact because of their building structure. So because of that, the amount of noise is escalated as against any other city in India. So, say, air pollution is a very huge problem in Delhi. The same thing was down here as well, but we have the advantage of sea breeze, so that pulls it away. But with noise, there's not really any advantage because it's all compact.*

Empirical data does in fact suggest that Mumbai's soundscape is considerably louder than other cities on a global scale, and that its decibel levels could in fact pose a health risk

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<sup>6</sup> Barry Blesser and Linda-Ruth Salter (2007) highlight the importance of architecture in understanding soundscapes. They use the term *spatial acoustics* to refer to the particular process by which a wall, building, or any other sufficiently large physical object actually affects the sounds we hear. *Spatial acoustics* therefore involves the process in which objects such as architecture can change or disrupt sound waves.

for residents. Recognizing the inherent subjectivity and bias in the application of “noise” as a category for understanding soundscapes, is it possible to locate some generalizable threshold of sound pressure level at which point something can definitely be called “noisy?” Health sector organizations have certainly attempted to establish such guidelines. The National Institute for Occupational Safety and Health (NIOSH), a division of the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), offers recommended maximum allowable daily exposure limits to time-weighted noise averages: 8 hours of maximum exposure at 85 dBA, 4 hours at 88 dBA, 2 hours at 91 dBA, 60 minutes at 94 dBA, 30 minutes at 97 dBA, and 15 minutes at 100 dBA (CDC 2016). For some sense of scale, the American Speech-Language-Hearing Association equates 80-90 dBA with the sound of blow-dryers and food processors, 90 dBA with that of subways and motorcycles, 100 dBA with hand drills and pneumatic drills, and 120 dBA with sirens and jet planes taking off (ASHA 2017). The World Health Organization suggests that ambient sound levels should be kept under 30 dBA to remain conducive to healthy sleep (Manuel 2005). Such measurements and guidelines draw upon numerous scientific findings linking prolonged noise exposure to a range of potential negative health effects, including hearing loss, stress, loss of sleep, psychiatric disorders, cardiovascular disease, and impaired growth and development in children (Schell and Denham 2003; Davies et al 2009). Noise, in large enough amounts, can precipitate clear behavioral and physiological responses in human beings.

Historically, Mumbai has ranked first, officially and unofficially, among India’s loudest cities. A set of studies from the Indian Central Pollution Control Board (CPCB) collected data from 35 sound monitoring stations in seven major Indian cities, concluding that the stations in Mumbai yielded the highest average decibel levels from 2011 through



2015<sup>7</sup> (*First Post* 2016; Aggarwal 2016). An ambient noise level study from the Maharashtra Pollution Control Board measured a sample of two days and two nights (outside of festival season) at ten monitoring sites around Mumbai including areas zoned as residential, commercial, industrial, and silence zones. The study reported daytime averages ranging between 56 and 73 dBA with the highest daytime measurement at any of the sites at 92.3 dBA and the lowest daytime measurement at 41 dBA, and nighttime averages ranging from 50 to 77 dBA, with a nighttime maximum of 88 dBA and minimum of 30 dBA (MPCB 2014). However, during festival season, these measurements are significantly louder. For example, during the five-day festival of Diwali, MPCB reports from 2014 to 2016 reported daytime ambient noise level averages between 62 and 91 dBA at fifteen stations across South Mumbai, with nighttime averages ranging between 58 and 86 dBA. The MPCB's highest reported level during those years was 108.7 dBA, while, according to their measurements, the absolute quietest the ambient noise level ever got at any of their South Mumbai stations in three years was 40.1 dBA one night in 2014 at Gloria Church in Byculla (MPCB 2015; 2016a). The MPCB recorded similarly loud measurements at twenty-five stations across Mumbai and its suburbs over five nights during 2016 Ganpati celebrations, with nighttime averages ranging from 62 to 87 dBA (2016b). Festival noise reports published by activists tend to include even higher measurements. Awaaz Foundation recorded levels as high as 117 dBA across 26 locations during Ganpati 2016, and took readings as high as 123 dBA (at Marine Drive) during Diwali celebrations from 2014 to 2016. Neither the MPCB's nor activists' decibel measurements are scientifically

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<sup>7</sup> Mumbai was briefly unseated as the CPCB's loudest city in 2016, after a year of vigorous anti-noise measures in the city (Chatterjee 2016d).

ideal. The MPCB noise monitoring stations consist of sound meters on 3-5 foot tripods, often fixed to the tops of select buildings. The meters are often far away from the sources of sounds being measured and therefore do not always represent an average citizen's experience of noise when moving about the city. In fact, the MPCB chooses its sites specifically because they are located away from direct sound sources. Activists, on the other hand, typically cherry-pick especially loud sounds to measure, seeking out processions, bands, DJs, and fireworks during festivals. Noting that the MPCB measurements tend to err towards lower measurements, while the readings taken by activists like Awaaz tend to present data only on the loudest instances of sound production, one might best assume that actual decibel levels fall somewhere in between.

At their most egregious, festival season decibel level averages, and even louder times of day at certain locations outside of festival season, frequently exceed the exposure limits recommended by public health organizations. For people living or working at or close to street level in Mumbai's louder localities, the annual festival season promises exposure to hours of uninterrupted hazard-level noise for days at a time. Even the most quiet areas surveyed outside of festival season by the MPCB have ambient noise levels that regularly surpass the legal restrictions set by India's Central Environment Ministry with the Noise Pollution (Regulation and Control) Rules of 2000. These rules specify limits of 75 dBA during the day and 70 dBA at night in areas zoned as "industrial," 65 dBA during the day and 55 dBA at night in commercial areas, 55 dBA during the day and 45 dBA at night in

residential areas, and 50 dBA during the day and 40 dBA at night in any of the city's 1200 silence zones designated around hospitals, schools, places of worship, and courts<sup>8</sup>.

Mumbai's high decibel levels, as measured by government officials and activists alike, appear to date back to the 1970s. Subsequent chapters will reveal why the timing of such decibel level increases corresponds with key changes in festival organization. In 1971, India's National Physical Laboratory (NPL) conducted a survey recording decibel levels in various locations throughout Delhi, Bombay, and Calcutta. The NPL research team found that the locations in Bombay had the highest average decibel levels, which they attributed in part to Bombay's tall buildings. Taking measurements at Kemp's Corner, Opera House, Kalbadevi, and Bhendi Bazar, NPL recorded daytime averages between 93 and 104 dB, and nighttime averages between 74 and 98 dB (*Times of India* 1971b). NPL published another study in 1977, which similarly found that "Bombay has the unenviable distinction of being the noisiest city in India, with the average level varying between 75 dB and 90 dB" (*Times of India* 1977). In 1986, a noise survey conducted in Delhi, Bombay, and Calcutta by the All India Institute of Medical Sciences claimed that "[t]he noise level never falls below 60 decibels in the three cities" (*Times of India* 1986a).

Empirical evidence also suggests that the intensity of sound in Indian cities has measurable injurious consequences on the health of urban populations.<sup>9</sup> The World Health

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<sup>8</sup> The Noise Pollution (Regulation and Control) Rules specify recommended penalties for violations of the rules consisting of a fine of up to Rs one *lakh* (100,000), five years in prison, or both. However, I have found no evidence of such penalties ever being issued.

<sup>9</sup> Outside the realm of public health, high decibel levels appear to have some other tangible consequences for Indian cities like Mumbai. For example, Dr. Dinesh Bhatt of the International Bio-Acoustics Council and Gurukula Kangri University in Haridwar, Uttarakhand says that the noise of Indian cities has become so high that it is drowning out the mating calls of some male birds, preventing them from communicating with their

Organization found that disabling hearing loss affects five times as many children in South Asia (2.4%) than in “high-income regions” like the United States, Western Europe, and Japan (WHO 2012; 2013). A 2009 study suggested that 63 million Indians “suffer from significant hearing loss” (Garg *et al* 2009:79), while also reporting a serious scarcity in the number of ENTs and otologists in the country, totaling only around 9000 throughout all of India. As Kumar (1997) suggests, India’s high rates of hearing loss, particularly among children, disproportionately affect poor communities. An informant once told me, with reference to Mumbai:

*So, for people who do not belong to the elite society – of course those belonging to the elite society are living much above the ground – so it’s very funny, Bombay’s spread across like this; that everybody’s just living on ground. The slums, the middle class, the lower class. Everyone who is living on ground are susceptible to a number of issues when it comes to [noise] pollution. But on the other hand, as these buildings rise and people are also rising in economic scale, they’re going higher and higher in those buildings, so someone living on the twentieth floor or nineteenth floor has hardly any problems compared to someone on the first ten floors. And that’s how Mumbai’s living. So, if a person’s living on the twentieth floor as compared to someone who’s living on the first floor, you will understand the range and the difference of lifestyle they have vis-à-vis the number of problems that they’re facing.*

A study by the Centre for Occupational and Environmental Health at Maulana Azad Medical College in New Delhi established a causal link between that city’s environmental conditions, including noise pollution, and high levels of early hearing loss (Chandra 2013), while researchers at the International Institute of Sleep Sciences in Thane attribute an increase in reported sleep disorders throughout Greater Mumbai in part to urban environmental factors including noise (Fernandes 2015a)<sup>10</sup>.

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female counterparts and successfully reproducing, and causing ecological disruption more generally by inhibiting the avian reproductive process (Nagrath 2015).

<sup>10</sup> In 2012, the Indian Supreme Court stated that individuals have a basic human right to undisturbed sleep, offering the declaration in connection with a ruling regarding actions that had been taken by police officers in New Delhi to disrupt the sleep of activists gathered

## **CONCLUSION**

The case of noise in Mumbai defies simple explanation on the basis of reductive hypotheses suggesting that complaints over noise are merely expressions of a resentful elite class in response to acts of sonic “resistance” on the part of a subaltern group. The circumstances of Mumbai’s soundscape issues, in addition to the extraordinarily high decibel levels involved, seem to suggest that a more nuanced explanation is more appropriate, specifically one taking into account the capacity for sound to have measurable physical effects on human bodies when present at sufficient volumes and for prolonged duration. Furthermore, concerns over noise have in fact placed activists in antagonistic relationships not with the more disadvantaged residents of Mumbai, but, to the contrary, with some of the city’s most powerful individuals and organizations.

As the following chapters of this dissertation will reveal, Mumbai’s political elite have tapped into the power of loud sound during religious festivals. Politicians and other influential individuals in the city have come to rely on the production of loud sound as a strategy of achieving and maintaining power, and anti-noise activists have in fact been among the few voices to any notable challenge to this new hegemony in the urban soundscape.

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in Ramlila Maidan to participate in a demonstration led by the yogi and political leader Ramdev (Mahapatra 2012). “Sleep is essential for a human being to maintain the delicate balance of health necessary for its very existence and survival,” the court said, concluding that sleep is “therefore, a fundamental and basic requirement without which the existence of life itself would be in peril” (quoted in Mahapatra 2012). In theory, the precedent established by the Supreme Court’s ruling could hold future legal implications with regard to litigation filed in response to noise violations.

## CHAPTER FOUR: “Vote Bank” Politics, Festival *Mandals*, and “Religious Noise”

### INTRODUCTION

As discussed in Chapter One, Bal Gangadhar Tilak’s *sarvajanic* Ganeshotsav effectively established an archetype for the modern public Hindu festival in Bombay. One particularly significant feature of the public Ganpati festival’s influence was the central role played by festival *mandals*<sup>1</sup>, the committees responsible for funding and executing the various tasks required for events during a festival. Festival *mandals* were not an entirely innovative concept introduced only through Tilak’s reinvention of Ganpati. However, their size and influence within communities grew due to the unprecedented scale of his *sarvajanic* festival, and expanded even further through the intensification of festivals beginning in the late twentieth century, as this chapter will reveal. Since the time of Tilak’s Ganeshotsav, festival *mandals* formed on the basis of locality, focusing on the production of events by and for each *mandal*’s own neighborhood or *chawl* (a kind of residential

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<sup>1</sup> In Hindi and other South Asian languages, the word *maṇḍal* is a generic term that can translate variously as “circle,” “group,” “board,” “disk,” “cycle,” or “system.” A common term for “solar system,” for example, is *saur maṇḍal*. *Maṇḍal* derives directly from the Sanskrit word *maṇḍala*, meaning “circle.” The word *maṇḍal* therefore appears frequently throughout South Asian languages in many contexts with various referents, including miscellaneous sorts of committees and organizations. Festival *maṇḍals* thus represent just one specific kind of *maṇḍal*, and just one particular usage of the term more generally. In the context of discourse regarding modern festivals, speakers frequently forgo the inclusion of a grammatical modifier (e.g. “festival *maṇḍal*”), and simply say *maṇḍal*, which is generally understood in such contexts to signify “a committee that plans festival events” without eliciting any confusion. For that reason, the word *maṇḍal* appears at times throughout this chapter and subsequent chapters without any modifier with the assumption that the reader will recognize its implied specificity. Additionally, although the word *maṇḍal* contains the retroflex consonant “ḍ” and is pronounced as such in spoken parlance, it is seldom written using the diacritic mark in Indian discourse and therefore this dissertation follows the more commonly accepted usage.

building). Each *mandal*, therefore, became responsible for collecting funds from local residents and business, installing a *murti* (idol) in a prominent space within the neighborhood, planning a *mela* for the community, and performing various other functions on a localized scale. Because individual *mandals* operated within their own given neighborhoods and *chawls*, the composition of *mandals* often came to reflect the demographics of their respective localities, which were often enclaves for members of a particular caste group or for migrant workers sharing the same village of origin.

This chapter narrates a history of the role that *mandals* have played in shaping Mumbai's festival soundscape. Ultimately, I will detail a trend beginning in the late twentieth century in which political parties, especially Shiv Sena and other parties with similar Hindu nationalist and Marathi-language chauvinist platforms, have aligned themselves with festival *mandals* into order to reap an electoral advantage through using festival events as opportunities to appeal to key "vote banks." The loud musical performances during festival events, which take place in open-air public spaces selected for their centrality in residential neighborhoods, draw in mass numbers of young potential voters. Political parties, along with the *mandals* they sponsor, therefore have an incentive to suppress the enforcement of noise laws and the efforts of anti-noise activists. In order to fully understand this connection that has developed between *mandals*, politicians, and Mumbai's urban soundscape, it is first necessary to examine the significance of the caste category of "Maratha" and the political actors that have unified under it. By winning the support of the Maratha community in Bombay and throughout Maharashtra, Shiv Sena rose to power and thus proved the efficacy of their strategy of building and mobilizing their base by investing funds in festival sponsorship. This represented a seismic shift both in local

politics as well as Bombay's urban soundscape, as Hindu festivals became the focus of a sonic arms race between political patrons.

### **THE CATEGORY OF "MARATHA" AND THE CONSOLIDATION OF MARATHA POLITICAL POWER**

In contemporary usage, the term "Maratha," or "Maratha-Kunbi," typically denotes a grouping of castes (*jati*) that represents the largest caste group in Maharashtra, and has come to hold political dominance in the state for much of the last century. As some historians of caste have suggested (e.g. Dirks 2001), in many cases modern caste categories that appear rigid and long-standing, including that of "Maratha," in fact developed during the colonial period amidst massive social change, large-scale migrations, new patterns of socio-economic mobility, and colonial efforts towards establishing systems of social classification. The category of "Maratha" has also come to evoke a romanticized warrior legacy symbolizing a particular sort of regional unity and fervent resistance to perceived outsiders. This symbolic value that "Maratha" connotes is generally derived from a nostalgic view of the Maratha Empire, which controlled great swaths of the Indian subcontinent from the seventeenth century into the nineteenth century. More specifically, this romanticized image of the Marathas has been cultivated through popular depictions of Shivaji, the first Maratha *chhatrapati* (king) celebrated for his opposition to the Mughal Empire, the Islamic dynasty that reigned over large territories in South Asia beginning in the sixteenth century until its slow process of decline during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries.

In the time of Shivaji, the designation "Maratha" seems to have been understood at least in part as a category relating to military service, rather than solely a reference to one's



*jati* status (Deshpande 2004). While some authors clearly identify Shivaji and the Bhonsle clan to which he was born as Marathas by caste (e.g. Gore 2000), Deshpande suggests that Shivaji himself had “uncertain *jati* origins” while being perceived as unquestionably Maratha insofar as the term’s connotation outside of *jati* (2004:10), although she does also note that upward caste mobility through military service would not have been uncommon at the time. *Chhatrapati* reign over the Maratha Empire ceased in the early eighteenth century, with the fifth Maratha *chhatrapati* in the line of Shivaji effectively relinquishing his power to his Brahmin prime minister (*peshwa*), thereby initiating the period of Peshwa rule over the Maratha Empire in which power was passed down through the Peshwa’s Chitpavan Brahmin lineage. During the Peshwa period, which lasted into the early nineteenth century, the Brahmin elite emphasized and ossified *jati* boundaries and increasingly classified non-Brahmin groups as *shudras* (laborers), the lowest stratum of the four-tiered system known as *varna*. After the last Peshwa ruler surrendered to the British East India Company in 1818, opportunities for shifts and contestations pertaining to *jati* and *varna* increased while the balance of power between Brahmins and non-Brahmins entered a period of notable transition.

Rosalind O’Hanlon (1985) discusses the distinction between the constituent parts of the compound category of “Maratha-Kunbi” as it was used throughout Marathi-speaking villages in the nineteenth century. At that time, O’Hanlon suggests, *kunbi* did not in itself denote a caste or sub-caste, as *kunbis* were not an endogamous group. Rather, the term *kunbi*, or “cultivator,” described “all those who till or otherwise work on the land, and who are no other caste” (1985:16). Marathas, by contrast, enjoyed a somewhat higher status than *kunbis*, although still seen as belonging within “the larger complex of peasant castes”

(O'Hanlon 1985:17). Furthermore, O'Hanlon points out that the boundary between Maratha and *kunbi* remained somewhat inconsistent and fluid. For those who could identify as Maratha rather than *kunbi*, the distinction implicitly offered some important privileges. Most notably, the category of Maratha could possibly confer a higher *varna* status, with Marathas in certain contexts more likely to be accepted as *kshatriya* (warriors and rulers) and *kunbis* considered to be of the lower order of *shudra*<sup>2</sup>. The nature of ideas regarding mobility between *kunbi* and Maratha is demonstrated by a saying that "when a kunbi prospers he becomes a Maratha" (O'Hanlon 1983:10). The boundaries between Marathas and *kunbis* became less discernible in the nineteenth century due to a common practice in which *kunbis* took on Maratha family names, possibly in keeping with a Deccan tradition of "calling a chief's retainers by the chief's surname," (O'Hanlon 1985:18) or perhaps as a way for *kunbi* families to augment the perception of their status and "[persuade] established, and perhaps less prosperous, Maratha families to form marriage connections with them" (*ibid*). O'Hanlon explains that "the most salient features of social change amongst non-Brahman groups" in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century included "the gradual emergence of a collective 'Maratha' identity and name for many non-Brahman cultivating castes [and] the disappearance from social usage of the term *kunbi*" (1983:33). Colonial writings and bureaucracy further reinforced these trends by frequently using the terms *kunbi* and Maratha interchangeably (Deshpande 2004).

In the late nineteenth century, amidst patterns of large-scale migration of Marathas and other non-Brahmins to cities (Deshpande 2004), members of non-Brahmin castes

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<sup>2</sup> Although O'Hanlon argues that some Marathas succeeded in gaining recognition as *kshatriya*, generally speaking Maratha is considered a *shudra* caste category in most contemporary contexts.

increasingly expressed resentment and outrage over the consolidated power held by Brahmins in western Indian since the Peshwa period. These protests of Brahmin dominance gave rise to what would become known as the non-Brahmin movement, in which Maratha leaders assumed a key role. “The Marathas joined the Satyasodhak Samaj and other non-Brahmin organisations to spearhead anti-Brahmin agitations,” writes Mohanty (2009:64). “It is argued that the Satyasodhak movement was dominated by Maratha-Kunbis asserting themselves as a community against the Brahmins” (*ibid*). Marathas also founded organizations like the Kshatradharma Pratipadak Sabha, “a Maratha society active in Bombay in the 1880s and 1890s, which set out to restore to all Marathas what it saw as their rightful position as the leaders and protectors of the land and people of Maharashtra” (O’Hanlon 1983:6). The non-Brahmin movement yielded a tendency to frame Marathas in oppositional relation to Brahmins: two rival caste groups vying for regional political dominance.

As O’Hanlon notes, groups of Hindus from various caste communities historically expressed affinity with Shivaji and the Marathas of a bygone era, de-emphasizing any caste associations of these historical figures (1983). However, beginning in the late nineteenth century, when Brahmin leaders like Bal Gangadhar Tilak deployed images of Shivaji in an attempt to mobilize a sense of supra-caste Hindu unity throughout the region, many non-Brahmins objected, noting historical instances that set Shivaji in direct conflict with the Brahmins of his time (Deshpande 2004:15). It was during this period that ideas first took shape suggesting that non-Brahmins, particularly those identifying as Maratha, “constituted a unitary social group” defined vis-à-vis Brahmins (O’Hanlon 1983:7).

In addition to his use of Shivaji imagery, Tilak similarly attempted to draw upon the regional popularity of the god Ganpati with his now-renowned cooption of the Ganesh Chaturthi festival at the end of the nineteenth century in order to strengthen relations between low-caste Hindus and regional Brahmin elites. An editorial written by Tilak and published in his newspaper, *Kesari*, in September 1894 explicitly demonstrates his desire for Maratha cooperation:

*It is important that the Vaishyas, the Sali (weaver), the Mali (gardener), the Rangari (painter), Sutar (carpenter), Kumbhar (potter), Sonar (goldsmith), Vani (trader) castes on whom the Maratha society rests have participated in the festival. Having worked the entire day, these people often while away time chitchatting, drinking and are found in gutters and Tamasha<sup>3</sup>, thus neglecting their families. If at least on these days – they spend their leisure worshipping Ganesh, a lot could be achieved. Brahmins have, no doubt contributed to the subscriptions but the grandeur we must remember could be added to this public festival because of our Maratha brethren. (quoted in Rege 2014:273)*

The efforts of Tilak and other Brahmin elites to form alliances across lines of *varna* and *jati* via Ganeshotsav often fell short, however. As Cashman (1970) notes, individual Ganpati *melas* were typically organized and attended based on locality within a city, which in turn were strongly divided by caste community. Any attempts to utilize the festival to connect Brahmins and low-caste Hindus were hindered from the beginning simply because members of different caste communities did not attend the same events, nor did they participate in the same *mandals* which were responsible for planning those events and were similarly attached to particular neighborhoods and thus *jati* communities.

Cashman also argues that Brahmin leaders failed to offer any meaningful basis for cross-caste unity within the context of Ganpati aside from the resentment of Muslims,

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<sup>3</sup> *Tamasha* is a form of theater found throughout Maharashtra. It has often been performed as street theater, and has been historically associated with performers from low-status *shudra* and Scheduled Caste backgrounds.

pointing out “Tilak’s inability to discover political issues which would appeal to all sections of society” (1970:361). As a result, over the years non-Brahmin *melas* tended to retain a more purely religious nature in the lyrical content of their songs as well as their imagery, while Brahmin *melas* incorporated more explicitly political and nationalistic themes. One verse sung in a Brahmin *mela*, for example, enjoins listeners to:

*Come out of your homes, O courageous ones of the Maharata country,  
Where are the weapons that once came out against the Muslims?  
Why do you not bring them out now against the gora [Westerner]?  
Have you lost your masculinity?  
Rise, be a true man, pick up  
Your weapons And, attack the enemy.* (quoted in Rege 2014:275)

By the early 1920s, contrary to goals of Tilak and other Brahmins to use Ganeshotsav to gain support from low-caste Hindus, the festival itself had actually become a primary site for the non-Brahmin movement’s contestation of power. In 1918, Tilak elicited hostility among some lower caste Hindus after *Kesari* published editorials expressing opposition to a bill introduced by Vithalbhai Patel into the Imperial Legislative Council which proposed extending legal validity to marriages between members of different caste groups (Rege 2014). The *Kesari* editorials took the position that *anuloma* marriages (marriages between upper caste men and lower caste women) should be allowed but not *pratiloma* marriages (those between lower caste men and upper caste women), thereby fueling non-Brahmin sentiment and resentment towards Tilak among lower caste *tarun mandals* (youth groups). This resentment of Brahmins found expression through a new innovation during the celebration of Ganeshotsav beginning in 1922: the *Chhatrapati mela*. The *Chhatrapati mela*, a specifically non-Brahmin event, emphasized a romanticized view of Maratha vitality and strength, with youth participating in the *mela* dressing up like Maratha soldiers from the time of Shivaji.

Music represented an integral component of the *Chhatrapati melas*, which featured songs with words that celebrated Maratha identity and derided Brahmins. One popular *Chhatrapati mela* song, for example, unfavorably contrasted the Brahmin Peshwa rule over the Maratha state with that of its first king, Shivaji:

*Awaken O Marathas, this is a time of freedom, awaken to your glory!  
Shiva-ba, who protected our faith is called Shudra by the beggar priests  
...The beggar priests robbed you of your freedom  
...And brought the glory of Satara to dust  
Shivaji is our source of joy and spirit.* (quoted in Deshpande 2004:17).

Other popular songs performed during the *Chhatrapati melas* of the 1920s included “Naktanchya Bazar” (“the market of those with distorted noses”), which “critiqued the Brahmins for spending Rs 15,000 on installing a statue of Tilak... [and] portrayed the Brahmins as usurpers of social and political power in the colonial society rather than what they posed to be, leaders of nationalism,” and “Shivaji Amucha Raja” (“Shivaji Our King”), which “reappropriated Shivaji from the Hindu nationalists and mapped history as a struggle... between the Brahmin and the *bahujans* [‘majority’]” (Rege 2014:277). Rege writes that the *Chhatrapati melas* of the 1920s gained so much momentum among groups of non-Brahmin youth that by 1924 they “overshadowed the popularity of the Brahmin Ganesha Melas in Pune city” (2014:277).

As a site for the contestation of power between Brahmins and lower-caste Hindus (particularly Marathas), the *Chhatrapati melas* of the 1920s at times provided occasion for the outbreak of physical violence. Gail Omvedt claims that during the *Chhatrapati melas*, “[f]racases had begun to occur even in 1922, by 1924 riots were breaking out every night in front of Gaikwadwada [the building known today as Kesari Wada in Pune], and from 1925 to 1927 it took rigid control by the police to keep the festival peaceful” (1976:236). In one

case, authorities in Poona blamed a riot in September 1924 on a *Chhatrapati mela* event organized by the Satyashodhak Samaj, an anti-Brahmin group founded by activist Jyotiba Phule (*Times of India* 1924b). Just a few days later, the same members of that *Chhatrapati mela* started a fight while attempting to break into the Poona office of the *Kesari* newspaper (*ibid*), which had taken a firm stance against *Chhatrapati melas*, publishing disdainful editorials that argued that *melas* should exclusively be of a religious rather than political nature (Rege 2014). According to reports, the *mela* members that attempted forcible entry into the *Kesari* office were allegedly “singing songs full of stinging sarcasm and bitter abuse of Brahmins” amidst the disturbance (*Times of India* 1924b).

The non-Brahmin movement set the stage for the emergence of a new era of Maratha socio-political prominence in the early twentieth century, as increasing numbers of upwardly mobile non-Brahmins came to identify with the caste category of Maratha and presented a more unified challenge to the dominance of Brahmins within regional political institutions. With the expansion of non-Brahmin Hindus claiming Maratha *jati* status, the caste cluster of Maratha-Kunbi came to represent a formidable demographic throughout western India. Although the Indian Census stopped recording demographic data regarding caste in 1931, more recent estimates have come to suggest that Marathas might make up somewhere around 32 percent of the population in modern Maharashtra (Dahiwalé 1995; Joshi 2014).

In the early decades of the twentieth century, Brahmin politicians dominated political institutions like the Bombay Legislative Council (BLC), but a power shift was already perceptible by the 1920s, when growing numbers of non-Brahmins were elected to the BLC and won control of various district governing boards throughout the region

(Dahiwale 1995). “Until 1930 the Congress Party was under the control of the educated urban-based Brahmins and business elites of Bombay,” writes Mohanty (2009:64).

“Gradually they tried to absorb Maratha elites, considering their rising dominance in the countryside. To accommodate the interest of Maratha elites, rural populism became a strong theme in the campaign rhetoric.” Brahmins continued to lose ground during the years immediately following Independence. The Bombay Tenancy and Agricultural Lands Act, passed in 1948, transferred large amounts of village land from landholders to cultivators, destabilizing Brahmin control of rural areas across Bombay State (Dahiwale 1995; Mohanty 2009). Moreover, the assassination of Mahatma Gandhi (by the Chitpavan Brahmin Nathuram Godse, a member of Hindu Mahasabha and former member of Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh) that same year aroused tremendous hostility directed towards Brahmins, especially in rural areas, resulting in many Brahmin families fleeing villages for cities and some Brahmin politicians abruptly retiring from politics (*ibid*). Studies from subsequent decades would suggest that Marathas benefited greatly from the landholding vacuum resulting from the Brahmin withdrawal from villages, coming to control up to 50 to 70 percent of rural land in villages throughout Maharashtra by the 1970s and 1980s (Dahiwale 1995).

