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1

**Politics as Permanent Performance:
The Production of Political Authority in the Locality**

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Let me start with a recollection from a seminar I attended some years back in India. The seminar was devoted to the interpretation of recent election results. For two days I was listening to people speaking with a great deal of confidence about caste politics, caste alliances, and interpreting the electoral results as emerging alliances between various caste communities. It was as if communities were imputed collective wills, intelligence, and rationalities. As my turn came I asked the rather naive question: why is it that we, as analysts, use the same conceptual language and the same mapping of Indian society—according to imputed caste and community identities—as political activists and those who devise electoral strategies? If they were right in their assumptions about people's propensity to vote along caste lines, why is it that they don't win elections all the time? How can we deal with the fact that our mapping of society coincides with the mapping used by those who in fact lose elections—which is what most political parties do most of the time! I then proceeded to offer a rather vague analysis of the election data from Maharashtra, basically admitting that this could be read in several ways. I admitted that I could not know what had determined why people had voted for one rather than another candidate at the local level. As an interpretation of election results my presentation turned out to be less than convincing.

20 The Politics of Cultural Mobilization in India

The question I want to raise concerns how we can interpret election results. Can we use them as an index of what happens in the broader social world? As a reflection of how class formations are changing and how caste identities are developing? Can we talk about stable constituencies organized around caste communities, or along linguistic lines? The longer I have studied Indian politics and public culture, the less convinced I become about the indexical value of electoral politics.

Much work done by political scientists begins from a registration of various apparent misfits between the social and the political world. For instance, why so many lower caste voters, apparently, vote for parties that do not seem to serve their interests, or why so many Xs who used to vote for party A, now, apparently, have moved their loyalties to party B. What if the assumption that there is a tendential fit between people's social condition and sedimented, or imputed, identities and their political choices is a wrong one in the first place? It is obvious that technologies of electoral systems and layered forms of representation inevitably structure or even 'distort' election results and give false impressions of 'political strongholds' etc. My proposition is different, however. It is to take seriously that political choice and preference probably is guided by much more ephemeral and transient collective moods, as well as by considerations of the worthiness or personal qualities of the candidates standing for election. In order to understand the choices made by the evermore discerning, impatient voters in India—possessing a high level of what Sudipta Kaviraj has called 'political literacy'—I will suggest that we should focus much more on the role of ideology, of the creation of public moods and sentiments, of the production of authority—i.e. all those subjective and floating energies that animate politics and shape what people like and dislike.

If we do not understand the force of these factors we will inevitably fail to come to terms with the many transformations taking place in Indian politics over the last decades. Let me turn to the Shiv Sena in Maharashtra to illustrate my point.

MANAGING THE MOODS OF MUMBAI

There is something profoundly excessive about the Shiv Sena. Visual, theatrical, urban, violent, masculine performances are at the heart of the party; all done in a distinctly—and wilfully and self-consciously—non-respectable style. Why this almost 'filmi' excess? The deeper I got into the worlds of Mumbai and Maharashtra as I was doing research there in the 1990s, the more I realized how many parallels and

continuities there were between the so-called 'mainstream' Congress and the Shiv Sena—in terms of worldview, major ideological complexes and views on core policies, and also in terms of social environments of their supporters, and the way of doing local and everyday politics in these two formations. I came to the conclusion that the difference is one of style, not one of sociology.¹ The similarities of the constituencies of the Congress and that of the Sena was noticed by early writers on the movement (Gupta, 1982, Katzenstein, 1981). In some of my studies of the Sena in the rural areas of Maharashtra I came to the conclusion that the growth of the Shiv Sena in parts of the state was driven by a youth rebellion within the wider political culture created by the Congress. This was something I could substantiate sociologically; I could see it played out—even within single families (Hansen, 1996a).

Yet, such a predominantly sociological perspective fails to grasp what is the essential feature of the Sena: its public style, or more precisely the way in which it has utilized the possibilities and space opened in the public culture of Bombay—the relative incoherence of government and policing in the city; the fact that the authority of the legal system by no means was self-evident, etc.—to create a new form of 'politics of presence'.

My argument here is that the most distinctive feature of the Shiv Sena is the way in which it relies almost exclusively on the possibilities of a politics of the spectacle—from the local street corner to mass meeting to the staging of policies through the state government. Democracy in India has produced a culture of politics that is incredibly fluid, situational and dynamic—where stable constituencies, alliances, equations and ideological principles are in constant flux and redefinition. In such a culture it is those who can create a collective mood, or the illusion of a collectivity driven by a mood—both highly ephemeral phenomena that can set political agendas at least for some time. They can generate demands and the illusions of their own 'power'—an equally ephemeral phenomenon. To perform this type of politics depends, therefore, on the ability to stage public performances, to use and employ a range of registers that can generate authority, and put the power of rumours, myth and other cultural registers to effective use.