Maratha politicians, according to Mohanty, managed to wrest control of the Congress Party (Indian National Congress, or INC) away from Brahmins in the mid-twentieth century “by accommodating the elites from other competing caste groups such as the Malis, Dhangers, Vanjaris, Mahars and institutionalised their own ideology of agrarian development” (2009:64-65). In the 1960s, cooperative societies in Maharashtra, particularly those operating in sugar production and agriculture, became closely aligned



with the politics of state government. Marathas dominated these cooperatives, thereby reinforcing their political control in the state (*ibid*). After the 1962 elections, the members of the ruling Congress Party in the Maharashtra state legislature were 16% Brahmin and 66% Marathas (Dahiwale 1995). Such trends at the state level mirrored those at the local *panchayat* (village assembly) level throughout Maharashtra in the late twentieth century, as Marathas similarly dominated the *panchayati raj* system (Dahiwale 1995).

While members of the Maratha community experienced tremendous success during the mid-twentieth century in their consolidation of power in the political arena of Maharashtra, new developments emerging by the end of the century would once again disrupt the status quo with respect to the relationship between caste and the state's party politics. In the first three decades following Independence, Marathas had unquestionably achieved unrivaled dominance within the center-left Congress Party in Maharashtra, and likewise the voting patterns of Marathas indicated their overwhelming support for the party (Palshikar and Deshpande 1999). This robust connection between Marathas and the Congress Party began to erode in the late 1970s and early 1980s, however. Tense relations between Indian Prime Minister Indira Gandhi and Maratha Congress Party leaders alienated some Marathas from the party (Palshikar and Deshpande 1999). Even more Marathas abandoned the Congress Party in 1978 to follow politician Sharad Pawar, who left the party to become elected Chief Minister of Maharashtra as part of a coalition party known as the Progressive Democratic Front. The Congress party underwent a schism, giving rise to Pawar's new party known as Indian Congress (Socialist), also known as Congress (S), in addition to the older INC, distinguished from the splinter party as Congress (I). With Congress (I) still vulnerable during the decade following the schism, in 1987

Pawar once again shifted allegiances, abandoning Congress (S) and the coalition from which he had drawn support in order to rejoin Congress (I). This tumult within the Maharashtra political establishment during the 1980s left a power vacuum that ultimately benefited the state's emergent extreme right party, Shiv Sena, which was increasingly posing an evident risk to the INC, particularly after forming a regional alliance with the right-wing Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) (Palshikar 2004:1502). Palshikar (2004) suggests that younger Maratha voters who had supported Pawar's exit from Congress in 1978 due to their own frustrations with the party's leadership may have offered a significant new base of support for the Shiv Sena once Pawar then returned to the INC, as these voters remained entrenched in their opposition to the Congress Party's old guard.

### **THE RISE OF SHIV SENA**

Shiv Sena first emerged during the mid-1960s in the wake of significant changes in the region. The Bombay State, which had been established following Independence in 1947 based on the geography of British-administered Bombay Presidency, was formally dissolved in 1960, with its lands divided into the new states of Gujarat and Maharashtra. The two new states were formed on the basis of language, with the preponderance of residents in Gujarat and Maharashtra being speakers of those states' new official languages, Gujarati and Marathi, respectively. This remapping of political geography along the lines of linguistics followed a pattern occurring nationally in India, with the passage of the States Reorganisation Act in 1956 and the subsequent formation of Telugu-speaking Andhra Pradesh, Malayalam-speaking Kerala, and the reconstitution of several other states like Tamil-speaking Madras State (later renamed Tamil Nadu) to accommodate greater

linguistic homogeneity. While language had for a long time been a point of political dissension in India (e.g. the anti-Hindi agitation that took place in South India earlier in the twentieth century), the reorganization of the states endowed issues of language and ethnicity with a new level of significance in the politics of identification within states.

Shiv Sena and its founder, Bal Thackeray, exploited the frustration and despair felt by many young people during a period of acute under-employment in Maharashtra's cities. They assigned blame for the hardships of Marathi-speakers on perceived ethnolinguistic outsiders like South Indians and Gujaratis, as well as leveling critiques against communists and Muslims (Heuze 1992; Mehta 2017). The group's name, "Army of Shivaji," invokes the image of the Chhatrapati Shivaji to convey the Sena's commitment to their "sons of the soil" platform. Thackeray, originally a political cartoonist, drew inspiration from militant Hindu nationalist groups like Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS) and became known throughout his political career for speaking favorably about the ideas and policies of Adolf Hitler, at times comparing Hitler's views of Jews with his own views of Muslims (*ibid*). The militant ideas espoused by the nascent Shiv Sena found frequent expression in the form of physical violence during the 1960s and 1970s, including attacks on communists and South Indian migrant workers (Katzenstein et al 1998) and the role of Shiv Sainiks in the violence between Hindus and Muslims during the Bhiwandi riots of 1970 (Hansen 2001).

In its early years, Shiv Sena held limited appeal to most Maratha voters. Although the Shiv Sena disavowed casteism in their politics, the high caste status of many Sena leaders, such as Bal Thackeray himself (born into the elite Chandraseniya Kayashta Prabhu community), failed to endear Shiv Sena to many Marathas who still identified with the legacy of the non-Brahmin movement and perennially demonstrated their loyalty to the

Congress Party at election time (Lele 1995). Sena criticisms of Marathas for their monopoly over rural economic institutions further alienated members of the community (Palshikar 2004). Largely overlooked by the state's formidable population of Marathas, Shiv Sena, despite its media visibility and grass-roots notoriety, ultimately represented a limited presence in Maharashtra's electoral politics until the 1980s and 1990s.

Among those factors that shifted the tide of Maharashtra state politics in the late twentieth century, the weakening of the secular left after Sharad Pawar's transition from Congress (I) to Congress (S) and back again seemed to have produced a power vacuum that presented a rare opportunity upon which Shiv Sena could lay the foundation of its eventual success. More crucially, Shiv Sena further strengthened its place in the state political sphere through its alliance with the BJP and its prioritization of Hindu nationalism within the party platform during the 1980s (Palshikar and Deshpande 1999). "The Shiv Sena's decisive turn to Hindutva," writes Lele, arose "when it established its political alliance as a dominant partner with the BJP" (1995:1525). It was at that time, he continues, that "the declining hegemony of elite Marathas had them to look upon militant Hindutva as a possible alternative ideology to help entrench their dominance over an increasingly differentiated and self-conscious group of subaltern castes" (*ibid*). Shiv Sena managed to thrive within a moment of economic and political uncertainty driving a collective pivot away from the relative secularism that had remained prominently represented in government through the INC since Independence. "In a sense," Palshikar explains, "the Shiv Sena was only occupying the oppositional space vacated by Sharad Pawar but in doing so, it was transforming the space into the base of militant, anti-Muslim communalism (2004:1499). In 1985, having intensified their Hindu nationalist rhetoric, Shiv Sena for the

first time won control over Bombay's city government, the Bombay Municipal Corporation (BMC, known as the Brihanmumbai Municipal Corporation since 1996).

In December 1992, Hindu nationalists demolished the Babri Mosque which stood since the 1500s at the location alleged to be the birthplace of the Hindu god Rama in Ayodhya (Uttar Pradesh). News of the event prompted wave after wave of retaliatory violence between Hindus and Muslims, with particularly severe riots occurring in Bombay through January 1993. Muslims numbered disproportionately high among the roughly 1000 deaths that resulted from the rioting (Mehta 2017). In the aftermath of the violence, mass migrations of Muslims out of Bombay drastically transformed the city's geography and demography (Hansen 2000). Bal Thackeray, following the destruction of the Babri Masjid, stoked feelings of communal anxiety and dissent with statements like, "a Muslim, whichever country he belongs to, is first a Muslim. Nation is of secondary importance to him" (quoted in Mehta 2004:52). Scholars, journalists, and international organizations generally agree upon the key role that Shiv Sainiks played in the atrocities, and in fact the Srikrishna Commission Report, which had been ordered by the state government, offered similar conclusions. According to the report, the "Shiv Sena pramukh Bal Thackeray, like a veteran general, commanded his loyal Shiv Sainiks to retaliate by organized attacks against Muslims...The attacks on Muslims by the Shiv Sainiks were mounted with military precision, with lists of establishments and voters' lists in hand" (quoted in Mehta 2004:81). The report resulted in no formal legal action, however, since the government of Maharashtra, which came under Shiv Sena control after the 1995 elections, determined that an inquiry like the Srikrishna report cannot constitute any basis for prosecution (Baxi 1996; Waah 1996; Albuquerque 1998).

The 1992-92 riots generated a sense of disillusionment and frustration within Bombay's Muslim community with regard to the Congress Party. Thomas Blom Hansen quotes one Muslim resident of Bombay who told him, "Congress failed to protect Babri Masjid and now the police is killing us. Who can we believe in?" (quoted in Hansen 2000:261). Furthermore, Mehta notes that Shiv Sena somehow won 5% of Muslim votes in the 1995 elections, which one of his informants explained by saying, "when you give the thief the keys to the treasury he'll never steal" (quoted in 2004:64). I myself felt a sense of astonishment and confusion the first time I saw Muslim men and women marching along in a Shiv Sena rally. Perhaps their rationale aligned with that expressed by Mehta's interlocutor.

In addition to winning a small amount of support from Muslims, the success of the Shiv Sena-BJP in the 1995 elections might also be attributed in part to the alliance's growing support among Maratha voters, who were steadily drifting away from the Congress Party. While Congress held support among 40% of Marathas in Maharashtra state at the time, Maratha support for Shiv Sena had grown to 26%. In Bombay, where Shiv Sena had already been in power from 1985 to 1992 and once again gained control of the BMC in 1996, the shift was much more stark, with 85% of Marathas having supported Shiv Sena-BJP (Palshikar 1996). Maratha groups like the Maratha Mahasangh increasingly endorsed candidates from Shiv Sena during elections (*Times of India* 1994), and by 1998, 60% of Shiv Sainiks in the Maharashtra legislature were themselves Marathas (Kulkarni-Apte 1998), although 20 years later, this number has gone down to about 40% (Mishra and Mahamulkar 2018), which is still proportionately greater than the Maratha population in the state.

The Shiv Sena-BJP alliance lost control of the Maharashtra Legislative Assembly from 1999 until 2014<sup>4</sup>, but their success in attracting many Maratha voters disrupted longstanding Congress Party strategy in the state. As Palshikar and Birmal wrote in 2004, “[t]he two traditional bastions of Congress, the Maratha vote and rural base, do not exist any longer. The Shiv Sena and BJP have emerged as major claimants for the support of these sections” (2004:5469). Many Marathas supported Shiv Sena over the Congress Party in 2004, expressing opposition to the Congress government’s enactment of employment reservations for OBCs (Other Backwards Castes) in government jobs as well as in co-operatives like sugar factories, dairies, and textile mills, thereby weakening Maratha dominance in these fields (*Times of India* 2004b). In the 2010s, amidst trends of Marathas losing ground in education and employment throughout the state, large-scale protests have demanded that government reservations be extended to Marathas (Kishore 2018). Although Bal Thackeray had historically opposed reservations based on caste, by 2014, two years after Thackeray’s death, the Shiv Sena’s reliance on Maratha voters had grown such that they were forced to recognize that it would “be a political suicide to oppose Maratha reservation” (Joshi 2014). Party leaders refrained from taking a firm stance on the issue until 2018, when Shiv Sena formally offered support for Maratha reservations. Uddhav Thackeray was quoted as saying, “[w]hatever may be the criteria, the Maratha community’s demands should be met immediately” (quoted in *First Post* 2018), while another Sena leader candidly stated that the party’s “chief concern now is to retain the Sena’s Maratha

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<sup>4</sup> In 1999, the Shiv Sena-BJP alliance won 125 seats in the Maharashtra Legislative Assembly. While Congress only won 75 seats, they formed an alliance after the election with Pawar’s Nationalist Congress Party (NCP) for a total of 133 seats. In 2004, the Sena-BJP alliance won a combined 116 seats, while the Congress-NCP alliance won 140 seats, and in 2009, Shiv Sena-BJP won 91 seat and Congress-NCP won 144.

vote bank in the hinterland in the face of a strident electoral threat from the Congress-NCP combine” (quoted in Mishra and Mahamulkar 2018).

### **POLITICAL SPONSORSHIP OF FESTIVAL MANDALS**

As mentioned in the introduction to this chapter, since the festival’s beginnings with Tilak in the 1890s, Ganeshotsav events have been organized on a neighborhood basis by local committees known as *mandals* (Kaur 2005). *Mandals* themselves did not represent a new institution for the time, however the organizers of the earliest *sarvajanic* Ganeshotsav celebrations innovated on the *mandal* concept greatly insofar as their role within modern, mass-scale public festivals. Anthropologist Raminder Kaur (2005) notes that early Ganeshotsav *mandals* established a leadership structure that remains with today’s festival *mandals*, in which *mandal* presidents are chosen by election, with larger organizations often having more elaborate systems of hierarchical leadership. The first overarching organization working in coordination with all local Ganapati *mandals* was convened in 1896, following pressure placed on festival organizers by “government officials who increasingly demanded closer regulation in the forms of licenses for melas, censorship of songs, and stricter rules for processions” (Cashman 1970:355). This umbrella organization featured four subcommittees, with Cashman describing their respective duties as such:

*The first was the managing committee which was responsible for dealing with the authorities by arranging the hours and routes of processions and the granting of licenses. The duty of the second group, the working committee, was to move about the city and supply the first committee with information relating to the number, constitution and locality of public ganapatīs and melas. The third, the mela examining committee, was delegated to the task of examining all songs and expurgating objectionable passages. The fourth, the rule-making committee, was required to draw up rules for the guidance of melas regarding their behavior in the streets, in processions and in the mandaps in front of the public ganapatīs. (1970:355)*



To this day, analogues for this type of overarching Ganpati *mandal* association continue to operate in Maharashtra, for example the Brihanmumbai Sarvajanik Ganeshotsav Samanvay Samiti (BSGSS) which represents mandals in Mumbai, as well as the Maharashtra Ganeshotsav Mahasangh, which works at the state level.

In contemporary Maharashtra, the model of *mandal* organization developed within the early years of the public Ganeshotsav now pervades the planning of all large religious festivals; however, the Ganpati festival remains the premier Hindu festival in the region, particularly in Mumbai and the rest of western Maharashtra. According to Kaur's 2005 book *Performative Politics and the Cultures of Hinduism*, Ganpati *mandals* numbered as many as 40,000 throughout Maharashtra at the time of publication. The system of permits required for many aspects of festival planning give some sense of Ganpati *mandal* numbers at the municipal level in Mumbai. For example, in 2014, the BMC granted permits to 1,188 *mandals* to erect temporary structures called *pandals* in prominent public spaces within neighborhoods inside of which the *murtis* of the god Ganesh are installed, with around 1,000 granted permits in 2015 and 1,300 approved in 2016 (Pinto 2015b; 2015c; Dias 2016). Worth considering is that nearly as many *mandals* have their applications for erecting *pandals* rejected, which does not stop those *mandals* from organizing other activities. Furthermore, these numbers do not reflect the many *mandals* that operate in those Mumbai suburbs outside of the BMC's administration. Past estimates offer figures ranging between 6,500 and 11,500 Ganpati *mandals* active in Mumbai over the last thirty years (*Daily News and Analysis* 2016; *Times of India* 1989a; 1992a; 2006).

*Mandals* vary tremendously in size and in the scope of their work, although generally the officers of *mandals* of all sizes work on a volunteer basis during the months

leading up to their respective festival and hold other jobs throughout the rest of the year. Smaller *mandals* consists of just a few members who organize modestly sized events for and within a particular locality. Other *mandals* involve massive operations with many officers and hundreds of volunteers, organizing large scale events that require the cooperation of city police and private security firms, contracting out the construction of temporary crowd control infrastructure, employing numerous artists and musicians, and often seriously disrupting traffic patterns in the city. During Ganeshotsav, for example, *mandals* throughout Mumbai hire sculptors and artists to make *murtis*, intricately detailed and measuring as high as twenty feet. Likewise, *mandals* contract the construction of their *pandals* to local builders and artisans. The larger *murtis* and *pandals* attract incredible masses of visitors to pray, sing *bhajans* (devotional songs), and admire the artistry. On the final day of the festival, enormous crowds gather in procession, escorted by bands and DJs (hired by *mandals*), to carry each *murti* through the city and out to the sea where they are immersed in the ostentatious ceremony known as *visarjan*. In recent years in Mumbai, Ganpati *visarjan* has attracted as many as 3 million attendees and required the deployment of over 40,000 police officers for crowd control.

Given their elaborate nature, Hindu festival events present a costly affair for the *mandals* that plan them. More established *mandals* receive some portion of their revenue through advertising, with banners bearing the names of local businesses adorning the spaces around festival *pandals*. A member of a medium-sized Ganpati *mandal* once told me that out of the 6.5 million rupees a year raised for the *mandal* (about \$88,000), a significant portion comes from the numerous ads displayed across the large towers that surround the group's *pandal*. The secretary of a smaller *mandal* said that a small banner ad (roughly

6'x10') displaying during the duration of Ganeshotsav costs around Rs.8000-1000 (equivalent to \$110-\$140 USD), and that their *mandal* usually sells spaces for 5 or 6 small banners. Some *mandals* also issue annual publications commemorating their festival celebration, with businesses purchasing ad space in those publications. One smaller suburban *mandal* I spent time with sold around 100 ads in their publication, for example.

Historically, however, the most significant source of funding for *mandals* comes in the form of a system of donation called *vargani* ("subscription"), in which residents and businesses in a particular community give money to their local *mandal* to organize events. Cashman describes the early implementation of the *vargani* system in Ganeshotsav during the 1890s, emphasizing its localized, grassroots nature. "Citizens of a street, peth or caste formed themselves into a committee to collect subscriptions," he writes. "They installed a public image [of Ganpati] and formed a mela of their own. The leadership, activities and constitution of the mela were determined by the local community" (1970:355).

Over the years, the success of *vargani* collection during festivals allowed festival *mandals* to become some of the more financially endowed institutions in Maharashtrian cities. By the 1950s, the Ganpati *mandals* of Bombay (numbering over 1,000) were collecting around Rs. 25 lakhs<sup>5</sup> annually through *vargani*, which, adjusted for inflation, would be equivalent to just over Rs. 18.5 *crore* in 2018, or \$2.5 million USD (*Times of India* 1957c). Thirty years later, in the mid-1980s, 2,350 Ganpati *mandals* acknowledged by the Bombay Police, along with 3,000 Shiv Jayanthi and Navratri *mandals*, managed to collect about Rs. 20 *crore* a year through *vargani* (Menon 1986), which would equate to over Rs. 217 *crore* in 2018 (roughly \$29 million USD). In 1991, it was reported that Mumbai's larger

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<sup>5</sup> In the South Asian numbering system, one *lakh* is equal to one hundred thousand, and one *crore* is equal to ten million (or one hundred *lakhs*)

Navratri *mandals* were spending at least Rs 15 *lakh* a day on that festival (almost Rs 1.2 *crore*, or \$161,000 in 2018) (*Times of India* 1991), while an estimate that same year suggested that Ganapati *mandals* across the state of Maharashtra collected around Rs. 50 *crore* per year (nearly Rs. 349 *crore* or \$47.3 million USD in 2018) (Date 1991). Giving some indication of the continued financial growth of *mandals* in more recent years, since 2016, one *mandal* alone (granted, Mumbai's wealthiest *mandal*, Gowd Saraswat Brahman Seva Mandal) has taken out insurance policies during the days of Ganeshotsav valued over Rs. 264 *crore*, or \$35.6 million USD (*Economic Times* 2018).

For the last half century, as *mandals'* operation costs have escalated and consequently their efforts to collect *vargani* have intensified, the collection of these "subscriptions" has frequently been associated with acts of coercion and violence, and *mandals* themselves have often earned a reputation as thugs or organized criminals. Kaur describes these connections, writing that "[a]s *mandal* presidents tended to be the leading lights of their locality, some of these characters might easily be gangster dons, or *gunde*, of the area. They might be renowned for nefarious activities bordering on, if not totally immersed in, criminality" (2005:81). "Although *gunde* may have run neighbourhoods since the dawn of criminality," she continues, "it was in the 1970s that their involvement in the festival became increasingly conspicuous... [and] [b]y the 1980s, there are said to have been around forty-five *mandals* financed by elements of the 'underworld'" (2005:83). Gita Menon quotes former Bombay police commissioner D.S. Soman, who described the *vargani* collection process as "sheer extortion" with "hardly any accounting" and stated that, "[u]nder the garb of festivals, goondaism thrived" (quoted in Menon 1986). High profile Bombay mobsters like Varadarajan Mudaliar, Chotta Rajan, Kalya Anthony, Amar Naik, and

members of the Gawli gang were all reportedly linked with Ganeshotsav *mandals* in the past (*Times of India* 1992b). Former Bombay income tax commissioner S.C. Parija once commented on the unreported and untaxed economy of *mandals* that has invited the interest of organized criminals, saying:

*We can do very little about it. If a mandal shows us a receipt of, say, Rs 20,000 for the purchase of an idol, but actually pays Rs 40,000, how can we stop that? Who can stop a businessman from giving his daughter expensive gifts? So it is not worth our while to conduct raids or even surveys during festivals. We cannot hope to find anything and are only likely to get accused of 'hurting religious sentiments' in the bargain. (quoted in Times of India 1992b)*

Brihanmumbai Sarvajanic Ganeshotsav Samavay Samiti (BSGSS) president Naresh Dahibawkar once responded to allegations that Ganpati *mandal* members were using extortion to collect *vargani* by asking, "If the authorities find certain mandals are transgressing the rules, why do the police, BMC, traffic authorities not bring them to book?" (quoted in Jaisinghani 2015). Dahibawkar's logic employed here is noteworthy in that it seems to disregard the possibility that the mechanisms of justice might ever falter or become obstructed in cases of *mandal* misconduct.

One of my informants once suggested that the unregulated nature of *vargani* makes festival organizing an attractive prospect for money launderers. She asserted that prior to the 2016 demonetization of ₹500 and ₹1000 banknotes, "these festivals were also one of the sources [for *mandals*] to throw their black money." Another informant told me:

*These [mandals] are multi-crore...Because of festivals, [...] they have a lot of sponsors, and they collect so-called 'donations' by force. They will go to a shop and say 'You have to pay a thousand rupees.' Two days back, in Poona, there's an eatery [where] people were dining. Three [Ganpati mandal men] said [to the proprietor] 'Give us a thousand rupees.' So the owner said, 'I'll give you 500 now, and 500 I'll pay later on.' [laughs] They beat him up! They ransacked the whole place. So, basically, it is extortion under the guise of religion.*

Various events reported in newspapers echo the claims made by my informant. In 2013, then-commissioner of Pune police Gulabrao Pol issued a statement urging Ganesh *mandals* not to “force people to give ‘vargani’” following incidents in which “some people [were] injured after a dispute over collection of donations recently in Chikhali” (*Times of India* 2013). Two headline-grabbing examples from 2018 illustrate the kind of violence and intimidation associated at times with *vargani* collection. In one case, four members of a Pune Dahi Handi *mandal* set fire to a man’s motorcycle after he was unable to pay them Rs. 500 as *vargani* (Shelke 2018). In another instance, two men from a Ganpati *mandal*, also in Pune, were arrested after having been accused of going to a hotel, demanding Rs. 2000 from the owner, and attacking him with a baseball bat after his refusal to capitulate (*Times of India* 2018).

In addition to attracting members of the criminal element, festival *mandals* similarly present an alluring opportunity for politicians and political parties. For decades, guileful politicians have looked upon religious festivals as an ideal way to access “vote banks” represented by the masses of young people gathered in enthusiastic effervescence. Former (Shiv Sena) Maharashtra state legislator Pramod Navalkar once said, “[p]olitics and the Ganpati festival go hand-in-hand chiefly because the deity attracts a mammoth following which political parties obviously covet” (quoted in Mishra 2002), while former National Congress Party leader Gurunath Kulkarni noted that Ganeshotsav “has an element of connectedness which fascinates political activists of every hue” (*ibid*). Large numbers of *mandals* organizing events during festivals like Ganpati or Navratri have come to establish firm associations with political parties.

Shiv Sena has been particularly adept in forming connections with Mumbai's festival *mandals*, especially during Ganeshotsav. As early as the late 1970s, Shiv Sena had begun asserting their presence in Ganapati celebrations by funding various *mandals* (*Times of India* 1979). Their dominance among Ganeshotsav *mandals* was wholly evident by the early 1990s, when somewhere between 50 and 70 percent of Bombay's Ganapati *mandals* had aligned themselves with Shiv Sena (*Times of India* 1992b; Prabhu 1992). Uddhav Thackeray, son of Shiv Sena founder Bal Thackeray and current Shiv Sena leader, once declared that "[f]estivals are the best occasions to mobilise public support" (quoted in Mishra 1995), and indeed the longstanding ubiquity of Shiv Sena during Hindu festivals like Ganeshotsav has likely reinforced the public's association of the party with the Hindu nationalist ideology that facilitated their rise to power. The party further endeared themselves with festival *mandals* and the Hindu right by enacting tax breaks for *mandals* in Maharashtra (Mishra 1995).

In addition to Ganeshotsav, Shiv Sena has for decades been prominently involved in Shiv Jayanti, the festival commemorating the legacy of the Maratha Chhatrapati Shivaji. As their name implies, Shiv Sena has endeavored since their inception to generate and maintain enthusiasm for their party by cultivating an impression that their group holds some connection to the revered Chhatrapati. By the time Shiv Sena emerged in the 1960s, invocations of Shivaji represented a useful public relations tactic for Maharashtrian political groups from across the spectrum. Cashman described the lionization of Shivaji in mid-twentieth-century Maharashtra, writing:

*The name of Shivaji is so powerful in Maharashtra that no politician can ignore it. Each political party of the region must define its program in terms of Shivaji. During the movement for Samyukta [united] Maharashtra, which was led by a coalition of opposition parties, the name of Shivaji was invoked as a supporter of the unilingual*

*state of Maharashtra, which was set up in 1960... Politicians and parties vied with each other in their attempts to gain Shivaji's endorsement for their particular programs. (Cashman 1975:119)*

In securing such an “endorsement” in the realm of public perception, Shiv Sena’s efforts have been so successful that the party now holds a near-monopoly on Shivaji veneration in today’s Maharashtrian political arena. Vidyadhar Date wrote that “[n]o one has exploited Maratha history better than the Shiv Sena chief, Mr. Bal Thackeray” (1995), while another editorialist commented that the Sena “would like to think it has a patent” on the legacy of the Chhatrapati (*Times of India* 2004a). The Sena’s appropriation of Shivaji’s image has served to reinforce their Hindutva credentials, as well as endear the party with Marathas by portraying the party as champions of Maharashtra’s “sons of the soil.” Just as Shivaji is celebrated throughout Maharashtra for combatting Muslim “outsiders” like the Mughals and slaying Afzal Khan, general for the Bijapur Sultanate, so too has the Shiv Sena propagated a conception of themselves as defenders of Maharashtra’s rightful (Marathi-speaking and Hindu) denizens against the incursions of South Indians, Hindi-speaking North Indians, and religious minorities.<sup>6 7</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> Shivaji has become a symbol for Hindu nationalism, in large part due to representations of his legacy by late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century Hindu reformers. For example, Lala Lajpat Rai once wrote that Shivaji was “fanatically anti-Muslim” and “had imbibed a deep rooted hatred of Mahomedan rule very early in his life. Even in his youth, Shivaji had resolved to free his country from the tyranny of Islam, and the horrors of the Muslim misrule” (Rai 1980:227). However, the historicity of such portrayals may be dubious. Burman notes “considerable evidence” of Shivaji “welcoming the Muslims into his state from the earliest times. For example, court proceedings of 1657 list names of Muslim *gazis* (judges) who were on salary to adjudicate cases. At the same time, Shivaji welcomed Muslim recruits into his army” (2001:1228). “Over and over,” he continues, “he espoused tolerance and syncretism... [and] had no difficulty in allying with Muslim states which surrounded him... even against Hindu powers, such as the nayaks of the Karnatic” (*ibid*).

<sup>7</sup> Shiv Sena’s appropriation of Shivaji has certainly been subject to some high-profile criticisms in the past. For example, former Maharashtrian Revenue Minister D.S. Desai denounced the Shiv Sena’s use of Shivaji’s name to “preach parochialism” (*Times of India*



Prior to the popularization of the modern Shiv Jayanti, a separate festival in honor of Shivaji had in fact been devised by Bal Gangadhar Tilak in an attempt to win support from Marathas and other non-Brahmans after his Ganeshotsav failed to meet his expectations in that regard (Cashman 1975). However, this Shiv Utsav proved much less popular than Tilak had hoped, and the festival was abandoned after only its third observance in 1906 (Cashman 1975; Pati 2007).

As Shiv Sena established and maintained their ascendancy over Ganpati and Shiv Jayanti celebrations, the party's longtime political partner, the BJP, gained a reputation for their own prolific involvement in Navratri *mandals*. Before the 1990s, larger Navratri celebrations (especially dances like *dandiya raas* and *garba*) were usually observed primarily in neighborhoods predominated by the city's Gujarati community. But as *dandiya raas* and *garbas* achieved wider appeal, BJP leaders formed an umbrella organization for Navratri *mandals*, lobbying the city to grant permits for late-night *garbas*, and conducted outreach during Navratri to garner support in suburban neighborhoods with dense Gujarati populations such as Borivli, Mulund, Ghatkopar, and Kandivli (*Times of India* 1991; Prabhu 1992; Mishra 1995). The BJP's inroads during the 1990s in fortifying their influence within Navratri *mandals* prompted socialist leader and former member of Parliament Mrinal Gore to inveigh against the alignment of *mandals* with parties, saying: "[w]hat the Shiv Sena has been doing with Ganeshotsav, the BJP is trying to do with Navratri – to

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1967), and the Socialist Party leader Achyut Patwardhan dismissed the Sena's politics as a "modern version of tribalism which reduced the national hero, Shivaji, to a local vote-catcher" (quoted in *Times of India* 1968). One member of Shivaji's thirteenth generation of descendants, Rajmata Kalpana Raje Bhosale, commented that "I would not like anyone to use Shivaji's name politically. The Sena is just using that name and has grown big on that basis. What principles do they have? Only *Garva se kaho hum Hindu hai* [a Hindu nationalist slogan meaning "Say with pride, we are Hindu"]" (quoted in Abhay 1991).

exploit the religious sentiments of the people to garner votes. It is also a way to collect unaccountable funds, most of the garbawallas being rich Gujarati traders” (quoted in Prabhu 1992).

Although parties like Shiv Sena and BJP with Hindu right political ideologies have been most successful in consolidating support from *mandals* and maximizing their visibility during festivals, parties of all stripes have sought to utilize festivals as a campaign vehicle. In the early 1990s, having observed the Shiv Sena-BJP alliance’s success with emphasizing their own connections to Hinduism via *mandals* and festivals, Congress Party politicians made similar attempts to court festival *mandals* (Date 1990). With Shiv Sena and BJP perhaps having reached a state of complacency with their dominance within festivals in the mid-2000s, festival *mandals* once again became a heated arena for competing political parties in 2005 following the departure of Narayan Rane (former Maharashtra Chief Minister and Minister for Revenue) from the Shiv Sena party to join the INC. With many Shiv Sainiks maintaining some affinity with Rane despite his transition to the Congress Party, *mandals* during the lead-up to 2005’s Ganeshotsav celebrations became key sites of competition between politicians from Shiv Sena and Congress, as well as Raj Thackeray, nephew of Bal Thackeray and founder of the Shiv Sena splinter party Maharashtra Navnirman Sena (MNS) that entered the fray in the mid-2000s (*Times of India* 2005a; Mishra 2006). Politicians unwilling to recognize the tremendous mobilizing power of festivals such as Ganeshotsav would suffer the consequences during elections. As Shiv Sena politician Pramod Navalkar explained in reference to the politicization of religious festivals, “[e]verything is fair in love and war and politics” (quoted in Prabhu 1992).

### **FESTIVALS, POLITICS, AND SOUNDSCAPE**

The complex system of relationships between *mandals*, parties, and religious festivals that has developed in Mumbai and other Maharashtrian cities in the last several decades has transformed festival soundscapes into auditory sites of great political significance. Festival events sponsored by political parties have come to represent the primary focus of attention for most anti-noise activists, and the terms “noise” and “noise pollution” have become closely entwined with Mumbai’s politicized festival soundscape.

Festivals events have in fact grown larger and louder in the years since politicians have come to rely on them as an indispensable part of campaigning, and anti-noise activists generally agree that this connection is one of causation and not mere correlation. It seems plausible, and in fact likely, that as politicians build public support and enthusiasm through the (fundamentally musical) idiom of festival events such as “road shows,” inter-party competition might encourage a sonic “arms race.” This might be further heightened as the influx of funds through the involvement of political parties can allow *mandals* to rent more powerful loudspeakers and hire larger bands to perform during events. Anti-noise activist Dr. Mahesh Bedekar once told me, for example, “I am somebody who also celebrates festivals, [...] but festivals [have not always been] celebrated like this. What you are seeing today is absolutely different.” Bedekar recalls a time not too long ago when festivals, he says, free of “political interference,” were a quieter and “more enjoyable affair.” “Unfortunately politicians came to know this is something which is untapped, and if a politician wants to become famous, it was very easy for him, in the name of religion – you can gather people.” Activist Sumaira Abdulali also ascribes excessive decibel levels during festivals to the involvement of politicians, saying:

*If you look at Diwali, for example, the shocking thing to me is that when I first started, in 2003, I assumed that Diwali would be the hardest to control, because it goes down to individuals [rather than mandals and political parties]. You know, each one telling himself. And I assumed that organized events or festivals would just take a decision [from the court] and you could stop it. But actually the vested interest has been so strong that Diwali has gone down, which means to me that it's reached people, but the political will to keep this whole system alive is counteracting it in the organized festivals.*

Abdulali is quoted making a similar point in a 2015 newspaper article reporting a decrease in Diwali decibel readings over a decade period, while noting that Ganeshotsav decibel levels rose during the same period. “Diwali is celebrated by individuals and families. Citizens have responded to years of activism on noise pollution, and brought down noise levels, opting for firecrackers that emit less sound,” Abdulali contends. “But Ganesh Chaturthi and Eid are celebrated at the community level,” she continues, “with politicians pumping in money. These festivals have, over the years, seen rising noise levels” (quoted in Mahamulkar 2015)<sup>8</sup>.

Another activist, Yeshwant Oke, offers his own hypothesis, positing that louder sounds made during festival events confer greater prestige to the organizers of that particular event. “This is one belief, and it leads to this – it’s like a vicious cycle that has started, and it is used as a sense of authority,” Oke told me. “The more noise you make, the stronger [you seem]. So, all these elections, their leaders, they will use thousands and thousands of [fire]cracker chains that can go on for half an hour, one hour. All this money

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<sup>8</sup> The article in question mentions dB readings taken by Awaaz Foundation, in which “[n]early every noise reading...during Diwali crossed 100dB in 2007; the highest was 130dB. Last year [2014], levels around Diwali dropped drastically to 80-95dB. Only one recording (105.5dB) crossed 100dB in 2014. In 2013, less than 50% recordings during Eid-e-Milad crossed 100dB, while the maximum was 104.5. This year, the maximum recorded was 113dB. Levels routinely crossed 100dB...Meanwhile, 14 of 18 readings during Ganesh Chaturthi last year crossed 100dB. The maximum level recorded during the festival in 2014 was 114dB. The highest recorded during Ganesh Chaturthi in recent years was 123dB in 2013. A decade ago, levels during Ganesh Chaturthi were 80-87dB.” (Mahamulkar 2015)

comes from a – it's an unaccounted money. So he [the politician] proves he is strong, he can use more crackers."

Through the political influence that they have come to hold, *mandals*, in addition to politicians involved in festivals, often command enough power locally to suppress noise complaints, deter the enforcement of noise rules by police, and generally hinder the efforts of anti-noise activists. In response to a PIL case filed by an anti-noise activist in 2015, a Bombay High Court bench made up of justices Abhay Oka and A.S. Gadkari stated that:

*festivals like dahi handi, Ganeshotsav and Navratri are often organized by local politicians and political groups and even anti-social elements are associated with them. It said that the common man is reluctant to complain about noise pollution "though the use of loudspeakers or musical instruments create a nuisance." Cops are reluctant to take action against influential persons involved in organization of such events. (Sequeira 2015a)*

It would appear that *mandals* and politicians have been employing strategies to suppress the enforcement of noise laws for as long as political parties have been involved in festival organizing. One account from 1974, pertaining to Hindu festivals throughout Maharashtra, claims that:

*the police are unable to enforce the [noise] rules because of political interference. When they try to implement any rule – for instance, the one specifying that loudspeakers should not be used after 11 p.m. – the local elected representative invariably rings up the police in his area and asks them to allow the organisers of the festivals to use the loudspeaker beyond the prescribed time-limit...This type of "pressure" is brought to bear on the police not only at the local but also at higher levels. They are thus forced to "overlook" the misuse of loudspeakers. (Vohra 1974)*

India's Noise Pollution (Regulation and Control) Rules of 2000 set maximum decibel limits ranging from 40dB to 75dB, depending on municipal zoning and time of day<sup>9</sup>. The

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<sup>9</sup> The decibel limits, by zone, established by the Noise Pollution (Regulation and Control) Rules (2000) are: 50dB during the day and 40dB at night in "silence zones," 55dB during the day and 45dB at night in residential areas, 65dB during the day and 55dB at night in commercial areas, and 75dB during the day and 70dB at night in industrial areas.

rules state that violations of these decibel limits will incur severe penalties of up to Rs. 1 *lakh* in fines, 5 years in prison, or both. My informants from the anti-noise activism community are generally adamant that these rules are rarely enforced, and that, in those rare circumstances when violations are actually issued, the implementation of penalties is unheard of. Even a bench of Bombay High Court justices once affirmed that “[t]here is a complete failure on the part of the state authorities to take action against noise pollution,” and that “[t]here is not a single case of noise pollution where criminal law is set in motion” (quoted in *Hindustan Times* 2015a). I myself have also never heard of the Noise Rules of 2000 being invoked to issue any penalty, however there have been recent cases of individuals being charged with violations under the Bombay Police Act (1951), which carries a much less severe penalty. Arpita Khan Sharma, sister of Bollywood superstar Salman Khan, was fined Rs. 12,500 in 2015 under the Bombay Police Act following noise complaints from her neighbors, for example (*Times of India* 2015b). Furthermore, the Bombay High Court has issued contempt notices in recent years to police officials who have failed to take action with regard to noise complaints during festival celebrations (Sequeira 2016).

One of my informants, a high-ranking police official in Mumbai, told me candidly about Ganpati *mandal* members using political ties to put indirect and direct pressure on police not to enforce noise pollution laws. He mentioned, for example, incidents of false allegations made against officers who did attempt to penalize *mandals* for organizing events that exceeded legal decibel limits. Additionally, he noted that some officers might feel averse to “[creating] friction between police and community” which could result from

getting involved in matters having to do with religion, such as noise complaints during festivals.

Another informant, an anti-noise activist in a Mumbai suburb, stated that local police “are still under some kind of control of politicians,” and that they might avoid issuing noise violations because “maybe they want to keep their book very clean, in terms of crimes booked.” A different activist accused certain police officers of having received *hafta* (literally “week;” a Bombay slang term for weekly payment issued to win favor with corrupt police) from “those *mandals*, [and] those DJ *wallahs*” in order allow amplified music to continue after the 12 am festival noise curfew. This activist also claimed that the *shantata* (“peace” or “silence”) committees organized by her local police department prior to large festivals to address noise issues have existed merely for the sake of appearance and that their meetings seldom accomplish anything more than “drinking a cup of tea.”

In the past, Bombay police officials often alleged that noise rules could not be enforced due to lack of decibel monitoring equipment, without which “they [would] not have adequate evidence while charging a man in court about noise violation” (Laxman 1980). Today, sound pressure level (SPL) meters are much more common in Mumbai’s police stations. However, some of my informants argue that police might not be using them consistently. I sat down with one activist as he took me page by page through a pile of documents received in response to a Right to Information request he submitted. The documents contained reports from various police stations throughout Greater Mumbai regarding their use of decibel meters. One station in south Mumbai reported never having taken any decibel readings at all, despite having possessed SPL meters for some time and having trained personnel in their proper use. This station also lacked the necessary

calibration certificate for the decibel meter. A station in Kalyan reported the same: no readings taken and no calibration certificate, despite possessing equipment and having completed training. A station in Navi Mumbai reported an even more deficient status, with no readings taken, no personnel trained, and no calibration certificate. My informant smiled approvingly, however, when he turned to reports from two stations in Dadar that he said were “very impressive.”

In 2015, following an implausible claim from Mumbai police officials that no noise violations were recorded during that year’s Diwali celebrations because no noise laws had been broken, Bombay High Court justice Abhay Oka chastised the police for their negligence, saying, “[t]he officers have [SPL monitoring] equipment but they don’t visit a single pandal” (quoted in *Times of India* 2015d). BMC officials made similarly dubious claims of having received no noise complaints at all during the 2015 Ganapati festival (Deshpande 2015). A number of Mumbaikars responded by using SPL meter smartphone apps to record decibel levels during Navratri a few weeks later and posting their measurements publicly to social media *en masse*, a practice which has continued during festivals ever since.

Another informant of mine told me that, having examined sound pressure equipment held by stations in the Thane Police Commissionerate, she found decibel meters that appeared dust-covered and in many cases unserviceable. She alleges to have filed an RTI request revealing that Maharashtra Police had spent Rs. 5.3 *crore* (over \$700,000) on sound pressure meters, averaging about Rs. 1.5 *lakh* (\$2000) per meter. My informant implied that these numbers could indicate a misappropriation of funds at the state level, as



these prices are significantly more expensive than even the most high-end SPL meters meeting OSHA recommendations.

I have heard numerous accusations of inappropriate behavior on the part of other government officials, besides police, who have allegedly been motivated by political interests in handling noise-related issues. For example, a journalist I spoke with claimed to have had first-hand experience of Central Pollution Control Board and Maharashtra Pollution Control Board officials “fudging data” pertaining to festival-related noise and other forms of pollution. These officials, my informant claimed, directly asked that relevant information be omitted from their reporting in order to cast a more favorable light on an incumbent party’s government in the immediate lead-up to BMC and state elections. Anti-noise activist Dr. Mahesh Bedekar, who runs a hospital founded by his family in Thane, suggested to me that medical personnel from other hospitals often opt to refrain from complaining about loud sound during festivals around their facilities, despite many patients being negatively affected by it and despite areas around hospitals being designated silence zones. Hospitals’ silence on the issue, he explained, might result from their substantial reliance on municipal corporations and other local government institutions for their basic operation. This reliance makes hospitals particularly vulnerable to political parties and politically connected *mandals* who might have an interest in continuing to organize loud festival events and who might be able to arrange undue scrutiny and withholding against any hospitals that challenge them. Because of “political interference,” he told me, “[n]obody is ready to talk anything against politicians...Politicians will say they’re against us, and see to it that our permissions are not given.”

In July 2017, Maharashtra Chief Minister Devendra Fadnavis (BJP) met with members of Mumbai's Ganpati *mandals*, represented by the Brihanmumbai Sarvajanik Ganeshotsav Samanvay Samiti, along with Dahi Handi *mandal* members and other BJP leaders (*Times of India* 2017a; *Hindustan Times* 2017). During this meeting, Fadnavis vowed that he would attempt to meet demands of the *mandals* by requesting a relaxation of silence zone rules during the upcoming festivals. The meeting occurred amidst an apparent disintegration of the longstanding alliance between the BJP and Shiv Sena parties, and it appeared that Fadnavis perhaps sought to win favor with this gesture among the festival *mandals* that traditionally offered their support to Shiv Sena (*ibid*). Uddhav Thackeray of Shiv Sena had only recently himself spoke on behalf of *mandals* asking that the government offer leniency in enforcing noise rules during the festivals, prompting one journalist to comment that "the bickering saffron allies have been trying to outdo one another to give patronage to these popular, local festivities, seen as being integral to Maharashtra's cultural identity" (*Hindustan Times* 2017). Within days, Maharashtra state BJP officials had begun efforts to investigate ways to circumvent a prior High Court judgment barring the use of loudspeakers in silence zones, to which Bombay High Court justices Abhay Oka and Vibha Kankanwadi responded by issuing a warning for the state not to take "any adverse decision" that would challenge the authority of the court (Chaudhari 2017).

Drama ensued in the activist community that August after Maharashtra state officials, having approached the Indian central government's Ministry of Environment, Forests and Climate Change "to remove the concept of silence zones from the Noise Pollution (Control and Regulation) Rules, 2000" (Chatterjee 2017), announced that Mumbai's 1,503 silence zones had simply ceased to exist, as per an amendment written into

the Noise Pollution Rules on August 10 (*Times of India* 2017b). The efforts of state BJP leaders seemed to please *mandals*, with BSGSS president Naresh Dahibhavkar stating, “We are happy CM Fadnavis kept his promise to relax noise norms for Ganeshotsav. We are not against anti-noise campaigners; we just want to celebrate the festival with all the fervour it deserves” (quoted in Chatterjee 2017).

This reworking of noise rules, however, gave rise to a power struggle between state legislators and Bombay High Court, who had previously issued judgments affirming and strengthening silence zone enforcement. “We are not accepting your stand that there are no silence zones,” maintained justices Abhay Oka and Riyaz Chagla (quoted in *Times of India* 2017c). The state government of Maharashtra countered by accusing Justice Oka of “harbouring serious bias” in dealing with issues of festival noise, and successfully entreating Chief Justice Majula Chellur to transfer the case to a different High Court bench made up of justices Anoop Mohta and Girish Kulkarni (Sequeira 2017a). The state’s motion to get the case transferred, said Awaaz Foundation lawyer Birendra Saraf, represented an attempt “to make Ganpati festival a *fait accompli*. This is done because government wants to get popularity by playing loud music during Ganpati” (quoted in Sequeira 2017a). Eventually, the High Court did restore silence zones, declaring that their elimination had presented a violation of Article 21 of the Indian Constitution (Sequeira 2017b; *India Today* 2017), which protects citizens against any deprivation of “life or personal liberty.” The whole episode, however, demonstrates the lengths to which many politicians are willing to go in order to accommodate the interests of festival *mandals*.

Experiences seem to vary widely between different activists and complainants in terms of threats and intimidation directed against them for their objections to festival noise

and other *mandal* activities. A survey conducted by the environmentalist organization SOCLEEN in 1981 “noted that most people did not complain against the noise pollution because they were afraid of being physically assaulted” (*Times of India* 1981). A few years later, Dr. Yeshwant Oke, after filing his first noise-related PIL in 1985, claims to have been threatened by Shiv Sainiks against whom the case was filed. The alleged offenders, having been expelled from the court by the judge, surrounded Dr. Oke “[i]n the quadrangle [of the] High Court. They [Shiv Sena members] said ‘Dr. Oke *murdabad*.’ Means, ‘he should be eliminated.’” That same year, after challenging the erection of a Ganpati *pandal* in the Bombay suburb of Mulund, an attorney and his family were allegedly attacked by members of the *mandal* involved. Even after the incident was reported to the police, apparently no action was taken against the attackers. A newspaper article described the events:

*The advocate’s telephone wires were cut by a mob which threatened to kidnap his daughter. When the family was returning to their home after lodging a complaint with the police, a mob attacked them with rocks and stones. The advocate, his wife and daughter were injured. His wife lost consciousness for a while on being hit by a stone, while his daughter received an injury on her foot... When they reached home, they discovered that the culprits had smashed a window pane of their flat, where two young children of the advocate were waiting, hiding in their beds. (Times of India 1985b)*

An anti-noise activist in a Mumbai suburb told me that when a person complains about decibel levels during a festival event, that event’s organizers “will give you *dhamkis* [threats]. They have all settings with the corporators and they know everyone at the police station. So that way we have named them as *gundas*.” When I asked her if she has experienced this personally, she said, “I’ve gotten so many *dhamkis*...[*Mandal* members] have threatened us, they threw away our sound meter – They just pulled it from my hand and threw it.” Another activist explained that at one point police officials had recommended that he carry a gun for protection. He decided not to follow their advice,

however, noting that he regularly rides the bus, where pockets are often picked. When I asked him who it might be that would want to hurt him, he joked about how he has filed cases against so many people that, should he ever be found murdered, it would be impossible to say which of the many enemies he's made might be responsible. Awaaz Foundation's Sumaira Abdulali, however, remarks on how different her experience has been, emphasizing that when she conducts measurements with a decibel meter during festival celebrations, she tends to encounter far more curiosity than hostility. I myself have witnessed many of these more benign kinds of reactions during my time spent accompanying Abdulali while taking readings.

During my 2015 research trip to Mumbai, one of my informants claimed to have been recently threatened by some men from a small Ganpati *mandal* in her neighborhood. After having complained to police about noise being made by the *mandal's* celebrations during the festival, this woman told me that several *mandal* members had accosted her and another woman outside her home one night. "They wouldn't allow us to enter our building," she said. "They literally circled us. And they started [verbally] abusing us, and one of them came hurling at us, trying to hit us, but he was caught by two-three of his chaps, because they knew that they would be in a such a big trouble if this fellow would literally hit us, or bang into us, or cause us any kind of damage." This informant asked me to join her as she went to her local police station to file a report regarding the incident. At the police station, after only several minutes in which she spoke to the officers present, I was shocked when a large group of men from the *mandal* appeared. About five of the men sat in the room with us as she gave her statement, and another four men waited outside. Their presence struck me as unconventional and somewhat unnerving, and the woman did not

seem to expect their arrival either. I learned only later that apparently an officer at the police station, possibly with some relationship to a *mandal* member, had made a phone call alerting the *mandal* that a complaint being made against them was in progress. They showed up at the station to observe the process and, presumably, make their presence felt by the complainant. After the visit to the police station, when I asked the woman about what had happened, she expressed that she felt this constituted a form of intimidation. “This is mental torture,” she told me. “I could actually imagine how a rape victim would feel if she had to be put in a court against the rapist.”

In speaking with me after the incident, my informant said that she recognized one of the *mandal* members, an older man who serves as the president of the small *mandal*. “He is a BMC guy,” she claimed. “He works with the municipal corporation...He was an engineer who used to pass files for builders, and that’s how he’s made his money. He’s made *crores* and *crores* of money taking bribes and passing files.” She also accused the police of accepting a bribe from the *mandal*. “That one particular officer who’s been appointed the task of going and checking will go, will be given a bribe, and will happily come back and give a different report, or will share that bribe with a few of his top officers, who will happily keep quiet,” she explained. “So that one person who reports the matter comes out as an ugly duckling, and is seen as a black sheep amongst the authorities, and amongst this engineer, or this BMC guy,” she continued. “So the next time you have a problem, this BMC guy could make sure that he could screw your life, if you are doing some work, some construction work, or if you go to BMC, he will make sure that he takes the help of his co-workers and he could do anything.”

### AZĀN AND “COMPETITIVE RELIGIOSITY” IN THE URBAN SOUNDSCAPE

With loudspeaker technology becoming more available and affordable in the late twentieth century, mosques in India and elsewhere throughout the world increasingly elected to amplify *azān*, the ritual recitation performed by a *muezzin* which calls Muslims to worship (*namāz*) five times daily. In Mumbai, where matters of soundscape and communalism have a history of volatile intersection, the subject of amplified *azān* has taken on particularly politicized significance.

In March 1977, amidst the closure of the two-year period known as the Emergency during which Prime Minister Indira Gandhi (INC) suspended normal democratic processes assumed the power to rule by decree, journalist Inder Malhotra wrote that mosques had been prohibited from using loudspeakers throughout the Emergency. According to Malhotra, it was only at that period’s end, at which time elections were once again permitted to take place, that Yashwantrao Chavan, Minister of External Affairs for the Gandhi administration, “announced with great fanfare that the muezzin can once again use the microphone to summon the faithful to prayer” (1977). Malhotra suggests that, in restoring permission to use loudspeakers in mosques, Chavan (who had previously served as Maharashtra Chief Minister) was attempting to consolidate support from Muslim voters. Interestingly, anthropologist Thomas Blom Hansen notes that his informants in Mumbai Hindutva circles allege that it was Muslim politician Abdul Rahman Antulay (INC; Member of Parliament 1976-1980 and Chief Minister of Maharashtra, 1980-1982) that not only permitted but “encouraged” the use of loudspeakers in mosques in the years following the Emergency (Hansen 2001). One of my informants, both in conversation with me and in

a self-published written piece, has espoused a different claim. He asserts that Chavan<sup>10</sup>, in his decision to allow loudspeakers in mosques, had been clandestinely influenced by “petrodollars” from Saudi Crown Prince Fahd bin Abdulaziz (later King of Saudi Arabia, 1982-2005), who, my informant argues, provided funding to mosques worldwide to be used, in part, to purchase and install loudspeaker systems for *azān*. “King Fahd of Saudia Arabia,” my informant told me, “distributed donations to mosques all over the world, and that is how the mosques’ loudspeakers came.” While I’m not able to find any corroborating evidence to support the claim that the Saudi government had any direct connection to the installation of loudspeakers in mosques in India, it is true that King Fahd was notably active in funding the construction of mosques worldwide, and perhaps this funding did enable the purchase of loudspeakers in many cases.

Regardless of the circumstances pertaining to their acquisition and installation, by the 1980s loudspeakers had become quite common in mosques in Bombay and throughout Maharashtra. A correlation emerged during this period that deserves special emphasis. In the 1980s, as political parties with Hindu nationalist platforms expanded and refined their utilization of urban soundscape through their involvement in Hindu festivals, those same parties started making headlines as the most vocal critics of amplified *azān* in Maharashtra. In 1982, leaders from both BJP and Shiv Sena issued statements calling for Pune police to ban the use of loudspeakers in mosques, although state BJP official Abdul Alim Khan, a

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<sup>10</sup> My informant wrote that it was Shankarrao Chavan (member of Maharashtra State Assembly 1960-1980, Chief Minister of Maharashtra 1986-1988, and Indian Minister of Home Affairs 1991-1996) who had granted permission for the use of loudspeakers in mosques, though it seems likely that he meant Yashwantrao Chavan, as my informant spoke about this event in connection with the Indian Central Government during Indira Gandhi’s term in office. Within this time frame, it would seem that Yashwantrao Chavan, and not Shankarrao Chavan, would have been in such a position of authority in the Indian government.



Muslim originally from Uttar Pradesh, reversed that position soon after, saying the party had “committed a mistake” (*Times of India* 1982d). By the end of the decade, with an alliance having been formed between the BJP and Shiv Sena, Bal Thackeray proposed that the two party allies should “commence their wedlock by barring namaaz on the roads and the use of loudspeakers in masjids” (*Times of India* 1989b). Reactions in the Muslim community to Thackeray’s threat brought the issue of sound from *azān* into direct relation with that of sound from sources associated with other religious groups. “If the government decides to do away with microphones at temples, churches and gurdwaras, then we will accept their ruling” one Bohra resident of Bombay was quoted as saying (*ibid*).

An anti-noise activist in Mumbai once used the phrase “competitive religiosity,” characterizing a widespread impulse in which members of a particular religious group attempt to justify the escalation of sound within their own community’s ritual practices by drawing them into relation to that of another religious community. Bombay High Court Justices V.M. Kanade and Revati Mohite Dhere referenced this same concept when they suggested that the use of loudspeakers on religious buildings leads to “competition between the different places, with each trying to be louder than the other” (*Daily News and Analysis* 2015b). A cleric from a Mumbai mosque said in 2016 that, “If I tell Muslims to lower the decibel level of loudspeakers in their mosques, they turn around and say, ‘first ask the Hindus who create so much noise during their pujas and festivals’” (quoted in Wajihuddin 2016b). In reflecting on his early career as an anti-noise activist in the 1980s, one of my informants told me that once mosques adopted the use of loudspeakers, “Naturally, the competition started amongst the religions. Because Islam did it, Hindus did

it, Sikhs did it, even Christians did it. Everybody wanted that their sound might be heard.

And that has created bad blood amongst the religions.” Another one of my informants said:

*It's high time for we Indians to understand that we should stop playing on the name of religion card, in the name of God. And now, what has happened? Everywhere, it starts with Hindus, okay? We have a lot of festivals. In India, you can have 365 days festivals! We have so many gods. Then, the same thing is then copied by Muslims. Their Muharram, their Eid, there are a few other celebrations. So then they will block the road, saying that Ganpati has blocked the road so we also can. Okay, then there are Sikhs... These gurudwaras start their loudspeakers every morning at 3 am... Then there are of course Christians coming out. So many churches have come. So we have to say, "No, we cannot." We Hindus are in a majority here. Why not we first stop ourselves? If I point one finger to you, three come to me... Every masjid is in competition with each other, as every mandir is in competition with each other, every gurudwara – Now the problem which I told you, there is one gurudwara like this, and the other building next is a gurudwara. So there is a competition. Likewise there are churches. I feel that every worship place has become a battleground now.*

A Mumbai-based journalist I spoke with commented on the criticism he often faces when writing about religious source of “noise,” suggesting that much of this criticism stems from attitudes of comparison and competition. “Once you speak against that issue [of sound during a Hindu festival or from a mosque’s loudspeakers], it becomes almost too communal. You know, ‘Why don’t you tell them, the other religion’... So in that situation, we’re writing about *everything*. Every festival. Every aspect.”

While this “competitive religiosity” typically manifests between groups of different religions, it is worth noting that examples do exist of such sonic competition between groups that share the same major religion. For example, a 2014 news story told of two mosques in the Mumbai suburb of Dongri. The *muezzins* of these two mosques, one Sunni and one Shia, had allegedly become engaged in an ongoing arms race of decibel levels, incrementally increasing the volume of their respective amplified *azān* in response to the other, causing great vexation for a nearby hospital in the process (Wajihuddin 2014). More often than not, however, this phenomenon occurs between groups of Hindus and Muslims

and involves the sound of festivals and *azān* respectively. The prominence of loudspeakers in Mumbai's mosques is demonstrated by a 2015 police affidavit regarding loudspeakers in religious structures. The affidavit revealed that out of 2077 Hindu temples, 95 had loudspeakers installed (of which 90 were unlicensed), while out of 1021 mosques, 882 had loudspeakers (836 of which did not have a license) (*Daily News and Analysis* 2015b).

Competitive attitudes between members of different religious communities with regard to sound appear to exemplify zero-sum thinking in a non-zero-sum situation. From the perspective of noise abatement advocates, the decibel levels of Hindu festivals and amplified *azān* are issues independent of one another. For certain members of religious communities, however, the relative lack of restrictions on a different religious group's ability to produce loud sound represents larger patterns having to do with fairness or favoritism in government regulations.

Many of the clearest examples of sound-related "competitive religiosity" can be found in the rhetoric of politicians<sup>11</sup>. In 2014, Vyankatesh Apdeo, central committee member of the Hindu nationalist organization Vishva Hindu Parishad (VHP), called for a Maharashtra-wide ban on loudspeakers in mosques, saying "[t]he year-long noise pollution caused by mosques is overlooked. But people are going to court to ban the use of loudspeakers during Hindu festivals like Ganapati and Navratri which have a limited duration" (quoted in Rashid 2014). Arguing to the contrary, Waris Pathan, a member of the Maharashtra Legislative Assembly representing the party All India Majlis-e-Ittehad-ul Muslimeen (AIMIM), asserted that *azān* "lasts no more than a minute five times a day. It is

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<sup>11</sup> Amplified *azān* has at times been a target of criticism from Hindutva groups outside of Maharashtra as well. In 2014, for example, supporters of the Hindu nationalist groups Rashtriya Hindu Andolan and Hindu Janjagruti Samiti held a rally in support of a ban on amplified *azān* (*Coastal Digest* 2014).

not a nuisance and does not hurt the sentiments of other community members. When other communities use loudspeakers for religious festivals which go on for days, why azaan shouldn't be on mikes?" (quoted in Wajihuddin 2016b).

Shiv Sena have consistently been more involved than any other party in debates surrounding amplified *azān*. In 2005, party officials railed against the Mumbai police, alleging that an Indian Supreme Court ban on the use of loudspeakers between the hours of 10pm and 6am was being selectively enforced, with cases being filed only against Ganpati festival *mandals* and not against mosques purportedly in violation of the ban (Mehra 2005). Three years later, Shiv Sena politician Manohar Joshi, former Chief Minister of Maharashtra, issued the same criticism, claiming that police were still neglecting to enforce the loudspeaker ban in the case of mosques. Anti-noise activist Sumaira Abdulali responded publicly to Joshi's critique, agreeing with him and stating that "[t]he Supreme Court, in its landmark judgment in July and October 2005 had made it clear that religion is not a ground to violate noise rules. Despite this, police are implementing the noise rules selectively, thereby promoting communal disharmony" (quoted in *Thaindian News* 2008).

Despite this rare moment of accord between Abdulali and the Shiv Sena, relations between the party and Mumbai's most prominent anti-noise activists are generally much more adversarial. For example, in 2010, Abdulali filed a PIL alleging that Shiv Sena officials were responsible for violating decibel limits during their annual Dussehra rally at Shivaji Park across from the party's headquarters in the Dadar neighborhood (*Thaindian News* 2010b). In response to the case, an editorial published in the party's newspaper, *Saamana*, referred directly to Abdulali by asking, "Is she not disturbed or bothered by the loudspeakers blaring from the mosques?" (*ibid*). Abdulali, having taken up the cause of

banning the use of loudspeakers for *azān* as early as 2004, replied that “[t]he Shiv Sena has at last supported my request for banning loudspeakers atop mosques, though it took some provocation to reach this point” (quoted in *Thaindian News* 2010c). In 2015, I accompanied Abdulali to a presentation she was giving at Nair Hospital for an audience of otolaryngologists, audiologists, and public health advocates. While speaking at the event, she alluded to the public dispute between herself and Shiv Sena:

*We are still using noise divisively. We – each community wants to ask the other community to take action before it will take action, and the result is that nobody is responsible. One example is that every year, around Ganapati time, I start getting emails and Twitter messages<sup>12</sup> and texts from people saying, “You are active only during Ganapati. What about the masjids which start making noise around 5 am everyday?” And every year my answer is the same. That I have taken noise [readings] of masjids. I have put them before the court. The government of Maharashtra has filed an affidavit stating that it is going to ensure that masjids do not make noise. The Supreme Court of India has filed – has passed an order that religion is not a ground to violate Noise Rules. The – one of the parties who is, ah, most into Ganapati celebrations [i.e. Shiv Sena], organizes the maximum number of Ganapati pandals, after I measured noise during a Dussehra rally of that party, made a statement that I should measure noise at the masjids first. And I said, “I have done that. I have gone to court. I have got the orders. You are the party that controls the BMC, because you are the elected party in the corporators, and it is up to the BMC to have those loudspeakers removed. Why has your party not done it? Is it the job of the party? Or the person in charge of the BMC? Or is that the job of an NGO?” The very next day, that whole conversation died down and the discussion went on to something else. So I would like to say again that noise is cuts across every religion. It’s a health issue. I think everybody here knows it. But it has been made into a political issue, and the only way to break that very strong political input into noise is to turn it into a health one.*

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<sup>12</sup> One such public internet comment responding to Abdulali’s decibel measurement during a Hindu festival stated, “there is a mosque behind our building, where people from the mosques shout since 5 am in the morning. Is this not a noise pollution? Loudspeakers also should be removed from the mosques which make noise 5 times a day and that too is a permanent feature. Does not Sumaira stop this noise pollution?” Another internet commenter wrote of Abdulali’s activities, “No mention of noise pollution caused by mosques and madrasas. With their insistent calls five times a day (so loud 55 decibel is a joke here, overlapping calls by at least 4 mosques at different times of one or two minutes apart), their announcements of deaths, births, goods lost, religious anti-Semitic speeches all year long. I am quite sure Miss Sumaira Abdulali must have covered all such noise pollutant studies.”

As Abdulali points out above, Shiv Sena has enjoyed control of the state and city governments for much of the last three decades, yet, despite their consistent complaints over amplified *azān*, have seemingly done very little to alter the situation. When I asked Abdulali for her opinion about this, she told me:

*It's very simple. So long as they let them be, they always have a way of justifying their own noise. The day they take them down [loudspeakers in mosques], they can't justify why they're doing it [i.e. continuing to hold loud events like their annual Dussehra rally]. So, it's a win-win for everybody. You keep throwing the ball, and allowing it to continue. So that's why, when I called them out on it, that was perhaps the first time someone had said that straight...And the next day, the never mentioned that again as a problem. I mean, after that I started getting calls from individuals, some of them quite threatening. But as a party, you know – Uddhav Thackeray, Bal Thackeray – never again.*

Abdulali once expressed her feeling that she is in a unique position to criticize Shiv Sena leaders given her Maharashtrian background, saying:

*And that's another reason why it's only a person like me who can take up this issue. I'll explain that a little more. Because of my family background, no one can say I'm not Maharashtrian. In spite of the fact that I'm Muslim, and I have a Muslim name. Because the Shiv Sena did try at some point. This is before the Dussehra thing happened [in 2010]...They said something about me or about noise, probably about masjids, and I wrote back on Facebook to say – they said something like "Leave," or something, "Leave for Pakistan." And I said, "I don't recognize the Shiv Sena's right to tell me to leave because my family has lived here [in Maharashtra] since 1880 when my great-grandfather was president of the Indian National Congress and took part in the freedom struggle. And a lot of people in my family, including my grandmother, were jailed during the freedom struggle, and in fact, an uncle of mine led the Salt March when Gandhiji was jailed. So, these are my credentials for talking about the politics of this country. Now tell me yours. You [the Thackeray family] come from Bihar<sup>13</sup>, which is North India, much later than my family came here, and no member of the Thackeray family has been part of the freedom struggle. So I question your right to say anything to me." And this was reported in – I think it was Frontline... So, it's*

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<sup>13</sup> In 2012, INC politician Digvijay Singh suggested that accounts contained within a book written by Bal Thackeray's father, Keshav (Prabodhankar) Thackeray seem to indicate that the family's ancestral roots may lie in the Bihari province of Magadh. Singh's claim, if true, poses a damaging prospect for the Thackeray family's carefully-crafted public image, since the Shiv Sena platform and rhetoric has historically been so entrenched in defending the rights of native Maharashtrians against the perceived threat of cultural outsiders, particularly migrants from North Indian states like Bihar.

*impossible for them to say I'm an outsider here. They can't do it. And, therefore, the politics of the whole thing is very crucial.*

*...many people told me I would not be able to take the neutral attitude [towards measuring decibel levels from religious sources] because I'm Muslim. And, in fact, I'm talking against Hindu festivals. But, the fact is, I am neutral. I may have any kind of name, but I am neutral. And, in fact, at some point, it was a worry to me that the Muslims are going to issue some fatwa or do something like that. Because, I mean, from both sides really. And it's not that there's no precedent for that, people like Salman Rushdie are Muslims who have been threatened by the Muslim community. So I've been as worried about that as the Hindu extremism, the Muslim extremism. But it hasn't happened. And again, I think that's because my political background [i.e. her family's legacy in Maharashtra] can't be challenged.*

Abdulali is not the only anti-noise activist who brought up issues of the potential for perceptions of bias in measuring the decibel levels associated with the activities of a particular religious group. Activist Ajay Marathe, for example, told me that when it comes to taking measurements of a religious group's sound source, "It's better that it comes from within." Marathe, a Hindu, says that he most often tends to refrain from filing PIL cases concerning sound from mosques for that reason, with some rare exceptions. Another informant, Dr. Mahesh Bedekar, explained to me that when he began his work to reduce decibel levels during Hindu festivals:

*"[t]here was a lot of opposition from politicians, from some Hindu organizations like Shiv Sena, [who said] 'Why are you talking only about Hindu religion, why don't you talk about the [...] loudspeakers on mosques?' I'm talking about Hindu religion because I celebrate those festivals and I feel they are not the way we ought to celebrate. I cannot talk about Islam. I don't know anything about Islam. But I'm sure that religion also doesn't say that you [should] shout on loudspeakers...But as a Hindu, I felt that my festivals had been totally hijacked by politicians.*

## **CONCLUSION**

Sound and soundscape have become core components of Mumbai's political sphere. The music performed during festival events represents the driving force behind the mass attendance of young, working-class people at those events. The *mandals* organizing those

events are aligned with politicians, who in turn have made festivals a central part of their campaign strategy since the final decades of the twentieth century. Politicians compete to be heard, demonstrating their authority and political worth by sponsoring the loudest events in a given festival. Loudness itself represents a crucial aspect of the political message being communicated. A subdued festival event will reveal an impotent political patron, and will inevitably fail to attract a satisfactory crowd. Politicians and *mandals* have thereby come to rely entirely on their unhindered ability to continue organizing loud events, even when challenged by those who object to the noise. In order to continue benefiting from their involvement in festivals, therefore, politicians and political parties have found it imperative to hinder the efforts of anti-noise activists and any other individuals that would seek to limit the campaign efficacy of festivals through the abatement of their decibel levels. Chapters Five and Six will further reveal the ways in which politically-linked *mandals* have obtained unchecked power in working-class communities, exploring the institutional role *mandals* have assumed in the economic lives of Mumbaikars through case studies of street musicians who perform during festivals.



## CHAPTER FIVE: Patronage Relationships Between Festival *Mandals* and Musical Laborers

### INTRODUCTION

The alignment of festival *mandals* and political parties has led to an immense escalation in the presence of Hindu festivals within Mumbai's urban soundscape and has given sound unprecedented weight in the workings of local electoral politics. Moreover, as the following two chapters will show, festival *mandals*, enabled in part by their collection of funds through *vargani*, have become significant providers of employment and services within the same communities that represent key vote banks for their affiliated politicians, especially communities made up of working-class Marathi-speaking Hindus.

The festival economy has become a crucial part of Mumbai's social wellbeing, and *mandals* hold control over it. The power that *mandals* wield as indispensable institutions in certain communities further reinforces their importance to politicians. My participant-observation research with a group of musicians who rely primarily on the festival circuit for work opportunities provides an exemplary case of the economic and political relationships that arise from festival season and its soundscape. This band of musicians represents the focus of this chapter as well as Chapter Six.

With this chapter, I suggest that issues of both economics and aesthetics, with regard to soundscape, are crucial in the processes through which many Mumbaikars situate themselves as members of political and ethno-religious communities, as well as conceptualize the relationship between those communities and their urban environment.

### **MANDALS AND THE STRATEGIC PROVISION OF EMPLOYMENT AND SERVICES**

Chapter Four of this dissertation established that Hindu festival *mandals* have developed an unseemly reputation among many Mumbaikars over the years. This reputation derives primarily from the prevalence of acts of coercion and violence associated with the collection of donations through *vargani*, as well as the occasional involvement of organized criminals (*gunde*) in *mandal* operations. Despite such widespread allegations (and verifiable instances) of criminality, *mandals* nevertheless tend to enjoy support and a reputation for perceived benevolence within the largely Marathi-speaking and working-class or lower-middle-class communities in which they are often situated. This disparity in perception might be attributed in part to the essential role *mandals* have come to occupy in these communities as a source of employment. *Mandals* hold de facto control over the formidable festival economy, upon which a large number of Mumbaikars from lower socioeconomic backgrounds depend for their entire annual income. The months making up the festival season bring an explosion of economic activity to Mumbai, and, *mandals*, with their *vargani*-based funding structure, can offer employment to those that need it.<sup>1</sup> The staggering scale of Mumbai's religious festivals attests to the massive economic potential of festival season<sup>2</sup>. For example, an estimated 3

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<sup>1</sup> See Chapter Four for greater detail in quantifying the funds raised by *mandals* through *vargani*. Due to the largely informal nature of the festival economy, reliable quantitative estimates of the festival season's capacity to generate jobs are not immediately available, but it is clear that large numbers of people do indeed depend on festivals for work.

<sup>2</sup> Gokhale (1985) suggests that religious festivals have had a profound impact on the regional economy even prior to the advent of massive *sarvajanik* festivals during the era of Tilak in the late nineteenth century. Writing on eighteenth-century Poona, Gokhale explains that the influx of non-residents into the city to attend religious festivals drove the development of the city's economy and led to an increase in employment by boosting demand for various services. He notes that around 40,000-50,000 visitors would annually

million people attended Ganpati *visarjan* ceremonies throughout Mumbai in 2015, requiring the service of 45,000 police officers (Narayan 2015)<sup>3</sup>. Ganpati celebrations happened to have come right on the heels of Bakr Eid observances that year, during which 15,000 police officers had been assigned to duty. One officer commented during Bakr Eid that “[a]s soon as the day ends, cops will gear up for immersion *bandobast* [crowd protection duty]” (quoted in Narayan 2015). As recently as 2016, there were around 1,300 officially licensed Ganeshotsav *mandals* in Mumbai (Dias 2016), which of course does not even account for the number of *mandals* working around other festivals, or those Ganeshotsav *mandals* operating without a license. Past estimates have suggested that over 10,000 Ganesh *mandals* operate in Mumbai (*Times of India* 2006).

Through *mandals*, festivals represent the most significant source of work for musicians, DJs, artists, and sculptors. Festival employment also drives business for loudspeaker rental shops and musical instrument supply and repair shops. Less visibly, festival *mandals* also provide work for contractors like builders, security personnel, private demolition and sanitation companies, and electricians who provide illumination, fans, and other necessities inside *pandals*. All of these workers are needed for the temporary infrastructure built during festival season. Members of one *mandal*, for example, once told me that they retained the 24-hour service of three electricians who slept on-site at a *pandal*

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for festivals during that period, with an urban population of approximately 60,000-100,000 (*ibid*).

<sup>3</sup> Ganpati *visarjan*’s appeal to massive numbers of people can in part be attributed to its reinvention during the late nineteenth century through the efforts of Bal Gangadhar Tilak. Moreover, the close involvement of political parties in religious festivals since the last thirty years of the twentieth century expanded the size of *visarjan* gatherings even further. For example, in 1979, the *Times of India* reported that that year’s *visarjan* ceremony at Girgaum Chowpatty alone brought 400,000 people together in attendance (*Times of India* 1979).

during the entire Ganpati festival in the event that any need for maintenance or repairs happened to arise. Those workers were apparently employed by a larger electrical contractor who provides lighting for around fifty other *mandals*. Outside of festival season, many of the workers employed by *mandals* during festivals rely only on more sparse opportunities like weddings, which are generally less lucrative than festivals. In one case I met a group of artists and builders that constructed a *pandal* for a Ganpati *mandal* who said that they typically get some work through contracts on Bollywood films during the remainder of the year.

*Mandal* members themselves typically work on a volunteer basis. Furthermore, the officers working in any given *mandal* almost always come from the same local communities in which the *mandal* operates, and in many cases *mandal* officers grew up participating in activities sponsored by the *mandal* for whom they would later volunteer. Many *mandals* have term limits on officer positions, and it is not uncommon for officers to rotate positions every few years. The *mandal* members I spoke to all had jobs outside their *mandal* activities and took time off before and during festivals to fulfill their obligations to their *mandal*. "Most of the guys [from the *mandal*] take off work [...] Let the work go undone for eleven days!" one Ganpati *mandal* officer told me. A disproportionately high number of *mandal* officers I met held jobs with the city, such as engineers working for the municipal corporation. I also spoke with multiple *mandal* officers who worked for political parties like Shiv Sena or Maharashtra Navnirman Sena (MNS). Almost all *mandal* officers are men, and there are only a few instances in which I heard of women working in any administrative capacity for *mandals*.

One of my informants, the working committee chairman of a large Ganpati *mandal*, described some of the necessary preparation he oversees leading up to and during the festival:

*We start in July. July, August, September. Three months. And there are about 350 artisans and craftsman who are working from morning, nine o'clock, until eleven o'clock in the evening. So, there's a lot of hard work.*

*...And the volunteers – now, you see, these girls, they just, "Chalo, chalo, chalo" [i.e. guiding visitors along the queue to the pandal]. And the guys that stop them outside. And there are guys who issue gate passes. There are guys who take control of the lord [the Ganpati murti]. And there are guys who control here the line. And you see the line. We are not as big as Lalbaug Raja [Mumbai's largest Ganpati mandal], but we are almost at par with them, as far as our name of the lord is concerned. Maybe they have ten times, maybe fifteen times the money we have, but see, we have less volunteers than them. They have about four thousand. We have two hundred. But people who are working here are about, maybe fifty. [An additional] one-fifty, they come only for eleven days. Fifty people, they work before the festival for three months...*

*The god [Ganpati] gives you the energy. I come in the evening and go at 8 o'clock in the morning. So I don't know how I get this energy at this age, you know. Fourteen hours working. And monotonous work! Monotonous. I mean, you need to say only one thing, all the time. But still, the energy comes. But, look, there is one guy here, his age is eighty. He's been working since I came in the morning, and he's still there. Eighty! And he gets the energy. What is this? Amazing.*

Reflecting on the number of jobs generated as a result of Ganeshotsav, my informant framed the festival economy in terms of the god Ganpati himself visiting the physical world to offer an act of divine intervention:

*When he comes, when he arrives, before his arrival, lakhs [hundreds of thousands] of people, they get work. They get employment. He's an actual god who comes to earth, to save people...He actually comes. What every Mumbaikar, what every Indian would say, I would say he actually comes...*

*Those who are jobless, those who are unemployed. They get work, they earn money. And they earn money – good money. You know, three, four times what they would get in the [off-season] period. In these three months they get about three times the money. If they save the money, they can go on for eight, nine months.*

While the festival economy can certainly present a boon to many of Mumbai's underemployed citizens, its effects on public sector institutions appear to be mixed. The Mount Mary Fair, celebrated by Catholics in the suburb of Bandra, brings some considerable measure of revenue to the BMC through stalls leased out to vendors. The municipal corporation has been collecting *lakhs* of rupees this way since at least the 1980s (Menon 1986), and by 2017 the Mount Mary Fair was generating between Rs 30 and Rs 35 *lakh* (approximately \$41,300-\$48,200) each year for the city treasury (Eeshanpriya 2017). However, during Ganeshotsav, a significantly larger festival, the BMC only collects a comparatively miniscule amount from *mandals*, especially when considering the costs incurred by the city because of the festival, such as deploying additional police and fire personnel or cleaning up beaches and bodies of water after *visarjan* ceremonies. A 2006 report noted that only a small fraction of Mumbai's Ganesh *mandals* register with the city and receive permits, and therefore the majority of unpermitted *mandals* operate without having paid required fees to the city in conjunction with the permit process (*Times of India* 2006). *Mandals* are charged fees based on the amount of space they occupy with *pandals*, and this amount is only determined by the BMC when a *mandal* applies for a permit (*ibid*). As a result, the BMC receives less than one *lakh* rupees each year from Ganpati *mandals*. It should be noted that politicians typically work with *mandals* regardless of whether or not the BMC has issued a permit to them (*ibid*). In the past, Ganpati *mandals* were required to pay an additional fee to the BMC for any advertisements sold around their *pandals*, but the BMC has since waived this fee (*Times of India* 2007). Furthermore, under the Shiv Sena-BJP government in the 1990s, *mandals* were granted a concession allowing them to pay reduced rates on the sizeable electrical utility bills associated with maintaining their

*pandals* (*Times of India* 1995). With regard to the national festival economy more generally, a 1998 report estimated that the numerous bank closings taking place during festivals could cost the Indian government up to Rs 100 *crore* for each day closed (Deshmukh 1998), which, adjusting for inflation, would equate to approximate Rs 370 *crore* or \$51 million USD today.

Despite, and in some cases because of, these festival-related costs to government, *mandals* have become repositories of considerable wealth generated through festivals. The funds collected by *mandals* through *vargani* and other efforts are used to finance not only festival planning and the employment that goes along with it, but also an array of other activities and services for local communities, both during and outside of festival season. Some of the festival *mandals* I met with provide services that include free food (in the form of auspicious offerings known as *prasād*), with many of the meals' recipients coming from poor backgrounds or living in slum areas. Moreover, outside of festival season, many larger *mandals* provide basic forms of social services that, in other contexts, might seem to be the kinds of roles and responsibilities ordinarily held by government institutions. For example, I interviewed members of one large festival *mandal* that financed medical services like dialysis for locals as well as having constructed several community centers including a library, a computer lab, and a yoga center. Another *mandal* supplies books and organizes an essay competition for local low-income students, conducts a youth drama program, assists with a program that works with developmentally disabled children, founded an initiative to remove pollution from a nearby lake, and conducts mosquito control in slum areas with a fogging machine to cut down on the spread of diseases like malaria and dengue. The same *mandal* also provides extensive services in a Konkan village from which many members of

the *mandal's* community originated before migrating to Mumbai. In that village, the *mandal* built a well, founded a neonatal care center, held a blood donation drive, donated supplies to disabled students, and organizes a regular trip that brings doctors from Mumbai to provide free medical services in the village. Festival *mandals* have also been known to provide education services (*Times of India* 1991), childcare (Date 1991), sports programs (Mishra 2003a), and relief efforts for victims of natural disasters such as floods (*Times of India* 2005b) and droughts (Jaisinghani 2015).

In becoming a major provider of employment and services in the working-class Marathi-speaking communities where they are most active, festival *mandals* have come to assume many of the roles and responsibilities held in other contexts by both industrial enterprises and government institutions. *Mandals* have therefore managed to ensconce themselves in very powerful, quasi-governmental positions, establishing their indispensability to communities in precarious or often dire economic circumstances by instituting a mechanism to collect funds (through *vargani*) and finance basic services and employment programs. Anthropologist Thomas Blom Hansen writes about the multiple modes of sovereignty and “informal authority” that operate outside the state in Mumbai, specifically drawing reference to Hindu nationalist groups in suggesting that “competing networks of power and authority seek to organize violence, retributions, and entitlements” (2005:170). The power held by *mandals* exemplifies this kind of authority beyond the state, especially as *mandals* have been known to deploy physical force in their efforts to levy the collection of *vargani*. However, the veneer of altruism *mandals* maintain by providing jobs and services conceals the fact that, unlike government institutions, *mandals* are not subject to any public oversight and therefore have no obligation to be equitable or non-



discriminatory in selecting *which* communities or individuals they decide to serve. This potential for bias and favoritism is most clearly underscored by the widespread tendency for *mandals* to maintain close and openly acknowledged affiliations with political parties, especially those aligned with movements like Hindu nationalism, Maharashtrian regionalism, and Marathi language chauvinism. With their connections to political parties, *mandals* need not remain impartial in their capacity to provide services or employment, and can focus these efforts on communities that align with those constituting the vote banks necessary to for their affiliated parties to maintain their influence in the political sphere.

One of my informants, a member of an affluent family with a background outside Maharashtra, discussed her views regarding the high levels of approval and regard for festival *mandals* generally found in non-elite communities. She said:

*All Dahi Handi, Ganpati, Navratri, Moharrum, Eid, none of the educated [classes], like advocates, teachers, lawyers, doctors, journalists, professors – you will never find them dancing even in their own marriage functions on the roads...*

*If someone [offers] to give five hundred or a thousand rupees and tells my son to go on that forty-foot Dahi Handi, I will never allow. But for these poor slum dwellers, this five hundred to one thousand [rupees] matters a lot. And when, for instance, there is one mandal, backed by, of course, some politician – they will cook food for eleven days. So afternoon lunch and night dinner is being provided in the mandal to some thousand families, thousand people. But this is one way for politicians to attract the people. I never go to eat food in that mandal. I'm from an upper-middle-class family, educated one. I will never go. I might go to some gurudwara, mandir, once to take some prasad, but I will never go eleven days lunch and dinner to sit in that queue to, like, you know, to get food for free. But for a slum dweller – husband, wife, two-three children, every day – see, if I'm a slum dweller, what do I think? "Oh, I'm saving my money." Okay? Now, if I tell that family, "Don't go to that mandal," what they will think? "Okay, she is wrong. We are getting food for free there. I'm saving my money." So these politicians have taken our country for granted. It's like that...*

*You will never find [members of more elite socio-economic classes participating on the street during festival celebrations]. You will find only these taporis [vagabonds] on the*

*roads. And these politicians hypnotize them, or what, I don't know. It's all that black money.*

This informant accurately highlights the way in which *mandals* (and the politicians associated with them) have found particular success through appealing to the needs of vulnerable and disadvantaged communities, cultivating an image of benevolence by selectively providing jobs and services to people that are otherwise underemployed and underserved by local industry and government alike. The characterization of the appeal of politicians and *mandals* to lower-class communities as a form of “hypnotism” may be less accurate, however. The individuals comprising these “vote bank” communities are not passive in their support for *mandals* or any particular political party. To the contrary, like any typical voter contributing to a democratic system, they are offering their support to those politicians seeming to be most inclined to serve their needs and interests as a community.

### **MANDALS AND MUSICIANS**

In planning for festivals, *mandal* officers are responsible for hiring musicians to perform during events. Traditionally, festival events feature bands performing music in Maharashtrian regional styles, although it is also common to find DJs playing songs (often remixed) from Marathi and Hindi films or instrumental electronic dance music. In situations where *mandals* choose to hire bands rather than DJs, some of the more popular live music idioms found in Mumbai include *dhol tasha pathaks* (a kind of percussion group found throughout north and central India based around the *dhol* and *tasha* drums), brass bands (an increasingly outmoded variety of marching band with a legacy in British colonial-era military music), *koli* bands (a Maharashtrian style associated with the

fishermen's caste, or *koli*), *naśik dhols* (a regionalized take on *dhol tasha* originating in the city of Nashik), and *banjos* (a local style in western Maharashtrian cities originally centered around the use of an amplified electric version of the string instrument *bulbul tarang*, a.k.a. *shahi baaja* or "Indian banjo").

*Banjo* groups represent a relatively recent phenomenon, only appearing in Mumbai towards the very end of the twentieth century<sup>4</sup>, but in this short time they have become a popular fixture of festivals, weddings, and other public events involving processional music. In contemporary *banjos*, an electronic keyboard is frequently substituted for the group's namesake instrument, perhaps because of its greater affordability, versatility, and ease of playing. Accompanied by any number of percussionists playing a mix of Western and Indian drums, the keyboard or *bulbul tarang* in a *banjo* provides melodies for a repertoire that features instrumental arrangements of classic and contemporary Marathi and Hindi film songs, Marathi patriotic songs, and occasionally a devotional. *Banjos* typically forgo the substantial brass and woodwind sections found in adjacent styles such as brass bands or *koli* bands, as a single amplified *bulbul tarang* or keyboard can produce sounds at a volume level equal to a dozen wind instruments given a powerful enough amplifier and speakers. This makes both the electronic keyboard and the electric *bulbul tarang* instruments well suited for loud outdoor performance, especially in situations demanding the need for audibility over competing sounds both from the other instruments in one's own band as well as the multitude of other sounds present during a festival.

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<sup>4</sup> Print references to amplified electric *bulbul tarang*, or banjo, can be found as early as the late 1980s and early 1990s (e.g. *Times of India* 1989a; 1992a), when Bombay police and BMC officials attempted to curb public uses of the instrument during festivals in an effort to reduce decibel levels. References to *banjos*, as a type of band featuring an electric *bulbul tarang*, are much more recent, dating back only to the early 2000s (e.g. Manjal 2000).

The two most common generalized categories of events featuring live music are processions, or “road shows” (sometimes called *jalūs* or, in the case of wedding processions, *barāt*), and “stage shows.” During road shows, musicians perform as they move through local streets along a predetermined route, often with hand-pulled carts or flatbed trucks carrying performers, instruments, or loudspeakers. Usually these processions begin and end at sites of ritual significance to the festival at hand, for example a procession for Ganpati *visarjan*, in which a Ganesh idol is conveyed from its *mandap* (shrine) to a nearby body of water, such as the Girgaum Chowpatty beach on Back Bay along Mumbai’s Marine Drive. Crowds attending road shows gather at street level or on the rooftops and balconies of residential buildings to watch the pageantry or dance along to the music. Depending on factors like the type of event, the time of day or night, and the location, in many cases there is a strongly gendered aspect to these spaces, with more men engaging with processions at street level and women more likely to watch from above on balconies, rooftops, or at windows.

For stage shows, *mandals* erect temporary or semi-permanent stages in prominent public spaces within their locality. Sometimes these stages are repurposed after the festival ends, but in most cases their placement disrupts the flow of traffic in neighborhood thoroughfares, and therefore they are dismantled after serving their purpose in the festival. Stage shows are common during festival events that feature dances, such as *garbas* and *dandiya raas*, two dance forms associated with the Navratri festival that have origins in Gujarat but have become very popular in Mumbai, even among non-Gujaratis. Generally speaking, stage shows and road shows often involve different kinds of live music, but in some cases the same bands that perform during road shows will also find work playing

stage shows. In such instances, these bands will adjust their repertoire and performance style to accommodate the needs of the event, with a given band's stage show mode of performance (sometimes known as an "orchestra" performance) more likely to include vocalists, expanded instrumentation, and more intricate arrangements as compared to road shows. While it is incredibly rare to find women playing instruments in bands in general, and during road shows in particular, stage shows provide occasional opportunities for women to perform as vocalists.

### **JAIDEVA BEATS: BANJO DESCRIPTION AND MEMBER BACKGROUNDS**

The *banjo* group Jaideva Beats boasts a large roster of over fifty members. For any given performance, though, usually only a fraction of the band members are available and required, with ensemble size and instrumentation being determined by the needs of the event in question. The band is notably well rehearsed, convening frequently and for long hours in their ad hoc headquarters by the sea. In my time with them, Jaideva Beats demonstrated a keen ability to keep their repertory up-to-date with thoughtfully arranged and skillfully executed renditions of the latest Marathi film song hits. For example, following the tremendous success of the Marathi film *Sairat* in 2016, three of the film's most popular songs ("Zingaat," "Yad Lagla," and "Sairat Zaala Ji") became staples in the band's subsequent performances, interspersed with devotionals such as an instrumental arrangement of the Siddhivinayak *mantra* "Jai Dev Jai Dev Mangal Murti" and Hindi film song classics like "Ek Do Teen" (from the 1988 film *Tezaab*). On my first full day attending rehearsal, the band, perhaps in an attempt to impress me with their mastery of American

music, erupted in an impromptu rendition of “My Heart Will Go On” from the 1997 blockbuster *Titanic*.

Several band members expressed their motivation in striving to integrate innovative stylistic or instrumental elements into the band’s music. For example, ongoing discussions within the band hinted at plans to raise funds for Rajesh to purchase percussion instruments in Brazil when he stops there on his next voyage working on the cruise ship. They suggested that adding these kinds of elements to their shows could serve as a useful way to set them apart from other *banjos* and earn them more attention from audiences and *mandals*. Because this high level of dedication to their craft, along with some resourceful networking skills of a few of the members, Jaideva Beats is highly regarded among Mumbai’s *banjo* groups. “Look,” one of the members told me, “the *mandals* here – they want something special. They want more attention for their *mandal* from the people all over Mumbai. That’s why they call us. Because we are famous. We are popular.” That same band member actually confirmed a suspicion I had had that perhaps this desire on the part of the band to distinguish themselves from other *banjos* might have contributed to their interest in having me perform with them. It is remarkably unusual to find a Westerner playing in a *banjo*, and it was clear to me as well as the band members that my presence, for better or worse, drew much attention from intrigued, and sometimes confused, audiences.

Many of the band’s more “senior” members (i.e. those over the age of roughly 23) have had quite a number of years of experience, having played together previously in another relatively well-established *banjo*. This predecessor, however, splintered following an internal conflict between its members, resulting in the formation of Jaideva Beats as well as a rival *banjo* operating in the same neighborhood of Dadar. I witnessed a friendly

manifestation of this rivalry one evening during a road show when our procession happened to cross paths with that of the other band. The convergence of the two bands triggered a sonic competition, in which each band attempted to outplay the other by hitting their drums with increasing vigor, with the goal of drowning out the opposing band entirely. With the surrounding crowd goading us on, the volume continued to escalate until both bands seemed to accept an impasse and resumed moving along our respective routes.

Nearly all of the members of Jaideva Beats identify with the caste category of Maratha and come from families with origins in Konkan villages, primarily in the Ratnagiri District of Maharashtra. In most cases, the band members maintain strong ties with these ancestral villages. For example, several band members make an annual group journey to their ancestral village for an extended vacation, usually just after finishing shows during Navratri. Among bandmates' families, many individuals take up semi-permanent residence in Konkan on a seasonal basis, or make frequent trips to return there. All of the band members are Hindu, and all of them speak Marathi as their first language with most also speaking Hindi. A few members also have basic, or in Rajesh's case, rather advanced, skills with English. The families of most members have modest socio-economic backgrounds, and a number of the band members told me that their families had previously been living in slum areas before becoming better established and at least somewhat upwardly mobile in the city, although in at least one case a band member's family was still living in slum housing. Nearly all of the band members are unmarried and live with their parents or other family.

One time, band member Pratik told me about how he felt playing music in Mumbai different from playing music in a village in Konkan, despite the fact that many

neighborhoods in Mumbai are made up largely of people from Konkan villages. In any given village, he explained, locals might not be entirely aware of the ways in which festivals are celebrated in the city. He continued:

*Because, in our village, people are not – every person is not using this kind of [smartphone]. They are not aware of technology, they are not aware of plastic money systems, and ATMs and all. They are just doing their daily work in the traditional way. They like banjo music and all, they like DJs and all, but in our village, there are no local cultural banjos.*

*[Gesturing to his friend Omkar, who was sitting with us] If you go to Omkar's village – he's from the Dhangar caste [a Schedule Tribe in Maharashtra who are known for herding and historically for being semi-nomadic]. They're goat herders, so they have their own dhols, and lezim [a kind of Maharashtrian percussion instrument constructed from a wooden stick with cymbals attached, as well as the name of a dance named after them]...[playing a video on his phone of a lezim performance] Old people in villages, they love this kind of celebration. They don't want DJs, or more drummers, or more dhol tashas.*

*...Every village has their own culture, has their own traditions of playing instruments....Maybe in the next 50 years it will change. If people from [Mumbai] move there [back to their ancestral villages], only then [would banjo groups like those found in Mumbai become popular in those villages].*

Pratik also explained the variation found in musical idioms between Mumbai and other cities in western Maharashtra:

*You'll find that people around cities like Pune...have their own culture of playing drums, like dhol tasha. [Within the dhol tasha idiom] there is an element of competition [i.e. sonically, between groups]. Some groups have fifty dhols. Now, can you imagine how much sound can be produced by fifty dhols! Some of them have hundreds of dhols. So, it's just about competition. And there are thousands of dhol tasha groups in Pune.*

*...Another is Nashik baja, which was invented in Nashik. What we play in Mumbai is local to Mumbai, like koli band.*

Pratik's mother, who comes from a Goan part of Konkan, overheard our conversation and interjected in her native Konkani. "My mom is saying that Mumbai is made just for celebration," Pratik translated. "Festivals, festivals. Every day there is a festival!" Pratik



contrasted the ceaseless excitement of Mumbai's festivals with the atmosphere of his mother's village:

*We are playing drums and all night at night, leaving home at whatever hour and coming back at whatever hour. In the village you cannot find people celebrating Diwali with crackers [as is common in the city]. In the village they don't celebrate Diwali this way. They celebrate only for one day...And they don't celebrate Ganeshotsav like here in Mumbai.*

Pulling up a video on his phone of a band performing a *bhajan* during Ganeshotsav in a Konkan village, Pratik emphasizes that people in the villages prefer comparatively subdued performances of devotional music for festivals, rather than the boisterous renditions of secular pop music found on the streets of Mumbai during festival season.

Despite the Jaideva Beats' relative prominence in the Mumbai *banjo* scene, all of the members depend on work outside the band. One band member, Omprakash, suggested that young boys from low-income backgrounds sometimes get the impression that playing in a *banjo* might offer an easy and enjoyable way to earn money, only later discovering the activity to be less lucrative than they had imagined. According to band members, Jaideva Beats gets paid around Rs10,000-15,000 (about \$140-215 USD) for a typical show during a festival, with that money being split among members after expenses<sup>5</sup>. Weddings generally pay less, and often bands will take on wedding bookings gratis, expecting only a bit of

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<sup>5</sup> A 2000 article by journalist Shilpa Manjal discusses the going rate at that time for bands hired for Ganeshotsav events in Mumbai. Manjal states that *banjos* and *naśik dhols* could typically earn between Rs800 and Rs8,000 for each hour of performance, while *koli* bands and brass bands were able to charge slightly more as their uniforms provided them with a more refined look that placed them in higher demand (2000). Manjal also interviewed several bands that played traditional Marathi music rather than arrangements of film songs and other contemporary popular genres. These bands were comprised of up to 60 members, mostly older men who worked in mills, and had in some cases been playing together for decades. Such bands had already become extremely rare in Ganpati celebrations by the time of Manjal's writing, and charged considerably more than their younger counterparts, with fees ranging between Rs10,000 and Rs20,000 in addition to charging compensation for time taken off from work at the mills (*ibid*).

publicity from the engagement. Band expenses include costs of transportation to performances, instruments and instrument repairs, as well as uniforms, which, when I first met the group, consisted simply of a light blue polo shirt printed with the band's name and logo. Later on in my fieldwork, the band ordered much more elaborate uniforms for all of its members, including me, comprised of saffron-colored *dhoti*, eggshell *kurtas*, and *sadri* in a lustrous gold color accented with a floral pattern in saffron that matched our *dhoti*.

A few band members are able to supplement their income from Jaideva Beats engagements with other opportunities for work as a musician. Two of the group's most talented drummers, Harsh and Rajesh's older brother Abhay, play with several other groups and teach music as well, while Sunil has found work with a band that frequently plays in bars with a seedy reputation, a fact that often invites playful teasing from his bandmates. Drummer Akshay studies audio engineering at a local college, hoping that these skills might someday offer work in the studios that produce Hindi and Marathi film music. There is slightly more demand for the talents of those vocalists who join the group for stage shows. Some of these vocalists are skilled in multiple styles of singing, and a few have received some level of training in Hindustani classical music. These singers are not formally attached to Jaideva Beats in the same way as the instrumentalists, and perform more frequently with other groups for live performances and small-scale studio projects.

Although band members generally require additional work besides playing with Jaideva Beats, the income from the band is far from negligible. In many cases, band members depend on this extra income from playing with a *banjo*, and it can provide the means for educational and financial advancement that would otherwise be absent. For example, Rajesh told me that when he first started playing in a *banjo*, his parents and older

family members told him, “Don’t waste your time.” But after he was able to demonstrate that his musical activities were not only personally rewarding but also financial gainful, their attitudes shifted towards support and enthusiasm. When he was younger, Rajesh said, “I didn’t have money to finish college. But I started playing *banjo* and paid my college fees until I made my graduation and Master’s. All because of *banjo*.”

Rajesh’s work experience and education stands out among the band members, and the path that led him to his current seasonal job on a cruise ship is a fascinating one. I learned a bit about Rajesh’s past one day as the two of us rode his motorbike past a small lane near the Currey Road Bridge in Lower Parel on our way to a Jaideva Beats performance for a *dandiya* in Kala Chowky. Rajesh made a detour down the lane, riding past some restaurants and a Shiv Sena *shakha* to point out a small building with a sign out front advertising English classes. “That’s where I learned how to speak English,” he told me. He explained that he had been working a job and playing in a *banjo* group at the time to pay his way through a hospitality program at a nearby college, as well as the English course from the ad. I consistently felt impressed and inspired by Rajesh’s drive and energy. At times, he would proudly start listing the languages in which he had cultivated a functional competence through his experiences working on the cruise ship. Narrating his personal background, he told me:

*Before, [my family] didn’t have money to eat. I was washing pots in a hotel [i.e. a restaurant in Indian parlance]...My father told me, “We don’t have money for college.” So at night, I washed pots. They gave me only Rs 600. At that time I was 17-18 [years old]... And in the morning I was attending college everyday. I passed [my classes], and after one year at my job they liked me and gave me a promotion. Then I became a [kitchen] steward.*

*When I finished my fifteenth [final year of Bachelor’s degree] and graduation, they knew that “This guy is the perfect guy. He knows everything.” Until that year, I got 5 years experience, plus I graduated, and they gave me the opportunity to steward. Then*

*I became a steward and got Rs 20,000 salary. And I was playing music. I got more money. So I was simultaneously attending college, getting my Master's in commerce. Then I got a year working for Udhav Thackeray of Shiv Sena. I was his butler. He told me, "Rajesh, no one is like you."*

It surprised me greatly to learn that Rajesh had previously worked for Shiv Sena chief Uddhav Thackeray. He first revealed this information very casually one night as we rode past a billboard bearing the faces of Thackeray and his son, Aaditya, founder and chairman of Shiv Sena's youth program, Yuva Sena. Rajesh explained that he got the job in the Thackeray household after Uddhav Thackeray himself dined at the restaurant where he was working. This visit provided Rajesh with the opportunity to meet the political leader. During this exchange, Rajesh mentioned his *aunty*<sup>6</sup>, who worked for the Sena in their Dadar headquarters. Thackeray recalled meeting Rajesh's *aunty*, and apparently enjoyed this brief interaction with Rajesh enough to offer him a job on the spot.

### **BANJOS, SAṄGĪT, NOISE, AND SPACE**

Rajesh and other members of the group suggested that many Mumbaikars, especially those from more privileged socio-economic classes, hold a low opinion of *banjos* and the young men who play in them. On one occasion, as Pratik and I rode sleepy-eyed onboard a train taking us back home from a show that ran late into the night, Pratik pointed out that middle-class Indians often hold disapproving attitudes about musicians because their profession, with its irregular working hours, is not conducive to conventional

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<sup>6</sup> In India and elsewhere in South Asia, the term *aunty* can convey alternate meanings in addition to its standard usage as a diminutive of "aunt." For example, *aunty* can be used generally as a term of respect for an older woman. Furthermore, and with greater relevance in this particular usage, *aunty* can serve to express fictive kinship relations to an older woman to whom one has close ties as a family friend or through sharing some significant component of one's background such as connections to the same ancestral village.

family life. Siddesh, a vocalist and occasional collaborator with the band, described the “low-culture” connotations of *banjos* and other “vernacular” musical idioms taking place primarily in public streets. He said that perhaps *banjo* music’s disrepute might stem from its associations with alcohol consumption during ebullient events like festivals. “The higher class people basically look down on *banjos*...They prefer something like *saṅgīt*,” Siddesh told me. Like many other musicians I spoke to, Siddesh insisted that musical forms like *banjos* exist on a spectrum opposite *saṅgīt*, a Sanskrit-derived word that I had always taken as a general translation for “music,” but which clearly connotes significantly more nuance<sup>7</sup>. In this high/low dichotomy<sup>8</sup>, *saṅgīt* represents more of an idealized category of refined artistic expression that includes Indian classical musics, but leaves no room for more raucous forms like *banjo* music, with its connections to folk and popular musics and its

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<sup>7</sup> Scholars like Saxena (2009), Amarnath (1989), Sharma (2000), and Ranade (2006) are clear in suggesting that traditional definitions of the concept of *saṅgīt* situate the term in time and place, tying it to the classical arts of South Asia. Thakur Jaideva Singh (1995) traces early textual usages of the word *saṅgīta/saṅgīta*, noting that the term appears in the *Rāmāyaṇa* (likely written over the course of several centuries between seventh century BCE and third century CE), along with the word *ātodya*, generally taken as an equivalent for *vādyā*, a category referring to instrumental music which, according to scholars of Indian classical music, constitutes one of the three core components of *saṅgīt* (along with vocal music, *gīta*, and dance, *nṛtya*) (Sharma 2000; Roy 2004). Singh also finds that the word *saṅgīta* appears in the work of the Sanskrit author Kālidāsa (circa fourth or fifth century CE) (Singh 1995).

<sup>8</sup> These attitudes attached to the term *saṅgīt* are perhaps best demonstrated in the 1942 book *Saṅgīt of India* by Atiya Begum Fyzee-Rahamin, writer and member of the Tyabji/Faizi family, who were prominent within Bombay’s Muslim community. Faizi-Rahamin wrote that *saṅgīt* “is an elaborate and complicated science” which “was created and practised by Deities and Celestial Beings, and handed down to kings and mortals on earth” (1942:1) and has since “been recognized as a path to the realization of God” (1942:47). “For the past twenty five years,” she said, “[t]he taste for high class music is lowered and deteriorated,” and thus the masses have lamentably welcomed the sound of the “ghastly harmonium instead of the sweet strains of the *Sarangi*” (1942:1). With *saṅgīt*’s preeminence having been lost to the onset of the modern era, Fyzee-Rahamin argued that “the sense of balance is lost, with the result that life has no definite purpose and outlook, and *Music* [emphasis original] is reduced to haphazard noise to fit in with the *hectic sensationalism of Modernism*” (1942:94).

association with low-status communities. On a number of occasions, while discussing issues of noise pollution in Mumbai, I have actually heard the term *saṅgīt* deployed by both anti-noise activists and *mandal* members as a means of determining which sounds qualify as “noise” through their contradistinction to *saṅgīt*. One time, when I asked Omprakash why wealthy people might not like *banjo* music, he quipped, “They like silence.”

More generally, in discourse regarding music and noise pollution, commentators frequently deploy rhetoric that conflates factors like musical style, instrumentation, or ethnic derivation with overall decibel level and a perceived quality of “noisiness”. For example, after a 2002 Indian Supreme Court judgment ruled that “entertainment programmes” must cease by 10pm in order to reduce late-night noise, many performers of Hindustani classical music were vocal in expressing their resentment that their artistry in the realm of *saṅgīt* might be so callously lumped in with other musical forms as implicitly constituting “noise” when performed at certain hours (*Times of India* 2002). The court ruling’s failure to distinguish between musical sounds on the basis of genre category with regard to their potential to contribute to noise pollution prompted famed vocalist Pandit Jasraj to comment that, “[c]lassical music, far from polluting the mind, is a healer, and purifies the mind” (quoted in *Times of India* 2002). Such reactions to the court ruling appear to be preoccupied with issues of taste and, by extension, socio-economic status, rather than with the theoretically non-discerning measurement of sound pressure level.

In Mumbai specifically, a somewhat commonly expressed attitude among festival organizers and musicians towards music’s potential to become noise holds that amplified pop and dance songs performed by DJs contribute to noise, while music performed on “traditional” instruments does not, regardless of decibel level. In 2015, the Maharashtra

Ganeshotsav Mahasangh, an organization representing over 200 Ganpati *mandals* throughout the state, urged its affiliates to reduce noise during that year's Ganeshotsav celebrations by opting not to hire DJs with loudspeakers and instead include music and dances that are "traditional and not western style" (Mahamulkar 2015). Similarly, Mumbai's premier Ganpati *mandal* association, the Brihanmumbai Sarvajanik Ganeshotsav Samanway Samiti (BSGSS), published a code of conduct for its members in 2016, stating that noise abatement efforts require that *mandals* "avoid DJs and go for traditional ways of celebration" (*Daily News and Analysis* 2016). Denouncing the prominence of DJs playing dance music and film songs during Ganpati, BSGSS president Naresh Dahibhavkar encouraged *mandals* to "have traditional festivals and play bhajans and devotional songs" (quoted in *Daily News and Analysis* 2016). When I spoke with two officials from one of Mumbai's largest Ganeshotsav *mandals*, they insisted that the events they organize are not responsible for festival noise, since they only hire brass bands and *dhol tashas* for *visarjan*, and never DJs. To be clear, this type of rhetoric implying that traditional musical forms cannot constitute noise is common among those involved in the production of festivals (for example musicians, *mandals*, and politicians). However, it is largely absent in the discourse of contemporary anti-noise activists, who often publicly reject such logic and object to the use of traditionally instruments in events when they exceed legally permissible volumes.

Attitudes suggesting that traditional musical forms cannot constitute "noise" seem to frame an understanding of the phenomenon of noise within a classification scheme built around ideas of modernity versus tradition or cosmopolitanism versus nativism. Within this logic, "noisiness" resides in musical content and what it signifies, instead of being a product of a given sound's volume. Ironically, there is some evidence to suggest that recent

trends imploring *mandals* to support “traditional” music rather than DJs has in some cases actually increased decibel levels during festivals in Mumbai. For example, in 2012, recorded decibel levels during Ganeshotsav *visarjan* spiked in comparison to previous years, attributed in part to the fact that state and local officials that year “allowed a relaxation of noise norms” by permitting the “use of traditional instruments after midnight on the immersion day, to the dismay of anti-noise activists” (Ghanekar 2012). In 2015, researchers from College of Engineering, Pune and the Maharashtra Pollution Control Board stated that in Pune’s Ganeshotsav celebrations, the “traditional instruments like dhol tasha and pakhwaj [which] have come to dominate the festival over the last few years...[have] added to [the festival’s] rising decibel levels” (Mascarenhas 2015). In a rare moment of agreement with members of anti-noise activist organizations like Wecom Trust and Awaaz Foundation, BSGSS president Naresh Dahibhavkar conceded that high decibel levels during Ganeshotsav in 2016 resulted in many cases from the use of “traditional instruments” (Chatterjee 2016b; 2016c). “We will be making an appeal to *mandals*,” said Dahibhavkar, “to restrict the use of drums, dhols and metal plates outside Silence Zones” (quoted in Chatterjee 2016b). In a joint letter to Mumbai Police Commissioner Dattatray Padsalgikar regarding noise during that year’s *visarjan* ceremonies, activists Sumaira Abdulali and Mahesh Bedekar highlighting performances of “traditional” music, noting that the “[u]se of metal plates produced the most noise, always exceeding 110 decibels (dB), while plastic membrane drums produced over 100 dB of noise” (quoted in *The Hindu* 2016).

In general, the members of Jaideva Beats acknowledged that noise pollution during festivals presents a significant problem in Mumbai. “When you celebrate your festival but



you are harming other people for your celebration,” one of the band members told me, “we are against that. Rajesh, Akshay, me, all the guys – We are against that.” A few band members even noted the harmful effects that loudspeakers and firecrackers during festivals have had on birds and bats in Mumbai, suggesting that the city’s relative lack of trees to absorb loud sound has exacerbated the noise issue. “We have everything here in Mumbai,” Rajesh once said. “But if you go to the US or to Europe, they have rules and they follow those rules. Whenever someone here follows the rules, everybody else says they are stupid for it.” One band member spoke favorably of the noise abatement efforts of Vishwas Nangre Patil, Special Inspector-General of Police in the Maharashtrian city of Kolhapur, telling me, “He just went to all the Ganeshotsav *mandals* and requested that they not hire DJs or use loud sound in their celebrations...[and] some of them listened. In Mumbai, you see, [*mandals*] do not obey this pollution act, environmental act, and they’re just playing their instruments and sound systems after 10pm.”

Despite their clear concern for problems having to do with noise, the members of Jaideva Beats often disavowed any responsibility for contributing to those problems through their involvement in a *banjo* group, citing the common argument that other sources such as DJs were to blame. For example, when I asked Omprakash about anti-noise activists that take decibel readings during festivals, he said, “That is only for loudspeakers, not for *banjos*...*Banjos* don’t harm anyone.” He suggested that his assertion could be proven by the fact that no *banjo* has ever been made to pay a fine for a noise violation, and therefore cannot possibly be breaking any law. I cannot say I have personally heard of a *banjo* being issued a fine over a noise violation, although there was one instance during a Jaideva Beats performance in which I took part where police officials with a decibel meter

told band members that we needed to either play quieter or stop entirely. Once, after noticing that I had a decibel meter app on my smartphone, several band members asked me to take a measurement while they performed. Predictably, this yielded very high decibel results. Even after being presented with this evidence of loudness, however, the band members generally continued to suggest that noisiness correlated more to musical idiom and style rather than to volume. On another occasion, Akshay, playing me a recording of a band performing a Marathi folk song on his laptop, said:

*Now, you hear this song? It's a peaceful song. Some mandals play different songs, with a DJ. Pop songs and rock songs. What do you want? You want a DJ? Do you want that harsh sound? No! This is good. This is good for listening, this is good for dance. Because this is our culture. This is a part of our culture. You know, this band is from Mumbai. All of these koli bands are from Mumbai and other parts of Maharashtra. This is our specialty... This is our folk song. It sounds good. There's no harshness, there's no irritation.*

One evening, as we were setting up outside a small temple in Kalbadevi in preparation for a road show for which Jaideva Beats had been hired, I walked over to a nearby chemist's shop to buy a small roll of cotton. Although I had many years of performing various styles of music amplified at excessive volumes in the United States, my first several performances with Jaideva Beats had resulted in ringing and pain in my ears, so I started pulling off small wads of cotton with which to plug my ears. When I offered the small pack of cotton to my bandmates in Jaideva Beats, they all declined, with one of them explaining that they had become accustomed to the loud sound. This explanation stuck with me as I wondered whether individuals can truly acclimate to high decibel sound which exceeds levels that typically cause discomfort and often reaches beyond a generally recognized threshold of pain. Could their refusal of hearing protection really have been an attempt to display stoicism, rather than a suggestion that human sensory perception could

acclimate to such potentially injurious conditions? Or, alternatively, could it be a sign that some degree of hearing loss had already occurred for these band members? Chapter Three discussed the ways in which the effects of loud sound can at times transcend variations in cross-cultural categorizations of “noise” in instances of such extremity that adverse impacts on the human body would seem inevitable. In cases of prolonged exposure to extremely high-decibel sound, the biomedical data appear strong and irrefutable by anecdotal examples such as any that ethnographic experiences might provide. More realistic and worth exploring, however, are cross-cultural variations in attitudes of permissibility with respect to sounds that are not within the range of causing potential harm, but nevertheless might present some irritation to certain listeners.

In his pioneering work on proxemics, the socio-cultural study of the “perception and use of space” (Hall 1968:83), anthropologist Edward Hall notes that the level of loudness of a human voice constitutes a factor in conceptions of personal space between individuals, which, like concepts of personal space more generally, are highly subject to variation between cultural groups (Hall 1963). As an example, Hall describes a study involving Arab and American subjects. In interacting with the Americans in the study, Hall suggests that the Arab subjects “experienced alienation traceable to a ‘suspiciously’ low level of the voice,” while, for the American subjects, the comparatively louder voices used by their Arab counterparts “proved to be disturbing” (1963:1005). In any given cultural group, Hall explains, “[c]hildren have to be systematically taught not only what is correct and incorrect usage but also how to modulate properly the loudness of the voice” in accordance with culturally-specific accepted norms (1963:1017). In establishing this link between human-made sounds and cultural conceptions of personal space, Hall’s work may provide a useful

way to understand urban Indian attitudes about sound by examining related attitudes about space more generally.

Hall writes that “what crowds one people does not necessarily crowd another,” and thus “there can be no universal index of crowding, no known way of measuring crowding for all cultures” (1968:84). Popular discourse offers many examples of a certain fascination with cross-cultural comparisons between Western and Indian ideas regarding personal space. Juxtaposed with the typical Western (especially American and Northern European) emphasis on the need for stringent social rules ensuring the preservation of personal space, Indian conceptions of personal space are often affectionately lampooned in social media, for example the *r/Indian subreddit*, which teems with posts about Indian parents entering their children’s rooms without knocking, the physically intimate nature of Indian queuing, and the differences between Indian and Western attitudes with regard to staring. A 2017 *Buzzfeed* article by Aroon Deep makes similar observations, relating cultural ideas having to do with personal space in Indian families to larger societal issues involving Indian attitudes about privacy rights and the protection of sensitive digital data (Deep 2017). Deep also notes the difficulty one encounters in attempting to find a direct translation for the word “privacy” in South Asia languages, with the closest analogues often signifying concepts closer to loneliness or solitude.

These cultural perceptions of space and privacy may hold particular relevance for those accustomed to life in Mumbai’s *chawls*, which are prominent features of the built environment in communities like that of Jaideva Beats. Architectural scholar Neera Adarkar writes that, throughout the history of *chawl* architecture in cities like Bombay, the “crumbling of private/public division was the distinctive factor that separated the chawl

tenement from the ‘self-contained’ apartment” (2011:18). Since, at times, an entire joint family takes up residence in a single *kholi*, with even more of their extended relatives living in the same building, *chawl* habitation demands a certain level of adjustment or suspension to expectations of privacy. Adarkar explains that “the entrance door of the chawl home was almost never shut,” while her colleague Smruti Koppikar similarly observes that living in a *chawl* “lent a unique informality to relationships and interactions, [as] children breezily zoomed in and out of houses [and] women walked into each other’s kitchens and asked for an ingredient they had run out of” (2011:121).

The predominant attitudes towards space and privacy held in Jaideva Beats’ community have a direct impact on basic auditory experiences of the city. One example has to do simply with the flow of air. Air conditioners are far less common in Dadar’s older *chawls* than in buildings such as the more recently constructed and upscale towers stretching upwards into the Mumbai skyline. In the older working-class residential buildings, temperature regulation is promoted instead by architectural features that utilize open air corridors and other common spaces, along with the prevailing sense of comfort among tenants in often leaving *kholi* doors and windows open while they are at home. This combination of customary practice and innate attributes of the built environment facilitate an increased flow of air from outdoor spaces, and with it the myriad of sounds from the city’s bustling streets. The effect is a less severe discontinuity between the environments and ambiances of indoor and outdoor, private and public, especially if compared to the kinds of buildings to which I am accustomed at home in Wisconsin, which are typically designed to retain warm air and shield from the atmospheric conditions and unwanted sensory stimuli of the outside. In the homes of Jaideva Beats’ members, like so many other

dwellings in Mumbai and across urban India, the sounds of the city represent more of a standard part of everyday life than an intrusion of personal space.

A conversation I had with Pratik one day in a small park near his home illustrated this culturally informed aspect of auditory perception. Unlike the rest of the Jaideva Beats members, Pratik lives in a suburb to the north of Mumbai. The first time I visited his neighborhood, he was especially eager to show me this particular park as it provided neighborhood residents with the kind of charming green space that often be elusive in Greater Mumbai. We strolled along a winding path as Pratik pointed out that several rare species of flora which had previously grow in abundance throughout the region had now become limited only to the confines of this particular park. I could tell that the park was a special place for him. This park, he explained, possessed a quality of remarkable serenity. Pratik told me that the peacefulness (*shānti*) of this place was an antidote to the noisy Mumbai soundscape<sup>9</sup>. What struck me as he told me this, however, was that, by my own standards, this park seemed quite loud. The park is encircled by large *chawls* and a busy thoroughfare, and in fact Pratik's voice had been rendered inaudible in my recording of our conversation, drowned out by the sounds of car horns, construction, and an event taking place nearby commemorating the anniversary of Bal Thackeray's death, which happened to

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<sup>9</sup> Religious studies scholar Drew Thomases has informed me through personal correspondence that he has a forthcoming book project which will contain a chapter discussing the phenomenon of sound and *shanti* in the Rajasthani town of Pushkar, a prominent site of pilgrimage tourism. Similarly addressing the perception of *shanti* amidst considerable background noise, Kaur, in discussing the observance of Ganeshotsav, writes that "concentration...can be attained, and even heightened, when there are distractions via excessive noise and movement – that is, shanti can paradoxically be achieved in noisy environment. In the midst of festival proceedings, with thousands of people all crowding to see various Ganapatis, it is still possible for the devoted to attain some kind of shanti in the darshan of the murti in the mandap, however eclipsed this might be in comparison to darshan of Ganapati in the home or in a permanent mandir" (2005:105).

be that same day. Pratik and I seemed totally misaligned in our ways of gauging what constitutes relative silence.

## **CONCLUSION**

While *banjo* music has clear similarities to older regional styles, it represents a form that is unique to, and emblematic of, Mumbai's festival soundscape in the late twentieth and early twenty-first century. *Banjo* music is deeply connected to the observance of large-scale *sarvajanik* festivals, and the proliferation of *banjo* groups in the last thirty years followed closely behind the trend of increased cash flow in festival organization through the involvement of political parties. This growth in the festival sector also has secondary effects on the urban soundscape, indexed by claims from anti-noise activists that festivals have grown louder in the years since politicians have become involved, in addition to data compiled by organizations like the National Physical Laboratory recording decibel measurements during festivals over time. For musicians like Jaideva Beats, who come from a community of working-class Konkan migrants for whom job prospects have become limited, concerns about noise are not entirely absent. However, ultimately greater emphasis is placed on the much-needed windfall offered by informal employment opportunities from festival *mandals*.

Having focused their activities within segments of the urban population in volatile economic circumstances, *mandals* have made themselves part of the basic fabric of those communities and have helped generate support for their affiliated politicians. With this economic and political prioritization of festivals, soundscape now represents a pivotal

arena for the formation of political and civic subjectivities for many Mumbaikars from communities like that of Jaideva Beats.



## CHAPTER SIX: Community, Labor Politics, and the Festival Soundscape

### INTRODUCTION

The day after I first met Rajesh and the rest of Jaideva Beats, I had made plans to join them again for two rehearsals, one taking place from 11am until 2pm, after which we would break and then reconvene for a second rehearsal from 8pm until 2am. Rajesh offered to give me a ride to and from the rehearsals on his motorbike, and I gladly accepted. After doing my best to keep up with the band during the first rehearsal, Rajesh and I mounted his bike to head back to Mahim where I had been staying. I became slightly confused, though, after we turned off the main road and drove towards Rajesh's *chawl* in Dadar. We stopped by his *kholi*, where I chatted for a bit with some of his family members before Rajesh abruptly signaled it was time to go. But after getting back on the bike, instead of resuming our trip to Mahim, we drove down the block to another *chawl* where band member Harsh lived with his family. Once again, after some time, Rajesh once again stood up and unceremoniously announced that it was time to leave.

We made two more similar short visits to the homes of Rajesh's kin and friends in the neighborhood. It was nice meeting and making conversation with new people, but I couldn't understand the purpose of these diversions as we were supposedly on our way back to my own home. When I asked Rajesh about this, he told me, "Each person gives respect, each person gets respect." I accepted this explanation at the time without fully grasping its meaning. But as time went on and such brief sojourns became a regular part of any day spent with the Jaideva Beats members, I came to realize the considerable social importance of these gestures I had initially assumed to be insignificant and unproductive.

At their most basic level, such visits facilitate the maintenance of a network of social relationships, producing and reproducing intimacy and bonds of kinship, both true and fictive. They exemplify the social phenomenon of “acknowledgement,” as explored by Christine Garlough (2013) and discussed in this dissertation’s introduction.

This chapter will explore the ways in which these kinds of quotidian aspects of life for the members of Jaideva Beats and their community relate to larger systems involving reciprocity, the politics of group imagination, and ways of envisioning one’s own social and economic role within Mumbai’s complex metropolitan milieu. Ultimately, this chapter will demonstrate how the network of relationships between musicians, political parties, and *mandals* found in Mumbai’s working-class Marathi-speaking communities represents a form of patronage system that has developed in aftermath of seismic shifts in the local economy due to the decline of the city’s historic textile mills. This new system of patronage has brought about strong connections between working-class musicians and political parties, especially Shiv Sena, vis-à-vis festival *mandals*, and has thereby directly enabled the circumstances contributing to the qualities of Mumbai’s contemporary festival soundscape that have made it so unique and controversial.

### **KONKAN MIGRATION AND BOMBAY’S TEXTILE MILLS**

As mentioned in the previous chapter, most of the members of Jaideva Beats and their families have ancestral roots in rural areas of Maharashtra’s Konkan region, particularly Ratnagiri District, and continue to hold a strong sense of connection with their ancestral villages. The band members, many of whom share the same ancestral village to which they return at least once a year for a long seasonal trip, frequently express the

closeness and love they feel for Konkan. Pratik, for example, describes his village as an idyllic place free from the many stresses of Mumbai life. “In our village, everything is available naturally. They’ve got coconuts growing naturally, foods growing naturally, rice growing naturally. In our region the rice crop is the most popular crop because the soil is the best kind of soil.” However, people are forced to leave this bucolic setting in droves, he laments, since “there’s no source of employment there, as compared to Mumbai.” The male ancestors of the Jaideva Beats members left their villages in Konkan over the course of the last century to find work in Bombay’s textile mills. With mill work evaporating from the city economy in the last forty years, Konkan migrants have continued to come to Mumbai, seeking employment in any other fields where it might be available to them.

As Pratik and I chatted in his family’s home, he gestured over to his father, who sat quietly in his chair watching television. “People like him, they would rather be living in their villages, but they can’t do anything because their jobs are here.” When Pratik was a young child and his parents were just beginning to establish themselves in Bombay, the family had been living in a slum area. His father, who had previously worked in a mill, became active with Shiv Sena, eventually securing more lucrative work and achieving a considerable degree of upward mobility, at which point he moved his family to a middle-class housing society in a suburb to the north of the city, far from Dadar where most of Pratik’s bandmates’ families reside. The increased sense of financial stability, however, did not change Pratik’s father’s feeling that he would rather be living in his Konkan village than in Mumbai. Men like his father, Pratik said, “are earning money, up to thirty thousand, forty thousand [rupees per month, equivalent to about \$425-\$570], but they don’t have that much peace, calmness.” Although the serenity and comfort of the village are absent in

Mumbai, the city offers economic opportunities too enticing, and necessary, to refuse.

Pratik invoked his father's daily commute as an index of his success. "Now he travels first class. But, you know," he said chuckling, "the rush in first class and second class is similar."

Pratik's father was preparing to retire within three years, at which point he planned, like many other Konkans of his age in Mumbai, to return to his ancestral village. Pratik showed me some images on his computer of a real estate developer's plans for the construction of a housing community in Konkan geared towards retirees leaving Mumbai to return to their village roots. He highlighted the transience of living in Mumbai for Konkan migrants, saying, "You can see that Mumbai is a temporary place. You come here, you live here, you do a job here. It's just a temporary place for employment."

To a great extent, the growth and fundamental character of modern Bombay has been shaped by this dynamic of semi-permanent migration of laborers coming from the rural Konkan districts to the south of the city, especially Ratnagiri. Bal Gangadhar Tilak himself was in fact born in Ratnagiri District, in the village of Chikhali. Waves of Konkan migrants began moving to Bombay in mass numbers during the late nineteenth century. The deterioration of Ratnagiri's agricultural economy, compounded with an overpopulation problem and a famine in 1888, drove many people to seek opportunities in the burgeoning city several hundred kilometers to the north (Patel 1963; Newman 1981)<sup>1</sup>.

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<sup>1</sup> Manorama Savur argues that the economic, social, and environmental hardships affecting the people of Ratnagiri since the mid-nineteenth century were the result of calculated efforts on the part of British colonial officials to limit development in the region in order to provide a constant flux of cheap labor to facilitate the growth of Bombay (1982). This deliberate underdevelopment of Ratnagiri District, Savur suggests, continued into the post-Independence era as Indian elites found it advantageous to perpetuate migration from Ratnagiri to Bombay (*ibid*). For example, Savur notes that in the early and mid-nineteenth century, despite multiple warnings issued in reports from their own officials, the British colonial government failed to regulate and limit the Khoti system of landholding which,

As early as 1880, the tremendous impact of this migration was apparent, with a colonial gazetteer writing that the “teeming population of Ratnagiri has been the chief factor in the development of Bombay” (quoted in Savur 1982:183). Over 125,000 migrants from Ratnagiri (representing about 15% of the district’s total population at the time) had arrived in Bombay by the 1880s, with that number nearly doubling in the four decades that followed (Newman 1981; Vartak et al 2018). Newman notes that the caste communities with the highest representation among Bombay’s migrants from Ratnagiri included Marathas, Kunbis, Mahars, and Bhandaris (*ibid*). In the late nineteenth and early twentieth century, textile mills provided work for over a quarter of these migrants, and, according to India’s 1921 Census, out of 109,820 mill workers in Bombay, 54,570 (49.69%) came from Ratnagiri District alone (*ibid*). 47.98% (26,181) of these Ratnagiri mill workers were identified as Maratha in the Census, and another 6.27% (3,423) were listed as Kunbi (*ibid*).

These migration trends continued into the twentieth century. Data from India’s 1961 Census indicated that migrants accounted for over 64% of Greater Bombay’s total population at the time (4.15 million), with 41.6% of these migrants having come from places within Maharashtra and 46% of these Maharashtrian migrants coming from Ratnagiri District alone, totaling nearly 500,000 people (Zachariah 1966; Puneekar and Golwalkar 1973). The Census also suggested that 81% of migrants in Bombay coming from other places within Maharashtra were Hindu, 75% came from rural areas, and 29% worked in textile manufacturing (Zachariah 1966). The preponderance of these Maharashtrian

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under the Peshwas, had granted revenue farmers (Khots) unchecked power that placed them in positions akin to the “petty barons of the medieval Europe” (1982:198). This system worked to the great detriment of rural Ratnagiri’s peasant classes, driving many low-caste men (and later women as well) to migrate to Bombay, which resulted in Ratnagiri’s agricultural productivity plummeting (*ibid*).

migrants were between the ages of 15 and 19 (*ibid*). Nearly 64% of Ratnagiri migrants living in Bombay in 1961 were men, and, as Punekar and Golwalkar (1973) point out, the result was a disproportionate representation of women, children, and the elderly in the villages of Ratnagiri District, however, as they note, by that point increasing numbers of women and children were migrating to the city as well.

For over a century, Bombay's numerous textile mills promised work and socio-economic mobility for impoverished migrants coming to the city from Ratnagiri and elsewhere<sup>2</sup>. In the 1930s, textile mills provided nearly 65% of all industrial jobs in Bombay (D'Monte 2002), although this number went down to around 40% by 1956 (Prabhu 1956).

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<sup>2</sup> India's earliest cotton textile manufacturing dates back to the 1820s, when British-owned factories were first established (D'Monte 2002). In the second half of the nineteenth century, Indian entrepreneurs opened their own textile operations in large numbers, especially in Bombay, where textile manufacturing became central to the growing city's economy (*ibid*). Parsi entrepreneurs were particularly active in Bombay's early textile industry (Benjamin 2001). For example, the city's first cotton mill was the Bombay Spinning and Weaving Company, founded in 1854 by the Parsi businessman Cowasjee Nanabhoy Davar (Chaloner 1990), with funding provided in part by British investors (D'Monte 2002). Within the decade, Cowasjee had opened a second mill in the city, the Bombay Throstle Mill Company. In 1855, Oriental Spinning and Weaving Mill was established by the Parsi merchant Nasarwanji Maneckji Petit and his son, Dinshaw Maneckji Petit (Brown 1912; Chaloner 1990). Dinshaw Maneckji Petit would later found Royal Mills and Petit Mills, as well as the Bombay Mill Owners Association in 1875 (Brown 1912; Chaloner 1990; Seth 2019). The Tata Group, a famous Indian conglomerate founded by the Gujarati Parsi Jamseti Tata in 1868, had some limited textile operations in Bombay, including Svadeshi Mills (purchased 1887) and Tata Mills (established 1913). Bombay Dyeing was established in 1879 by Nowrosejee Wadia of the Wadia Group, a 300 year-old conglomerate founded by Lovji Nusserwanjee Wadia (1702-1774), a Gujarati Parsi who started the business as a ship- and dock-building enterprise in Bombay holding contracts with the British East India Company. Lovji Nusserwanjee Wadia's great-grandson, Bomanji Hormusji Wadia, founded the Bomanji Hormusjee Spinning and Weaving Company in 1860. Merwanji Bhavnagiri and Pallonji Kapadia started the Great Eastern Spinning and Weaving Company in 1860. Their New Great Eastern Spinning and Weaving Company in Bombay would later be purchased by the W.H. Brady Company (now known as the Brady Corporation), a Milwaukee-based manufacturer founded in Eau Claire, Wisconsin in 1914 that currently has operations in five continents. In the mid-twentieth century, New Great Eastern Spinning and Weaving Company came under the ownership of Nandlal Kanoria, a

Primarily men went to work in the mills, however Pandharinath Prabhu notes that *jāti* played something of a role in the likelihood of women working in mills alongside men, with Mahar women more often seeking mill jobs than Maratha women, who more frequently sought employment as domestic laborers hired by Bombay's affluent families (*ibid*). Ratnagiri migrants were especially well represented in the mills, making up 25.3% of mill workers by the early 1980s, followed by those from Satara and Sangli Districts (18.6% and 11.3%, respectively), both non-coastal districts in southern Maharashtra which border Ratnagiri (van Wersch 1992). In a 1963 survey of mill workers from Ratnagiri, Kunj Patel founded that 44.2% of laborers had fathers who were also working or had worked in Bombay's textile mills (Patel 1963).

Ever since mass migration to Bombay from the Konkan districts of southern Maharashtra began in the nineteenth century, migrant workers and their families tended to establish patterns of semi-permanent or seasonal residence in the city, returning to their native villages with regularity, much as the members of Jaideva Beats and others in their community do today. Vartak et al note the tendency for such patterns to result in "the blurring of village boundaries with urban areas" (2018:2). Patel's 1963 survey found that 89.6% of Ratnagiri mill workers in Bombay maintain connections with their ancestral villages, and quotes a report from the Royal Commission on Labour in India from 1931 which, in addressing permanent labor in Bombay, states that "[i]f by permanent labour is

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Bengali sugar and tea merchant. The Indo-Iraqi Jewish entrepreneur Elias David Sassoon (1820-1880) also invested in cotton manufacturing in Bombay, and by the 1920, the Sassoon Spinning & Weaving Company came to own twelve textile mills in the city. Other prominent early Bombay cotton mill owners include Thackersay Mooljee, an Arya Samaj member who founded Hindoostan Spinning and Weaving Mills in 1873 (Sedgwick 2016), Narottam Morarjee, a Gujarati entrepreneur who owned the Morarjee Goculdas Mill, and the Aditya Birla Group, a Mumbai-based conglomerate founded in 1857 who ran textile manufacturing operations in Mumbai from 1897 until 2006 as Century Textiles Limited.

meant workers who have permanently settled down in the city, who follow industrial or other occupations and have lost all contact with their villages, there is very little permanent labour force in the city” (quoted in Patel 1963:33). Historically, mill workers would return to Ratnagiri and other Konkan districts for around a month each year during harvest season (Patel 1963; Newman 1981)<sup>3</sup>. A Royal Commission on Labour in India report from 1930 explained:

*In the months of April and May...there is a regular exodus, mostly to the Konkan. Workers who do not own lands or have not rented fields for cultivation usually go once a year either for the Shimga holidays (March) or during the Diwali holidays (October-November). Workers coming from the Ghats generally go to their native places during the Navratri holidays (September-October) (quoted in Newman 1981:47)*

Mill owners generally tolerated this seasonal leave of absence, perhaps holding a similar opinion as Daniel H. Buchanan, author of the 1934 book, *The Development of Capitalist Enterprise in India*, that “[d]anger of moral disintegration occurs where the tie which binds the worker to his village has been most completely severed” (quoted in Patel 1963:38). Punekar and Golwalkar suggest that Konkan migrants would feel it necessary to ultimately return to their villages for good upon reaching an advanced age, noting “a tendency to work in the city till one can physically pull on. The migrants return to the villages, only when it is

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<sup>3</sup> In 1999, the widespread practice of Konkan migrants leaving Mumbai seasonally to return to their native villages caused some concern among Shiv Sena and BJP leaders. That year, Lok Sabha elections had been scheduled during Ganeshotsav, with an estimated half a million Konkan Mumbaibars, representing a significant Shiv Sena vote bank, having made plans to leave the city during the festival (Ranade 1999; *Times of India* 1999a; 1999b; 1999c). Shiv Sena Lok Sabha candidate Mohan Rawale was quoted as saying, “These people are all our voters....Most of them are in my constituency and my men are trying to dissuade them from leaving. I have also requested Shiv Sena chief Bal Thackeray to issue an appeal to stop the voters from leaving” (quoted in Ranade 1999). “Of about 140,000 voters in Dadar,” said Congress Party candidate Rajan Bhosale, “50 per cent are Maharashtrians. Of these, 45,000 are migrants from the Konkan region” (quoted in Ranade 1999).



a must for them. Round about the age of 60 years the persons start coming back, but all of them do not return” (1973:19).

In addition to maintaining connections to ancestral villages through regularized return visits, my informants in Jaideva Beats and other members of Ratnagiri migrant communities in Mumbai preserve a sense of their rural Konkan roots through the construction of social networks in the city. Families with origins in the same village tend to establish residence not only in the same neighborhood in Mumbai, but often the same *chawl* or housing society. This phenomenon led Pratik to tell me that “[o]ur relations [here in Mumbai] are like our home villages.” Konkan villages are generally organized spatially into hamlets (*wadis*) that are segregated along the lines of *jāti* (Vartak et al 2018), and according to Koppikar (2011) and Adarkar (2011), *chawls* have long mirrored these same patterns of habitation. “Migrants gravitated together in a chawl not only the basis of their village of origin,” Koppikar writes, “but also by ties of caste, subcaste and clan. Anyone who did not meet the standards was an ‘outsider’ and, therefore, did not find easy accommodation or acceptance in a chawl” (2011:122). Mumbai’s present status as a megacity results from many waves of mass migration from rural areas in Maharashtra and throughout India over the last century and a half. This rapid process of urbanization has shaped Mumbai into a spatial and social mapping of various villages all shifted to one location. Sandria Freitag writes:

*An Indian city could be characterized by nothing so much as the lack of an overarching civic identity, a lack of social cohesion and sense of civic community. An urban center was instead a collection of mohallas (neighborhoods) originally shaped through immigration patterns, economic activities and government service. These in turn related to kinship, caste, linguistic and occupational affinities. Religion, particularly in the guise of religious festivals, was one of the few ‘glues’ which bound together members – especially male members – of different urban mohallas. (1980:600)*

Freitag is speaking here in general about Indian cities, but her point seems particularly relevant in the case of Mumbai given the rate and circumstances of the city's development. Through this preservation of rural patterns of social networking and spatial organization in the context of such a large and heterogeneous city, processes of group imagination in various communities throughout Mumbai often prioritize place of origin, ethnolinguistic identification, and *jāti*. In the case of my informants with rural Maharashtrian backgrounds, this results not only in robust feelings of mutual affinity within their community, but often also feelings of antagonism and suspicion of perceived outsiders, such as Hindi-speaking migrants from North India.

In the 1970s, the vitality of the textile industry in Bombay began to seriously falter (D'Monte 2002). Workers were becoming increasingly upset that their wages had stagnated, mills found themselves unable to sell as much product domestically as they had been earlier in the century, and a general decrease in demand for textile exports was compounded by competition from new producers in Pakistan and China (van Wersch 1992). Shiv Sena gained momentum during this period in part through their activity in Bombay's mill neighborhoods, where they consolidated a base of support built around their notion that textile mills should only hire Maharashtrian workers (Whitehead 2008:272). Labor unease culminated in January 1982, when mill workers began a strike that lasted for eighteen months and ended without any concessions being made to the workers (*ibid*). In the years immediately following the strike, more than two-thirds of Bombay's 60 mills had been shut down with four-fifths of mill workers losing their jobs (*ibid*). Darryl D'Monte (2002) writes that the early 1990s policies of liberalization of the Indian national economy further ensured the decline of the mills. Moreover, D'Monte suggests a link between the

violence of the 1992-1993 Bombay riots and general feelings of malaise due to unemployment throughout the city following the collapse of the textile mills (*ibid*). He argues that the mill closings crushed any feelings of hope for young working-class men from both Hindu and Muslim communities alike, who then “took out their insensate rage on members of the other community” (2002:17).

In the decades since the decline of Mumbai’s textile mills, migration to the city has slowed somewhat, with the manufacturing sector’s share of the Mumbai job market having decreased from 41% to 20% between 1961 and 2001 (*Times of India* 2012). However, many migrants still come to the city each year from Ratnagiri and other Konkan districts of Maharashtra. A 2012 study from the National Sample Survey Organization (NSSO) said that three times as many migrants arrive in Mumbai from other places within Maharashtra than those migrants coming from other states, mostly in North India, with over 50% of Maharashtrian migrants coming from rural areas (*ibid*). This information seems to contradict much of the rhetoric of Maharashtrian chauvinist parties and organizations suggesting that North Indian migrants represent a critical threat to native Maharashtrians’ employment prospects. In fact, the NSSO data reveals that only 17% of migrants come to Mumbai for jobs, with the majority (over 53%) coming for marriage (*ibid*).

#### **YOUTH ENGAGEMENT WITH POLITICS AND POLITICAL PARTIES**

In his 2010 book *Timepass: Youth, Class, and the Politics of Waiting*, geographer Craig Jeffrey describes a phenomenon found across Indian cities characterized by certain patterns of seemingly aimless behavior among underemployed young men. Jeffrey writes that the liberalization of the national economy during the 1980s and 1990s:

*while benefiting some sections of the lower middle classes, often threatened middle classes' access to state subsidies, reduced the supply of government jobs and undermined state services, such as educational and health facilities. By the late 1990s a gulf was emerging between an upper middle class in metropolitan India, the apparent beneficiaries of liberalization, and the lower middle class, who typically found their jobs, educational strategies and access to state goods under threat. The rise of the lower castes within formal politics in many parts of India and the related emergence of a small Dalit (ex-untouchable) and lower caste elite in the 1980s and 1990s unsettled middle classes still further. (2010:7-8)*

For lower class urban Indian men, these changes in the job market were accompanied by the propagation of increasingly unachievable notions of what constitutes success, derived primarily from mass media and public discourse, as well as through the popular mythologizing of the relative financial stability that been experienced by older generations in previous decades. The result, Jeffrey writes, was the widespread development of a kind of youth masculinity typified by the appearance of being idle or loitering in public spaces (i.e. "timepass") (*ibid*).

Jeffrey's examination of "timepass" resonates very strongly with my observations of the day-to-day activities of the Jaideva Beats members. Their community of Konkan migrants certainly experienced the kind of economic hardships described by Jeffrey, especially given the collapse of Bombay's textile mills beginning in the 1980s. Unemployment and underemployment have become chronic problems in the community ever since, and young men like those in Jaideva Beats often pass this excess time conspicuously together in public spaces. These timepass activities form a core part of their group and individual identities, and in many ways seem to have informed their worldviews and their decisions to play in a *banjo*. In fact, their ability to commit considerable time and energy to the *banjo* is in itself evidence of their experience of excess free time due to underemployment. During my fieldwork, I spent countless hours hanging out on the streets

of Dadar with the band members and their friends, leaning against parked motorbikes while they launched lewd jokes at each other or sipped tea. Our shows, which typically ended at hours that already seemed late to me, were often followed by a lengthy ritual of standing around and chatting in an empty street, occasionally followed by a trip to a restaurant for a late-night Mughlai meal. Large chunks of the day seemed to be budgeted for time spent bouncing from one *chawl* to another, sitting around in a friend's company to listen to music or watch television, as in the process described in this chapter's introduction. Timepass certainly constituted a substantial part of the group's day-to-day experience of the city.

Jeffrey identifies a crucial aspect of timepass, noting that the problems of unemployment facing lower-middle-class urban men can make them particularly sensitive to trends perceived as contributing to increased competition in the job market, which can in turn galvanize them to become politically active (2010). During our many extended periods of "hanging out," members of Jaideva Beats would regularly express their frustration with migrants from the Hindi-speaking states of North India. On one occasion, a band member told me about his concerns about an influx of North Indian migrants in Mumbai using counterfeit university graduation certificates to boost their credentials in competing for employment against native-born Maharashtrian job applicants<sup>4</sup>.

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<sup>4</sup> There have in fact been many incidents throughout India involving individuals deceiving employers with forged credentials and certificates purchased from counterfeit university degree operations (Yadav 2018; Burke and Chaurasia 2015). There have even been cases of Indians attempting to obtain visas to enter the United States using documents linked to fraudulent universities (*India Today* 2016a). In the context of Mumbai, however, I have not seen any specific evidence suggesting that North Indian migrants are using counterfeit certificates to secure jobs at a rate higher than native Maharashtrians.

In another instance, as a group of us riding motorbikes were stopped at a traffic light in the northern suburbs, one band member, Vishal, leaned over to shout a disparaging remark at an auto rickshaw driver who had come close to hitting him only moments earlier. The driver offered some apologetic response in Hindi, thereby revealing his geographic origin, and the band members immediately started making jokes about his ethnicity and alleged inability to drive. Later, when I asked Vishal and Omprakash about this exchange, they insisted that many auto rickshaw drivers from northern India operate their vehicles illegally without a license, or manage to obtain fraudulent licenses by purchasing them from corrupt officials. They also informed me that all taxi drivers in Mumbai must be able to speak Marathi according to a law that passed in 2010 (Ghoge 2010), of which I had previously been unaware. Omprakash argued that, since the state of Maharashtra and many other Indian states were formed on the basis of those languages spoken predominantly within their borders, a person seeking any kind of work in Maharashtra should therefore be required to speak Marathi. "In North India," he told me, "you can see that the criminal offenses are increasing each day. And nowadays, crime in Mumbai is increasing because of these outsiders. They shouldn't be able to find opportunities for employment here." For the band members and many other young men in their community, expressions of their own entitlement to jobs in the city are very often justified on the basis of language, thereby providing a clear delineation between themselves, as Konkan migrants who speak Marathi, and those coming from outside Maharashtra seeking employment, most notably Hindi-speaking North Indians. I once asked Pratik for his thoughts on the fact that Mumbai is a relatively new city populated predominantly by migrants or the descendants of migrants, including those that consider themselves native Maharashtrians.

“Yes,” he replied, “even Shivaji is not from [Maharashtra], he’s from North India,” a reference to the claim that the Bhonsle Maratha clan’s lineage can be traced to the Rajputs of Mewar in present-day Rajasthan (Haig 1930). “But,” he continued, “he belonged to a Marathi-speaking family.”

Sumanta Bannerjee suggests that Indian cities, in recent decades, have experienced a surge in revanchism, or a “tendency to demonise the religious and ethnic minorities” and a general “intolerance of different cultural lifestyles” (2012:13). In my experience with Jaideva Beats and their close friends and relatives, such revanchist attitudes were frequently expressed with reference to ethnolinguistic outsiders. Revanchist attitudes towards religious minorities, particularly Muslims, were expressed more rarely in my presence and seemed to play a less significant role in band members’ political perspectives and overall worldviews. This surprised me somewhat given many of the members’ declared support for Hindu nationalist organizations. However, statements possessing a distinct anti-Muslim bias were not absent entirely. For example, during a conversation between Pratik and myself over the controversial nature of Bal Thackeray’s legacy, Pratik insisted that Shiv Sainiks do not hate Muslims altogether, but rather resent the increased pressure on Mumbai’s job market resulting from the migration of Muslims from places like Hyderabad or North India. He argued that Muslims migrating to Mumbai from outside Maharashtra hold no sense of allegiance to India on the basis of national identity, his implication being that they may identify more with Pakistan or a global community (*ummah*) formed around Islam that transcends national boundaries. As evidence for this, Pratik noted that children in Indian *madrassas* do not sing “Vande Mataram” or “Jana Gana Mana” (India’s national anthem).

Expressions of hostility toward cultural outsiders among the members of Jaideva Beats were usually linked to politics, and very often were invoked to justify support for Shiv Sena politicians or other political parties with adjacent platforms like MNS or BJP. For the band and other members in their community, personal ties to Shiv Sena and likeminded parties abound. Pratik once volunteered for Shiv Sena, and Rajesh, as mentioned in the previous chapter, had previously worked for the Thackeray family as a butler. I became accustomed to hearing about “aunties” in the neighborhood who worked for the party, and in fact Rajesh’s biological aunt (and mother of band member Vishal) was a Shiv Sena politician in a northern suburb. I even once had the privilege of joining her and her family to celebrate her birthday, having been invited to the party by Rajesh. For musicians and other laborers whose work involves close cooperation with *mandals*, the involvement of political parties like Shiv Sena in day-to-day affairs, such as receiving payment for a musical performance during a festival, is commonplace. My initial shock at these kinds of casual interactions with politicians (especially those whose politics I disagree with so vehemently) soon subsided slightly, as I realized that my own expectations of at least superficial separation between the domains of civil society, politics, and religion represent a culturally particular Western ideal. Generally speaking, the manner of interaction I often observed between members of Jaideva Beats’ community and politicians seemed to demonstrate a remarkable level of familiarity and affinity. Corporators and party workers from Shiv Sena or MNS were often members of one’s own community or even one’s own family, and were therefore treated as such. These relationships between the community and their local politicians, therefore, seem to be established and maintained in part through



the same kinds of “timepass” activities detailed earlier in this chapter which prompted Rajesh’s statement that “each person gives respect, each person gets respect.”

There was one encounter with the world of Mumbai’s political institutions in particular that caught me by surprise early on in my work with Jaideva Beats. Rajesh called me one morning to tell me that he wanted to rent an electric guitar for me to play during an upcoming stage show. He asked if I would go with him to find one, and I agreed. A few hours later, when he picked me up on his bike and we headed towards Dadar, he explained that we were first going to the Sena Bhavan, the big white building across from Shivaji Park where Shiv Sena is headquartered. Apparently some of Rajesh’s aunt’s colleagues wanted to meet me there, having heard about a Westerner who had been playing with a local *banjo*. They had even arranged for Rajesh and me to be interviewed by a reporter working with the party’s newspaper, *Saamana*. After arriving at the Sena Bhavan, we climbed the stairs to an office where we were graciously received by Rajesh’s aunt and three other women who shared the office with her. We sat a while and chatted with them, drinking tea and taking *selfies* together. My participation in the band’s activities seemed to provide the initial curiosity that prompted this meeting at the Sena Bhavan, but in a sense this ultimately ended up feeling just like any other visit around the neighborhood to pass time with a group of family members or friends in their own home. At some point, Rajesh gave the signal that it was time to go, and we left the Sena Bhavan to meet the *Saamana* reporter at the newspaper’s office in Prabhadevi. Much of Jaideva Beats’ relative success could be traced to their ability to build rapport with individuals that hold power locally in their community, such as Shiv Sena politicians and party workers. Out of these networking efforts, the band has established relationships of reciprocal exchange with these local

leaders. Elements of such exchanges could take the form of performances by the band during the party's campaign events leading up to an election, helping to get the band hired for various festival events, or even offering the opportunity for the band to receive some exposure through a feature in *Saamana*.

Once, amidst local campaigns leading up to a BMC election, I stood on a *chawl* balcony in Dadar with band member Akshay as we watched the pageantry of numerous elaborately decorated *tempos*, each representing a different BMC candidate, which drove around the neighborhood's residential streets blaring music and campaign speeches out of loudspeakers mounted on top of each vehicle. A *tempo* representing a candidate from MNS, for example, had been decorated to look just like a steam locomotive, with green and saffron banners flowing down its sides and banners displaying the faces of the candidate along with party head Raj Thackeray, cousin of Shiv Sena's Uddhav Thackeray. At the same time, a small theatre troupe, sponsored by the MNS campaign, was putting on a play on the street outside the *chawl*. I was amazed by the vibrancy of local elections in Mumbai compared to what I was used to in American cities. Incorporating music and art, the campaign process struck me as more like a festival than an election, and this visibility and audibility of public campaigning seemed to correlate with an increased state of awareness and involvement in the elections among people in the neighborhood. As we looked down at the action on the street, Akshay pointed to one of the *tempos*, which was playing a song between repetitions of a prerecorded speech from a candidate. The song, Akshay explained, had been recorded in a nearby studio by several members of Jaideva Beats, including himself. The recording had been offered to candidate to be used free of charge, with the band members covering production costs themselves. It was a gift, Akshay said. The

candidate was from the neighborhood, and Akshay told me that he admired this candidate and felt that his platform resonated with the band members and their community. This particular candidate was running independently, but his policy ideas were akin to those of Shiv Sena or MNS. According to Akshay, one of the other members of Jaideva Beats had also done the *tempo* decorations for the candidate as well. Like the song, this work had been presented as a gift. Akshay explained that sometimes it is more important to establish good relations with political candidates than to accept money from them. If the candidate wins, he said, the band could stand to benefit materially from having entered into a reciprocal relationship with a BMC corporator.

Parties like Shiv Sena also employ more formal strategies of engaging with and endearing themselves to their target communities. The party and its leaders have established or become involved with many programs involving youth recreation which allows them to build a positive reputation among members of “vote bank” communities from a young age. For example, Aaditya Thackeray, son of Uddhav Thackeray and head of the party’s youth organization, Yuva Sena, serves as president of the Mumbai District Football Association. I also once attended a *kabaddi* tournament that had been sponsored by Shiv Sena, with several local party dignitaries also in attendance. The party’s involvement with festival *mandals* has of course been discussed in previous chapters of this dissertation, though it is worth noting that the party also sponsors music events outside the context of festivals and festival *mandals*. Siddesh, a vocalist who sometimes works with Jaideva Beats, told me about the Shiv Sena-sponsored singing competitions he has entered over the years which offer cash prizes to their winners. “They sponsor such events, people come and enjoy them, and they remember. ‘This party organized this event. I think I’ll cast

my vote for this party. That party, they don't organize events. It's dull, very dull," he said. Shiv Sena was also in fact responsible for organizing Michael Jackson's notorious 1996 concert in Mumbai, an event which facilitated the unlikely meeting of Bal Thackeray and the King of Pop at the Thackeray family's compound, Matoshree, and precipitated the surreal moment in which the Shiv Sena chief boasted that Jackson had used, and indeed autographed, his family's toilet (Dasari 2018; Purandare 2009; *India Today* 2016c).

In our conversation, Siddesh addressed the realities of having to engage with political parties in order to find work as a musical performer in Mumbai. As a musician or a band, "you have to get involved in all these kinds of things," he told me, speaking about party sponsorship. "If you are performing a show without any political party's help, a party will come and say, 'Take this money, take our banner.' If you say no, they'll take out the stage. They can do that." He explained that unless a performer is willing to accept money linked to political parties, they risk gaining a reputation as a "free-of-cost singer," precluding them from gaining respect, legitimacy, and financial stability as a working musician. This necessary capitulation for musicians in working with political parties serves to demonstrate the economics of live music promotion in communities like that of Siddesh and Jaideva Beats are fundamentally unlike circumstances typically encountered by Western musicians. Western models of live music promotion most often involve ticket sales generating revenue from which funds to pay performers can be allocated. In Mumbai, events featuring performers like Jaideva Beats occur in public areas where audience members, often from very modest socioeconomic backgrounds, are invited to partake in the entertainment free from the burden of any expectation of a direct fee for admission. In sponsoring such an event involving live music, a party like Shiv Sena therefore receives no

immediate material benefit in the form of revenue, but rather benefits from having furthered their organization's good reputation among a large audience of young potential voters.

Over the years, Shiv Sena has engaged with communities of their target voters in various other ways, having initiated programs like daycare centers, food kitchens, and the construction of improved sanitation facilities in low-income neighborhoods (Menon 1986; Katzenstein et al 1998). As Thomas Blom Hansen (2001) notes, Shiv Sena has also increased their presence in working-class Marathi-speaking communities throughout Mumbai by opening numerous *shakhas* ("branches"), a model of meeting house for local young men popularized by the Hindu nationalist organization Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS). Under the guidance of *shakha pramukhs* (branch heads), youth in *shakhas* receiving training as activists junior volunteers for the party (*ibid*). The RSS model of *shakha* tutelage involves a regimen of physical conditioning that includes calisthenics and martial arts (Valiani 2010; Peabody 2009). Since the early twentieth century, Hindu nationalist groups have cultivated a particular form of martial masculinity among their young male supporters in a trend that Nandini Gooptu (1997) has called "muscular Hinduism."<sup>5</sup> Gooptu relates the origins of this trend with the aggressive and communalistic rhetoric of Hindu revivalist leaders, along with the mass influx of low-caste *shudra* rural migrants to large cities in the hopes of securing work involving unskilled manual labor (*ibid*). Despite their efforts, many of these migrants failed to find jobs, frequently blaming

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<sup>5</sup> The term "muscular Hinduism" appears to be a play on the similar concept of "muscular Christianity," which describes late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century efforts among some Protestant leaders to instill in their male followers a sense of "Christian manliness...to energize the churches and to counteract the supposed enervating effects of urban living" (Putney 2001:1). Putney (2001) describes the phenomenon in the context of the United States, though similar trends were apparent across the globe.

Muslim migrants for the scarcity of work and consequently come to identify with the ideas of Hindu nationalists. These newly urbanized populations of *shudras*, who tended to view physicality as being virtuous unlike many urban high-caste Hindus, thereby came to form the base of the growing movement of Hindu militancy and muscular Hinduism starting in the 1920s (*ibid*)<sup>6</sup>.

For underemployed young men in Mumbai's Konkan migrant communities, the experience of having excess time on one's hands serves as a prerequisite condition in becoming involved with a Shiv Sena *shakha*. Furthermore, the belief that such an employment situation results from unjust factors beyond one's immediate control, such as heightened competition for jobs due to an influx of laborers from North India, can often contribute to feelings of identification with the politics of Shiv Sena to begin with. Young men in these circumstances often experience a great deal of despair in confronting a persistent denial of economic opportunity. "The Shiv Sainiks perceive their relationship to work and the given situation in terms of desideratum and not of possibility," write Gerard Heuze (1992:2191). "Those who are students represent themselves as future unemployed," he says, "[g]ranted, these unstable activities leave much spare time, which is spent on the streets, at tea stalls or at pan shops...There is a prodigious number of holidays, much roaming and a general sense of lost time in the Sena" (*ibid*).

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<sup>6</sup> Valiani (2010) also links the RSS's emphasis on constructing a masculinity based around physicality and aggression to the emasculation of Indian men in British colonial discourse. Mrinalini Sinha's 1995 book, *Colonial Masculinity: The "Manly Englishman" and the "Effeminate Bengali" in the Late Nineteenth Century* focuses specifically on this phenomenon. In the book, Sinha quotes Hindu revivalist Swami Vivekananda, who said, "You will be nearer to God through football than through the *Bhagwad Gita*" (quoted in Sinha 1995:21).

## **GENDER AND SPACE**

Jeffrey suggests that the phenomenon of timepass possesses a strongly gendered quality. He writes that during his fieldwork:

*Young women were typically unable to participate in the types of public timepass in which the young men engaged. In line with broader patriarchal ideas, professors, government officials and young men's parents imagined young men as by nature (fitrat) wayward and somewhat detached from daily tasks and young women as essentially diligent, obedient and conscientious. Parents, professors and urban society at large considered it inappropriate for unmarried young women to 'hang out,' except in certain public spaces, such as the sweet shops and confectionary stores. (2010:77)*

These gendered expectations informing ideas about the permissibility of timepass activities reflect larger attitudes in India involving gender and space. Scholars such as Srivastava (2012) and Phadke (2012) have noted that a prominent feature of ideas about gender throughout India is the notion that public spaces are the domain of men, whereas women's activities should be centered on their roles in domestic spaces, with their movements in and through public space being limited to only certain kinds of necessary actions<sup>7</sup>. Implicit in such cultural attitudes is a differential valuation of work performed in these two categories of space, with men's roles in the public arena seen as being superior to the labor performed by women in private spaces (Srivastava 2012). Similar attitudes towards gender and space can be found across the globe. Michelle Rosaldo (1974) famously argued that the gendered assignment of divided public and private spaces acts as the basis for larger patterns of gender-based inequality, with women's exclusion from certain aspects of public life resulting in reduced access to political and economic power.

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<sup>7</sup> It should be noted that these gendered expectations observed by authors such as Srivastava (2012) and Phadke (2012) can vary according to differences in class, caste, age, ethnicity, religion, and region.

My informant Pratik expressed this gendered line of thinking once when we were sitting in his home, drinking tea and watching YouTube videos, while his father sat somberly on the couch beside us watching television, and his mother prepared food in the kitchen. “All our [the members of Jaideva Beats’] fathers are similar. They don’t talk to anybody. Our mothers’ side’s guests come over, their relatives come, but [the fathers] don’t talk with them,” he said, crunching on one of the biscuits his mother had just served to us to enjoy with our tea. “[Our fathers] are workers. If you go to his job, he’ll talk with you. They don’t think of the house as their purpose in life. They think of their job [as their purpose]...Now, he’s been working for the last twenty years. So [our fathers] aren’t going to remember us, but they’re going to remember their colleagues.”

Writing about the Bajrang Dal, a branch of the Hindu nationalist organization Vishva Hindu Parishad targeted towards young men and boys, Sanjay Srivastava (2010) examines the processes by which the group’s members “master” urban space through their round-the-clock meetings and movements through the streets on motorbikes, often without any particular destination in mind. The young men regularly make late-night trips to the homes of their members, during which “the women of the family are woken up, and snacks are hurriedly arranged” (2010:839). In my work with Jaideva Beats, I found myself joining in precisely the same kinds of activities. It was, at times, difficult for me to hide my feelings of guilt and embarrassment in moments when our group’s arrival to a home prompted a band member’s sisters or mother to perform often inconvenient or laborious tasks implicitly expected of them, usually involving food preparation. Just as Srivastava describes, our movements on bike or on foot seemed intent on mastering the public space around the neighborhood and city. The band members further highlighted the significance that this



certain kind of space and place held for them through the pride they took in their neighborhood, with “Dadar” always accompanying the band’s name and logo on uniforms, promotional materials, and even the side of their *tempo*.

One of the most prominent features of most festival celebrations is the stark separation of men’s and women’s spaces. The processions of large *sarvajanic* festivals like Ganpati are accompanied by crowds of men at street level, dancing or setting off firecrackers. Often, especially at night, women are almost entirely absent from these kinds of events, with women and girls more likely to observe the festivities from above, huddled together on a *chawl* balcony or looking out a window. The musicians playing in *banjos* or brass bands during festivals are generally all men as well, as are the members of the festival *mandals* responsible for organizing the events. And although Shiv Sena includes women in many official roles with the party, men dominate the party’s most public manifestations, such as in *shakhas* or accompanying party-sponsored Ganpati processions<sup>8</sup>.

I would often ask the members of Jaideva Beats about the absence of women during festivals or in *banjos*. The most common response I received was that this absence represented a deliberate exclusion exercised out of “respect” for women. Indians, they would explain, hold women in high regard, and therefore prevent women from engaging in activities and professions that are not adequately respectable. Pratik, for example, discussed his feelings on the subject with me as we rode a train together late at night after a show. He argued that out that the irregular hours of work as a *banjo* musician render such

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<sup>8</sup> Gerard Heuze writes, “The Sena is an organisation of youth. An estimated 95 per cent of its members and 80 per cent of its *pramukhs* are below the age of 35 years. Its style, its reputation and nature make it a grouping of youth. These young people, for the most part unmarried, are all male. The Shiv Sainiks are fond of stressing the fact that their sisters support the movement, but the latter are never to be seen in public activities” (1992:2190).

forms of musical labor incompatible with the level of respectability that women deserve. In another instance, while eating in a restaurant with Rajesh, I mentioned that it seemed like I had only ever seen male servers in restaurants in India. His response was similarly predicated on the idea that some forms of work are respectable while others are not, and that women should only be permitted employment in the former. It is worth noting that, in Mumbai, many of these allegedly disreputable jobs in food service are held by North Indians. Various members of the band offered similar explanations as to why women and men were separated during the *dandiya raas* events in which Jaideva Beats performed. Other informants outside the band cited the prevention of “eve teasing” (i.e. sexual harassment or assault in public spaces) as the reason why women and men are separated during festival celebrations. Such statements were often accompanied by claims that men tend to consume alcohol or other intoxicants (e.g. *bhang*) during festivals, as if inebriation in the presence of women can be blamed for compelling men to commit acts of sexual assault. “The public-private dichotomy,” writes Shilpa Phadke, “has constructed the female body as fragile and lacking in strength. Various attacks on women – molestation, sexual assault and rape – reinforce beliefs about the vulnerable female body” (2012:54). Along similar lines, Kapur and Cossman (1993) identify the pervasiveness of “protectionist” attitudes within Hindu nationalist communities, in which these communities justify systems of exclusions and limitations placed upon women through claims that they require men’s protection. Religious festivals and their associated activities serve as exemplary cases of these beliefs.

Leena Abraham writes that, in Indian cities, systems of separating post-pubescent children based on their gender are exercised based on the idea that women are

“simultaneously dangerous and in danger” (2004:221), with the perception of women as “dangerous” originating in the view that some kind of intervention is needed to control women’s sexuality (*ibid*). Girls are thereby taught guidelines for behavior based around confining their activities to only certain (domestic) spaces deemed appropriate for their gender, while boys experience fewer mechanisms controlling their physical movement beyond their families’ homes (*ibid*). Phadke links the regulation of women’s movements outside the home to ideas about “defilability,” suggesting that “women’s presence in particular privileged spaces, usually public, may threaten the sanctity of these spaces, [while] at the same time, women themselves may face the threat of being defiled in public spaces, especially at particular times of the day” (2012:54).

Among the members of Jaideva Beats, the behavior of women who did not conform to gendered expectations was subject to condemnation and ridicule. One particularly salient example involves a young woman in their community who played in the group’s rival *banjo*. Although the members of Jaideva Beats maintained some level of playful antagonism with the rival band in the neighborhood, they would often single out this particular young woman in expressing their scorn for her behavior. The first few times her name came up in conversation, their attitudes seemed merely dismissive and I failed to note any great significance in them. Later on however, when I inquired with more persistence, some of the band members cautioned me to stay away from her, noting that her transgressions include drinking alcohol and using curse words. I noted that I myself drink alcohol and use curse words on occasion, and yet not only had I not been shunned, but in fact I had been welcomed with remarkable cordiality. Their responses were

somewhat evasive, but they indicated that these behaviors degraded her character but not my own due to her gender.

### **IDENTIFICATION WITH THE CATEGORY OF MARATHA**

Jaideva Beats had been booked to play a road show in the upscale neighborhood of Walkeshwar. I had played there once before with the group, not far from the steps that go down to Banganga Tank, where local lore suggests that a pole in the center of the tank marks the spot where Laxman's arrow pierced the ground and opened up a spring for the water of the Ganges. I took the train down to Grant Road, where I had arranged to meet Rajesh and Pratik. From there, we were to travel the rest of the way to Walkeshwar by bike. When I arrived, however, Rajesh and Pratik explained that a more than sufficient number of band members had already gone to Walkeshwar for the show, so our presence would be redundant. Rajesh said that he had called up his friend Omkar, who lived close to Grant Road, and that the new plan would be for the three of us to spend the evening at Omkar's home before meeting up with the rest of the band after the show had wrapped up.

Upon arriving at his home, Omkar greeted us enthusiastically, thrusting a 750mL bottle of Budweiser in my hand within moments of our entrance. Omkar had a gregarious attitude, a robust build, and a pointed beard that would have elicited comparison to Shivaji even in the absence of the *Chhatrapati's* portrait that happened to be hanging on his wall. Omkar was joined by his friend Anil, who was also friendly but significantly more subdued. Pratik mentioned that Anil was working for Shiv Sena, and that Omkar had also worked for the party until recently. Anil handed me his business card, which confirmed his affiliation to the party, and told me to call him anytime if anyone were to give me any trouble. I

thanked him for the gesture, while struggling to envision the kind of trouble to which he might have been referring. Anil joked that we each had to finish four of the large bottles of beer. I laughed, replying that I would undoubtedly need to fall asleep after only two.

After sitting and chatting for just a few minutes, Omkar and Anil decided it was time to take a walk around the neighborhood. It was already late, and the streets were quiet for a Mumbai evening. We discovered some excitement down the road, peering through a gate that led into the courtyard of a housing society where a group of residents had gathered for a small festival celebration. They were dancing to music playing from a smartphone plugged into a PA system. Omkar entered the courtyard without hesitation and beckoned for the rest of us to join him. The next song on the playlist happened to be “Zingaat,” from the 2016 Marathi-language box office hit *Sairat*. Omkar grabbed my hand, pulling me in to dance with him. We danced vigorously with the residents of the housing society for a few moments. Omkar seemed amused by my acquiescent attitude. Apparently satisfied with what had been accomplished in the courtyard, he signaled for us to leave.

We ended up at a Mughlai restaurant around the corner, where we ordered chicken, dal, and rice. The room was empty except for our group as well as two or three Muslim men each seated by themselves at tables around us. Our topic of conversation somehow landed on the Maratha identity shared by all four of my companions. At the time, members of the Maratha community had been organizing ongoing demonstrations throughout Maharashtra. The protesters, Pratik explained, argue that Marathas have been unfairly disadvantaged in the state economy when compared to castes that receive reservations and other privileges through their SC (Scheduled Caste) or OBC (Other Backward Class) status. Pratik and the others spoke with reverence of their Maratha ancestors’ history as

agriculturalists, and of the prestigious status held by Marathas in the time of Shivaji, now lost, they explained, due to the realities of socio-economic unease attributed to the arrival of migrant “outsiders.” “Ek Maratha, *lakh* Maratha,” Omkar bellowed, summoning a phrase that had become a popular slogan in the ongoing protests. Translating to “one Maratha, one *lakh* Marathas,” the phrase offers an expression of Maratha solidarity, and has since been used as the title of a popular Marathi-language film. Omkar repeated the slogan, gesturing to me. He wanted me to repeat it with him, which I did, and he seemed to find that hilarious. He took out his phone and took a short video of us reciting the line, and I pondered the bizarre possibility that a group of Shiv Sainiks in the near future might sit around and entertain themselves with a front-facing smartphone video of a Westerner exclaiming “Ek Maratha, *lakh* Maratha!”

Being Maratha forms a core part of the sense of identity shared by most of the members of Jaideva Beats. Along with their Konkan roots, this identification with the caste category of Maratha plays a tremendous role in the way the band members and their community see themselves as part of the social life of the city and the nation. Some of the band members expressed the way they perceive significance in their Maratha identity through their food preferences. On one occasion, just after having performed at the wedding of the daughter of a wealthy Gujarati merchant, the band members and I made our way to the buffet tables at the wedding’s reception and gathered large piles of food onto our plates. Given the ethnicity of the bride’s family, Gujarati food was being served. After we finished eating, one of the band members asked me what I thought of the food, and my response was highly complimentary. Some of the guys scoffed. “Too sweet,” said Harsh, and several other band members gestured in agreement. Abhay complained that the food

lacked onion, which also elicited consensus from the others. Harsh asserted that Marathas need onion in their food, unlike Gujaratis. This was not the first time members of the band emphasized their preference for onion. It happened somewhat often when I shared meals with them. It was always striking for me, since I enjoy onions and generally onion avoidance is rare in the West, more often occurring at an individual rather than cultural level. In India, however, onions represent a significantly more polarizing ingredient, and avoidance of onion often indexes identification with a particular ethnic or religious group, such as Vaishnavas or Jains.

Various ancient Hindu texts suggest that the matter making up the food humans consume can be divided into three categories (*guṇa*): *sattva*, *rajas*, and *tamas* (Saraf 1970; Srinivasan 2000). While *sattvic* food can serve “as the channel for spiritual growth,” *rajasic* and *tamasic* food “inhibits that growth” (Roncaglia 2013:136). Onions, garlic, and mushrooms happen to be among the most common examples of *rajasic* and *tamasic* foods (Srinivasan 2000). *Tamasic* consumables also include meat, alcohol, and tobacco (Roncaglia 2013). The ingestion of *rajasic* and *tamasic* foods is associated with negative behavioral effects including agitation, lasciviousness, lethargy, and aggression. Srinivasan (2000) notes that consuming onions is specifically forbidden in ancient texts such as the *Manusmṛiti* (ca. second century BCE to third century CE) and Vedanta Desika’s *Aharaniyamam* (ca. thirteenth century CE), while Theraiyar’s *Padartha Guna Cintamani* (ca. tenth to eleventh century CE) similarly offers claims regarding the strong effect of onions on the human body. To this day, many people in India still hold that onions, along with other *rajasic* and *tamasic* foods, ought to be avoided due to their potentially injurious effects on one’s physical wellbeing. “Pure veg” restaurants, commonly found throughout

Indian cities, offer menus that accommodate diets abstaining from these types of ingredients. The members of Jaideva Beats not only express a specific preference for this polarizing vegetable, they also assert a direct association between onions and some perceived essential characteristic of the Maratha identity, like a bellicose toughness or bravado seen as lacking in non-Marathas. A preference for onions, therefore, offers a point of differentiation between the band members as Marathas and various groups of “outsiders” in Mumbai, such as Gujaratis.

More generally, food choices carry special importance throughout India. Traditionally, caste categories provided a framework in determining who could accept what kind of food from whom, and furthermore with whom one could share their meals (Roncaglia 2013). Historically, Mumbai’s Hindu extremist groups, enraged by the migration of South Indians to the city, chose *udupi* restaurants as frequent targets for attacks, viewing the cuisine as emblematic of migrants from southern states like Kerala and Karnataka (*ibid*). Abstaining from eating the meat of particular animals, specifically beef or pork, can hold a strong indexical relationship to a given person’s identification with Hinduism or Islam, respectively. Furthermore, as anthropologist Sara Roncaglia writes in her book, *Feeding the City: Work and Food Culture of the Mumbai Dabbawalas*, members of high-caste communities have traditionally emphasized the importance of maintaining a strictly vegetarian diet (Roncaglia 2013). Indeed, India has a higher percentage of vegetarians than any other country in the world, with 31% of the national population practicing a vegetarian diet and another 9% abstaining from meat but consuming eggs (Yadav and Kumar 2012). It is worth noting that none of the members of Jaideva Beats are vegetarian, and in fact on multiple occasions I heard a few of them utter the phrase “chicken is life,” seemingly only



half in jest. This willingness, and even eagerness, to eat meat in some ways reflects their backgrounds in terms of caste and regional origin, and furthermore, given meat's *tamasic* properties, perhaps also gives some sense of how they perceive their own qualities as Marathas.

## **CONCLUSION**

Rajesh's affirmation that "each person gives respect, each person gets respect" indicates the manner in which "timepass" activities involving frequent visitations around his neighborhood in Dadar help to strengthen ties within the community. At the most fundamental level, these ties between neighbors are generally based on kinship and ethnicity. Kinship ties include the extended kin networks that form the basis of *jāti*, so often emphasized as a crucial part of self-identification for the members of Jaideva Beats, as demonstrated by their ruminations on being Maratha. These ties also include those of fictive kinship, expressed affectionately in mentioning *aunties* in the Shiv Sena, or in frequent statements by I heard from band members declaring that Jaideva Beats represents a "brotherhood." As this chapter has demonstrated, ethnic community imagination among Konkan migrants in Mumbai is vigorously maintained through regular trips to one's ancestral village as well as through patterns of habitation in *chawls* and neighborhoods based upon village of origin and caste.

For the sizeable population of those with Konkan roots living in Bombay, the collapse of the city's textile mills created a major crisis in employment that simultaneously provided a unique opportunity for Shiv Sena. Before the 1980s, the Sena had already gained a foothold in communities of Marathi-speaking mill workers, but their consolidation

of power did not gain momentum until the years following the textile strike and closure of Bombay's mills. During this time, the party found widespread appeal among those demographically most likely to have been impacted by the loss of textile jobs, namely young Hindu men with native Maharashtrian (frequently Konkan) backgrounds and from *shudra* (very often Maratha) communities. Many of these men, confronted with dire employment prospects, came to identify strongly with the Sena's revanchist message that Maharashtrian jobs should be reserved for Maharashtrians, and that the presence of certain cultural outsiders was to blame for exacerbating the plight of Marathi-speaking "sons of the soil." As established in Chapter Four, the Shiv Sena's rise to power, the expansion of their involvement in Hindu festivals, and the growth of the festival season phenomenon found today all happen to coincide with decline of Bombay's textile mills. Beginning in the 1980s and 1990s, in the absence of the once-robust mill economy, young working-class Marathi-speaking men in Bombay managed the experience of widespread unemployment with strategies of "timepass" that included political mobilization through involvement with Shiv Sena *shakhas*. These men also began seeking work in the informal economy that was rapidly developing around festivals<sup>9</sup>. Some founded bands that played *banjo* music, a style that, coincidentally, also appeared during this time period, albeit drawing stylistic influence from older antecedents.

Jaideva Beats and their community represent an exemplary case of the manner in which political parties, along with the *mandals* they sponsor, establish networks among their target constituents. Furthermore, the band's statements and activities demonstrate

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<sup>9</sup> In 2015, Naresh Dahibavkar, convener of the Ganpati *mandal* association Brihanmumbai Sarvajanik Ganeshotsav Samanvay Samiti (BSGSS) specifically noted that Ganpati *mandals* rely heavily upon the labor of Konkan workers leading up to and during festival season (Pinto 2015c).

the necessity for musicians and other laborers dependent upon the informal festival economy to establish and maintain strong reciprocal relationships with politicians. In particular, the members of Jaideva Beats have formed close relationships and feelings of identification with the Shiv Sena party and political parties with similar platforms built around ideologies of Hindu nationalism and Maharashtrian ethnolinguistic chauvinism. As illustrated throughout this chapter, these kinds of relationships are produced and reproduced through acts such as gift giving, and often originate in preexisting ties of kinship.

Anthropologist Karen Michaelson (1976), writing about systems of patronage in 1970s Bombay, describes a situation in which official mechanisms for providing services and employment often proved insufficient, subsequently giving rise to a patronage model requiring the deployment of “middlemen” to serve as intermediaries between institutions and communities in need. At that time, a prime example would have been the role of *jobbers*, who were responsible for hiring workers in the textile mills and whose nepotistic practices contributed to the overrepresentation of certain demographics among mill workers. “In Bombay,” Michaelson writes, “there is no single class of patrons, but a varied web of asymmetric relationships operating at different levels of social organization (caste, family, city administration, etc.) with differential access to resources at various points in that web” (1976:282). Although the socioeconomic circumstances of contemporary Mumbai have changed considerably, Michaelson’s model of patronage still seems applicable, especially with regard to the relationships built around festivals between politicians, *mandals*, and workers like Jaideva Beats. All parties involved in such relationships are actors in the sense that none are merely passive recipients of benefits

from this system. While the relations are asymmetrical, each party relies on the others in order to maintain the equilibrium established within the community, even if that equilibrium requires the exclusion of outsiders. Bands like Jaideva Beats rely on politicians and *mandals* for work. Those politicians and *mandals*, in turn, rely on musicians for the efficacy of the events they sponsor, because ultimately it is music that draws crowds to festival events, thereby offering the opportunity to build and consolidate their appeal within key “vote bank” communities.

## CONCLUSION: Soundscape and Power

In the early afternoon of the final *visarjan* day of Ganeshotsav during my first trip to Mumbai, I had been visiting a friend in his flat located in the affluent Mumbai suburb of Versova. After an hour or so of tea and conversation, I announced that I would have to leave in order to make it to another appointment in South Mumbai ahead of the immersion ceremonies. A work colleague of my friend, who had also been joining us, explained that he had to travel in the same direction as me and asked if I might want to split a car with him. I agreed to his proposal, abandoning my previous plan of traveling by auto rickshaw to the nearest railway station before completing the journey by train. We bid farewell to our host and took to the street to find a taxi.

Once in the vehicle, our ride was achingly slow. Even though it was still early in the day, the suburban thoroughfares were already jammed with *visarjan* processions and automobile traffic. It felt as if it would surely be nightfall by the time we made it past Bandra and into South Mumbai. My friend's colleague and I made small talk as the minutes and hours slipped away in the backseat of a hot taxi. The taxi inched its way through intersections gridlocked with *banjos*, DJs, gigantic *murtis*, and groups of young people dancing and setting off firecrackers. "They shut the whole city down with this festival," my new acquaintance remarked, raising his voice to be heard over the bands playing outside our window. "It's the one time a year for the voiceless to go out into the streets and have their voices be heard." I found his observation and phrasing to be astute, and it has stuck with me through the years.

The participants in public events taking place during a festival like Ganeshotsav often come from modest backgrounds, living in *chawls* or even in slums. In their day-to-day experiences and engagements with the city, they hold relatively little agency and power when compared to Mumbai's more privileged individuals and communities. The effervescent moments of a festival temporarily suspend this social order, and even invert it. During a festival like Ganeshotsav, those that lack power and control over the city's principal social and financial institutions can *seize* a kind of power and control over the basic flow of the city and the movements of its denizens. Those who feel their interests have been routinely neglected can find opportunity during a festival to elevate their voices in chorus with each other, creating a sound so loud it demands to be heard and acknowledged by the entire city. Even individuals with considerable status and resources, like a Western PhD student and a cosmopolitan Mumbaikar with an elite socio-economic background, must yield to this seizure of the streets, their money and social capital rendered powerless from the back of a taxi cab. In this sense, the festival soundscape is crucial in enabling certain kinds of political participation and thereby facilitating a mode of citizenship by offering agency and voice.

While public festivals temporarily grant a kind of power to those that otherwise lack it, they simultaneously reinforce and augment the status of many of the city's most powerful individuals and institutions, namely politicians and festival *mandals*. The power of the festival crowd, therefore, is transitory and performative, and ultimately festivals, and the sound associated with them, serve the interests of certain elite Mumbaikars. The mass demonstration of populism evident Ganeshotsav and other festivals closely relates to a point made in a recent publication by anthropologist Thomas Blom Hansen. Hansen (2019),

addressing the phenomena of Hindu nationalism and majoritarianism in contemporary India, suggests that many decisions in India's processes of politics and law enforcement are driven by attempts to appeal to a reified entity perceived and expressed as "the public" or "the people." Such appeals to "the people," he notes, fail to acknowledge the varied nature of Indian society in its communities and their differing interests, and ultimately such a reification only serves the momentum of majoritarian political and ideological movements, especially Hindu nationalism. Hansen finds that the notion of *bahumat* ("majority," or, by Hansen's translation, "esteemed by many") has become a legitimizing concept underlying Indian politics since the 1990s, and has imbued extreme (and even violent) political action with "the moral force of a majority" (2019:30). Hansen also argues that a significant part of this reification and exaltation of "the people" can be located in the role of crowds in Indian political history. Crowds, according to Hansen, have been taken as a physical manifestation of "the people" in modern Indian history. "The bigger the crowd, the stronger argument," he writes (2019:29).

The effervescence, exceptionality, and power of Hindu religious festivals derives from their pairing of massive crowds with incredible sonic loudness. Historian Karin Bijsterveld writes of the symbolic meaning that pervades cross-cultural interpretations of loudness in humanly organized sound. Such interpretations, she explains, tend to associate loudness with "power, strength, progress, prosperity, energy, dynamics, masculinity and control," while also construing loud sounds "as a sign of a deliberate disruption of societal order, often by those lower in the hierarchy" (2001:60). Bijsterveld's observation seems to carry validity in the case of the loud sounds produced during Mumbai's Hindu festivals. The participants in musical processions, such as the ones that halt the city's usual traffic

patterns during Ganpati *visarjan*, certainly manage to temporarily disrupt the sonic and social equilibria of the city. The stylized expression of power they assert through their sounds and movements bears a clearly masculinized character, as demonstrated, for example, by the male domination of public festival spaces and the ubiquitous invocation of Shivaji's army through imagery, attire, and rhetoric. Simultaneously, the sounds of Mumbai's Hindu festivals reinforce and augment the power of those that already possess it: the elite individuals and institutions that maintain their position at the *top* of Mumbai's social and political hierarchy. This dissertation has sought to demonstrate that the noisy character of Mumbai's Hindu festival soundscape exists as much more than merely the cumulative sonic byproduct of musical entertainment. The loudness of festivals is the expression of power, and the impetus for that expression runs deep within the strategies of the political elite and the sentiments of the crowds that support them. As anti-noise activist Dr. Yeshwant Oke once explained to me, the loud sounds made during festivals represent "a vicious cycle that has started, and it is used as a sense of authority. The more noise you make, the stronger [one portrays oneself to be]."

With the music before mosque conflict of the late nineteenth and early twentieth century, soundscape proved its incendiary capacity as a platform for community imagination and political mobilization in India's growing cities such as Bombay. The sound of Hindu festival processions became a powerful symbol upon which the boundaries of religious and political community could be generated or displayed, and through which political ambitions could be realized. Concurrently, the late colonial period in Bombay Presidency witnessed the rise of the idiom of mass-level *sarvajanik* festivals, due to Bal Gangadhar Tilak's activities with the reinvention of Ganeshotsav. The scale of these new



urban festivals raised the stakes of festival sound's political potential. These developments of the colonial era would have a long-enduring legacy, setting the stage for the unprecedented politicization of soundscape that would arise decades later through the formalization of a political patronage system in the organization of religious festival events in Bombay.

As Bombay city experienced dramatic changes in the early twentieth century such as population expansion, widespread infrastructural and architectural development, and the introduction of new transportation technologies, local understandings of the urban soundscape became centered around the concept of "noise," which emerged in its mass-noun form as a collective feature of Bombay's soundscape, rather than any number of individual occurrences of discrete sounds. This new "noise consciousness" characterized excessive and unwanted sound as a fundamental quality of the city's acoustic environment: a sonic monolith existing beyond the summation of the numerous sound events that comprise it. To borrow from the medicalized language of the early twentieth-century anti-noise movement in Bombay, noise itself came to be diagnosed as the disease afflicting the city, rather than being viewed as the symptom of other socio-political processes at work (which might include inadequate facilities for a rapidly growing urban population, myopic urban planning, political opportunism, or a rising hegemony oriented around inter-community resentment, to name a few). Regardless of its underlying cause, the ambient decibel levels endured by many Mumbai residents, during festival season especially, represents an unacceptable burden on public health, as accurately noted by the city's anti-noise activists.

In the last fifty years, the political sponsorship of festival *mandals* has established a new funding model in festival planning, resulting in bigger, louder, and more frequent festival celebrations. This trend in which politicians finance festival *mandals* was spearheaded by the Shiv Sena party, who successfully built and maintained support for their ethnolinguistic and religious chauvinist platform through their involvement in Hindu festivals like Ganeshotsav since the late twentieth century. Sena chief Uddhav Thackeray himself once commented that “[f]estivals are the best occasions to mobilise public support” (quoted in Mishra 1995). Although Shiv Sena have historically been the most active political sponsors of festival events, all political parties have now come to rely on festivals as a core part of campaign strategy, transforming festivals into an arena for a political arms race. Political involvement in festivals has dramatically increased the scale and loudness of festival celebrations, with increases in festival season decibel levels beginning in the 1970s having been quantitatively recorded by organizations such as India’s National Physical Laboratory, along with written accounts from various sources beginning in that time period describing increasingly large crowds attending increasingly loud festival events. In the late 1970s, commentators were stunned by the hundreds of thousands that arrived at Girgaum Chowpatty for Ganesh *visarjan*, unaware that crowds numbering in the *millions* would gather for the same annual event forty years later.

Just as Dr. Oke suggested, loudness is power, with each of Mumbai’s politicians wanting to be the one to sponsor the city’s loudest festival event. Through political involvement in festivals, festival *mandals* themselves have developed into institutions of tremendous power and influence. Mobilizing the considerable power that exists between them, *mandals* and the politicians that support them easily and regularly quell the

enforcement of anti-noise laws and efforts to reduce decibel levels in Mumbai. Very clear evidence exists that noise laws are left unenforced, along with very clear evidence that *mandals* and politicians practice various forms of intimidation and pressure to suppress that enforcement. In the course of my fieldwork, I heard about and even witnessed various instances in which festival *mandals* and their affiliated politicians intimidated, attacked, or blackmailed individuals and institutions who had filed noise complaints; threatened police officers who chose to enforce noise laws; and encouraged and rewarded deliberate misconduct or obfuscation on the part of police and other government officials in handling cases of noise violations. Political suppression of noise law enforcement has been documented as early as 1974, when one account stated:

*the police are unable to enforce the [noise] rules because of political interference. When they try to implement any rule – for instance, the one specifying that loudspeakers should not be used after 11 p.m. – the local elected representative invariably rings up the police in his area and asks them to allow the organisers of the festivals to use the loudspeaker beyond the prescribed time-limit...This type of ‘pressure’ is brought to bear on the police not only at the local but also at higher levels. They are thus forced to ‘overlook’ the misuse of loudspeakers.” (Vohra 1974)*

Politicians and *mandals* are therefore heavily invested in keeping their events as loud as they can make them, and will go to extreme (and even illegal) lengths to that end.

The competitive nature of political engagements with soundscape is further demonstrated by the history of complaints coming from politicians and other commentators regarding the sounds of amplified *azān*, the call to prayer in Islamic traditions. In the early 1980s, Hindu nationalist politicians, including Bal Thackeray himself, began calling for a ban on loudspeakers in mosques. Within the same period of time, politicians from Shiv Sena and BJP intensified their own monetary support for Hindu festival *mandals*, enabling those *mandals* to rent and purchase the most powerful

loudspeakers available in order to hold the loudest possible events. In the decades that have elapsed, political and religious leaders from either side of the *azān* debate routinely chastise the opposing side for contributing to excessive urban noise without critically examining their own role in the matter. In the words of one activist, this situation typifies “competitive religiosity” playing out in the audible sphere. This dissertation has discussed the opinion expressed by anti-noise activist Sumaira Abdulali, who posited that politicians from parties such as Shiv Sena and BJP have made a deliberate decision to continue to allow amplified *azān* in mosques, despite their history of critiques and despite having steadily held positions of power through which they could stop the practice altogether. Allowing mosques to continue amplifying *azān*, Abdulali suggests, grants figures and institutions from the Hindu right with the rhetorical license to justify the continued loudness of their own events. Such politicians can thereby refer to the excessively loud sounds associated with a minority religious community as a symbolic intrusion into Hindu society at large, thereby legitimizing the forcefulness of their own approach towards both sound as well as inter-community politics. With the urban soundscape having been transformed into a site of increasing competition, anti-noise activists have come to present the most considerable challenge to those figures seeking to consolidate power through loudness.

The chapters of this dissertation have established that festival *mandals* now operate as major providers of employment and services in communities targeted as vote banks by the politicians that sponsor them. More specifically, these communities are comprised of working-class, Marathi-speaking Hindus. Just as festival *mandals* came to occupy the economic void left by the decline of textile manufacturing, so too have *mandals* located

gaps in the provision of basic human services where government programs have failed to accommodate those in need, taking it upon themselves to act as the providers of those services. Festival *mandals* have therefore placed themselves in a quasi-governmental role within communities that otherwise would be in desperate situations without their assistance. While helping those communities is clearly not detrimental in itself, the provision of services by *mandals* rather than government institutions poses certain problems. *Mandals* fundamentally differ from government institutions in that they can choose precisely which communities to accommodate with services and employment, and also which to ignore. There is no formal mechanism that regulates their actions or drives them towards equitable provision of employment and services. Their tendency, therefore, is to provide for communities that align with the vote banks sought after by their political financiers in order to secure their continued electoral success. With the crucial social and economic role festival *mandals* have come to occupy, they serve to illustrate Thomas Blom Hansen's point (discussed in Chapter Five) regarding forms of institutional authority that exist beyond the state in Mumbai, often competing with the interests of state power. From the perspective of those individuals and communities favored by festival *mandals* and their affiliated politicians, however, the economic boost provided by festival season jobs, along with the services offered by *mandals*, bring about generally favorable views of *mandals* and their sponsors.

The members of the *banjo* group Jaideva Beats exemplify the impact of this new employment market oriented around festivals and *mandals*. Mumbai's working-class musicians, such as the members of Jaideva Beats, must rely on patronage from politicians (especially Shiv Sena) and the *mandals* with whom they collaborate. In the absence of

*mandals* and politicians acting as employers for musicians, paying work would prove to be exceedingly elusive. Notably, all of the members of Jaideva Beats must rely on other work outside of music for their subsistence. This reliance on supplemental income is common among those who depend on festival *mandals* for seasonal work. As a surrogate for the collapsed textile job market, therefore, the informal economy of festivals falls short even for those from the select vote bank communities targeted by *mandals* and political parties.

The decline of Mumbai's textile mills provided a critical opportunity for the Shiv Sena party in its early decades. The group's popularity soared among former mill workers in the 1970s and 1980s, demonstrating that the Sena's politic rhetoric of economic and ethnolinguistic resentment could find greater resonance with those experiencing staggering levels of unemployment. During that same period of time, the party had begun the initial phases of their investment in festival *mandals*, which proved to be a potent strategy in disseminating the party message and connecting with new supporters. Furthermore, the sponsorship of festival events allowed the party to frame its ideology and organizational identity within the context of divine authority as well as the emotional experiences of spiritual effervescence and empowerment that accompany the celebration of large *sarvajanik* festivals.

In our conversations, the members of Jaideva Beats unequivocally identified with both the Shiv Sena party and the core components of the party's platform. As young men from working-class, Konkani, Hindu communities in the post-textile mill era, the band members often placed blame on the influx of unskilled migrants from places like North India into Mumbai for the underemployment of native Maharashtrians such as themselves. Although, in most cases, the families of the band members left the Konkani region

generations ago to find work in the mills of Bombay, they retain strong feelings of identification with their Konkan heritage. Many Maharashtrian Mumbaikars, more broadly, conceive of their own identity on the basis of their ancestral village, and village or regional origin continues to play a major role in settlement patterns within *chawls* and neighborhoods in the city. The result, I would argue, is the preclusion of any sense among Mumbaikars that their city represents, in fact, one big community of people all connected by the shared experience of migration or descent from migrants. Rather, Mumbai exists as a highly fragmented city, with perceptions of ethnic, linguistic, and religious difference regularly playing a significant role in local politics, and thereby fueling the chauvinism and revanchism of groups like Shiv Sena.

The men from Jaideva Beats return to their ancestral Konkan village frequently to visit. However, they tend remain in Mumbai during the celebration of large festivals, given the considerable work opportunities such festivals provide. This dissertation has shown that the situation had once been quite different for Konkan migrants during the era of textile manufacturing. It had previously been common practice for mills to grant a leave of absence for their Konkan laborers to return to their ancestral villages during major Hindu festivals. Nowadays, this systematized practice of holiday retreat seems to have vanished along with the mills themselves. Individuals from Konkan communities in Mumbai generally stay in the city to take part in festivals, either as members of the crowd or as workers hired by *mandals*. This has inevitably contributed to the massive growth in the scale of festival celebrations experienced over the last half-century.

My conversation with Pratik, described in Chapter Five, demonstrated that more subdued music and celebrations are generally the norm in villages during festivals like

Ganeshotsav. The raucous festival celebrations found in Mumbai represent a unique product of the urban environment and its own social phenomena, particularly those having to do with interactions and conflicts between members of different ethnic, linguistic, and religious communities. The tendency for the urban environment to reshape the musical and ritual practices of festivals has been clear, in fact, since the days of music before mosque riots. As the first chapter of this dissertation has shown, the opportunities for such conflicts over music during the colonial era had, in many cases, apparently been produced through the clashing traditions of different migrant communities, developed in native villages and replicated in the urban setting without adequate inter-community dialogue and cooperation.

Mumbai's soundscape is now the site of aestheticized sonic competition. Politicians and festival *mandals* go to great lengths to organize the loudest events and prove their strength to the voting populace. Rival *banjos* clash on city streets, striving to outplay each other and secure favor both among crowds and with *mandal* officers who hold considerable hiring power in an otherwise hostile job market. Religious and political leaders quarrel, disparaging the sounds made by opposing religious communities and calling for them to be silenced. To dominate the urban soundscape is the goal, with coveted material rewards going to the city's loudest voices.



## GLOSSARY

*Awaaz Foundation*: A non-governmental organization concerned primarily with issues of noise abatement environmental protection founded in Mumbai by Sumaira Abdulali in 2006.

*Azān*: An Arabic-derived term (*adhān*) describing the call to prayer in Islamic religious practice. In Indian cities and various other places around the globe, *azān* has increasingly been amplified using loudspeakers.

*Banjo*: A local style of street-performing musical band in western Maharashtrian cities originally centered around the use of an amplified electric version of the string instrument *bulbul tarang*, a.k.a. the “Indian banjo.”

*Bhajan*: A devotional song in the context of Hindu religious practice.

*Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP)*: A national political party in India generally representing a right wing platform and often associated with Hindu nationalist ideology.

*Brahmin*: The highest-ranked of the four tiers of the *varna* system, representing the class of priests and intellectuals.

*Brihanmumbai Municipal Corporation (BMC)*: The primary governing body for the city of Mumbai, known as the Bombay Municipal Corporation until the city’s name was formally changed in 1996.

*Chawl*: A colonial era style of tenement building most often associated with the working-class communities that provided the primary labor force for Bombay’s textile mills.

*Chhatrapati*: A South Asian title meaning “king,” especially in the context of the Maratha Empire.

*Chitpavan*: A Brahmin community in western Maharashtra.

*Communalism*: In South Asian contexts, a term used to describe sectarian tensions between groups on the basis of identification with a particular religion, ethnicity, or caste.

*Congress Party*: Also known as Indian National Congress (INC), the Congress Party is a national political party in India with a center-left platform.

*Corporator*: A legislator elected into office within a municipal corporation.

*Crore*: A term used in the South Asian numbering system, equal to ten million (or one hundred *lakhs*)

*Dahi Handi*: A Hindu festival in honor of the god Krishna, associated with a ritual in which groups construct human pyramids to reach, and then break, a pot that has been suspended high overhead and filled with butter or curd (*dahi*). It is celebrated during the Hindu calendrical month of Shrāvan (July-August).

*Dandiya raas*: A dance form associated with the festival of Navratri that originated in Gujarat but has also become popular in Maharashtra.

*Dhol tasha*: A kind of percussion group found throughout north and central India based around the use of the *dhol* and *tasha* drums.

*Diwali*: The five-day Hindu festival of lights, taking place during the Hindu calendrical month of Kartik (October-November).

*Dussehra*: A Hindu festival taking place after the nine nights of *Navratri* during the Hindu calendrical month of Ashvin (September-October).

*Ganeshotsav*: Also known as Ganesh Chaturthi or simply Ganpati, Ganeshotsav is a ten-day Hindu festival in honor of the god Ganesh. It is celebrated during the Hindu calendrical month of Bhadra (August-September).

*Garba*: A dance form associated with the festival of Navratri that originated in Gujarat but has also become popular in Maharashtra.

*Greater Mumbai*: An area comprising the island city of Mumbai along with those suburbs administered by the Brihanmumbai Municipal Corporation.

*Gunda* (*pl. gunde*): A term in South Asian languages describing an organized criminal.

*Gurudwara*: A place of worship in the Sikh religion.

*Hafta*: A slang term, literally meaning “week,” which refers to a weekly payment issued by nefarious actors in order to bribe or otherwise win favor with corrupt police officers.

*Jāti*: South Asian term derived from the Sanskrit word meaning “birth” or “species,” used to refer to extended kin networks associated with particular forms of labor and social statuses. Along with *varna*, *jāti* constitutes part of the social phenomenon described by the English word “caste.”

*Kholi*: A single-room apartment within a *chawl*.

*Koli*: A caste community associated with the traditional labor practice of fishing.

*Konkan*: A coastal region along the Arabian Sea stretching across the westernmost parts of Maharashtra, Goa, and Karnataka. Historically, the Maharashtrian Konkan districts to the south of Mumbai have been the source of mass labor migration to the city.

*Kshatriya*: One of the four tiers of the *varna* system, representing the class of warriors and rulers.

*Kunbi*: A caste grouping in Maharashtra and other parts of western India that has become somewhat absorbed into a greater Maratha-kunbi caste cluster since the late colonial period.

*Lakh*: A term used in the South Asian numbering system, equal to one hundred thousand.

*Maharashtra*: A state in western and central India established in 1960 on the basis of Marathi linguistic majoritarianism. Its largest city is Mumbai.

*Maharashtra Navnirman Sena (MNS)*: A Maharashtrian political party established in 2006 following a schism within the Shiv Sena party between Raj Thackeray (MNS founder) and his cousin, Shiv Sena chief Uddhav Thackeray.

*Mandal*: A Sanskrit-derived word meaning “circle” in various Indo-Aryan languages, used to describe a variety of organizations, most pertinently festival *mandals*, the groups responsible for planning the discrete events comprising a religious festival.

*Mandir*: A Hindu temple.

*Maratha*: A large caste cluster representing the dominant caste community in Maharashtra.

*Marathi*: An Indo-Aryan language representing the official and most commonly spoken language in Maharashtra.

*Mela*: A word in various South Asian languages meaning “fair” and used in reference to singing parties and other gatherings taking place during *sarvajanik* festivals.

*Muharram*: An annual Islamic festival commemorating the death of Hussein ibn Ali at the Battle of Karbala in the late seventh century.

*Murti*: An idol depicting a god in Hindu traditions.

*Navratri*: One of two Hindu festivals, most often referring to *sharada* (“autumn”) Navratri which takes place over the course of nine nights during the month of Ashvin (September–October).

*Pandal*: A temporary structure in which an idol is installed during a Hindu festival.

*Ramnavami*: A Hindu festival commemorating the birth of the god Rama, celebrated during the Hindu calendrical month of Chaitra (March-April).

*Ratnagiri District*: A district in the Konkan region of Maharashtra from which large numbers of migrants seeking work in Mumbai have historically originated.

*Sarvajanik*: A word in various South Asian languages meaning “public,” used to describe the innovation of mass-scale public festivals initiated by Bal Gangadhar Tilak with his reinvention of Ganeshotsav in the late nineteenth century.

*Shiv Sena*: A regional political party in Maharashtra founded by Bal Thackeray with a right-wing platform associated with Hindu nationalism and the assertion of rights of Marathi-speakers in the state.

*Shudra*: The lowest-ranked of the four tiers of the *varna* system, representing the class of laborers.

*SOCLEEN*: A non-governmental organization based in Mumbai concerned with environmental issues, including noise pollution.

*Tempo*: In South Asian discourse, a *tempo* is a type of van. Originally, the term “tempo” referred to a German automobile manufacturer that marketed a van in India during the mid-twentieth century that became so popular that the word *tempo* came to be used generically to refer to all vans of this type.

*Utsav*: A word in Hindi, Marathi, and other South Asian languages, derived from Sanskrit and meaning “festival” or “celebration.”

*Vargani*: A word in Hindi, Marathi, and other South Asian languages meaning “subscription.” Used to describe the system of donation by which festival *mandals* collect funds from individuals and businesses in their local community and fund their operations.

*Varna*: Derived from a Sanskrit word meaning “color,” *varna* refers to the four-tiered classification scheme of social stratification that, along with *jāti*, constitutes part of the larger system described in English as “caste.”

*Visarjan*: A Sanskrit-derived term in Indo-Aryan languages meaning immersion, used most notably in the contemporary context of religious festivals, especially the immersion of an idol depicting a deity such as a Ganesh *murti* during Ganeshotsav.

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