¹ This point is developed in more detail in the first chapters in my book (2001) *Wages of Violence. Naming and Identity in Postcolonial Bombay*, Princeton: Princeton University Press.

Since Hobbes theorized the absolutist state, European notions of political power and the state have undoubtedly been starkly reductionist. To paraphrase Hobbes: 'Covenants without the sword are but words,' and at the basis of the state, of power, of legitimacy, we find—purely and simply—violence. In this view royal pomp, state rituals as well as modern ideological formations essentially serve to efface and occlude this foundational violence, which is the origin of a state. Geertz has called this 'the great simple that remains through all sophistications ... politics, finally, is about mastery: "Women and Horses, Power and War" (Geertz, 1980, 134). This has, argues Geertz, led to an unfortunate blindness towards the importance of symbols and ideas in their own right to statecraft and state power. Geertz retrieves the importance of this in his study of the classical Balinese 'theatre state', the *negara*, a polity whose basis of sovereignty was its status as 'an exemplary center—a microcosm of the supernatural order'. Pomp, ritual and spectacle were not devices to represent the state or occlude its violent nature—they constituted the core of the state that was based on the '(...) controlling idea that by providing a model (...) a faultless image of civilized existence, the court shapes the world around it ...' (ibid., 13). The dramas of that polity were neither lies nor illusions, concludes Geertz, 'They were what there was' (ibid., 136).

I am not suggesting that India is about to return to ancient precolonial rituals of politics, but the model of the *negara* should remind us that the rationality of intent, purpose and pursuit of interests that often are imputed to states and political groupings tend to occlude the mythical and performative dimensions of modern politics. We should not forget that the notion of 'interest' is a culturally specific invention of a tamed and 'rational passion' (for money) that was foregrounded by early modern thinkers as a way to limit religious bigotry and strife, as Albert Hirschman pointed out (Hirschman, 1977). Anyone who has studied local politics and formation of local leadership in India (and beyond) will know that visibility means everything—that a cause may be enunciated, a protest be staged, and an action performed in order to provide a stage whereupon an emerging leader or ambitious man can make himself available as a focus of attention, trust or affection. He seeks to become a tangible embodiment of the 'community' or the locality he seeks to represent—or better still, he tries to express and create community and locality through the very act of representation.

When I use the term performance, I use it somewhat more broadly than for instance Schechner's emphasis on performance as actions

pertaining to ritual, the theatrical and the staged (Schechner, 1988, pp. 251–88), although these dimensions are crucial to the world of modern competitive and media borne politics, as Edelman has been pointing out for decades (see, for example, Edelman, 1988). Political performances are indeed about constructing spectacles and media events, but it is also very much about a certain styling of the self, the movement or the cause—by the use of a certain linguistic style or conceptual vocabulary, a certain way of dressing and acting in public, etc. I suggest that we regard political performances as a certain magnified and specialized subspecies of Erving Goffman's notion that everyday life is framed as a series of not always conscious performances and improvisations of speech and repertoires of bodily actions (Goffman, 1959, pp. 73–4). To be in politics, in a movement or promoting a certain cause, implies engaging a certain genre of propositional speech and action designed to convince, persuade and make things happen in the world (what Austin called 'illocutionary speech', Austin, 1962), and to make things exist as 'facts' or possibilities by constant reiteration and repetition, which is Butler's idea of the performative (Butler, 1993, p. 2). Political performativity comprises, in other words, the construction of images and spectacles, forms of speech, dress and public behaviour that promotes the identity of a movement or party, defines its members, and promotes its cause or worldview.

I will argue that the Shiv Sena has perfected these techniques, that performance is what the Sena really is. It never had any elaborated programme or coherent ideology, only this unprecedented capacity to generate moods. I will go further and argue that by perfecting these possibilities of the culture of politics in India, the Shiv Sena may teach us something broader about India's political modernity.

We should not be surprised by the foregrounding of the visible and of the centrality of representation in the broadest sense that we see in Indian politics. Modern societies are in a sense founded upon such collective representations of 'the state' in action, or by the multiple mappings of society one finds in policy papers or political rhetoric that seek to convince us about how our complex societies can be read and understood. If we look at democracy as a historical and cultural form, we can see that one of its most radical breaks with previous forms of politics is that it instituted the idea that a society can be understood and shaped in its own terms, without any reference to a pre-given or transcendental form or force—be it a divine force, the polis, or perhaps even the nation.

The problem in this new ontology that grew out of democracy was, as Claude Lefort has pointed out, that not only did political power become something abstract that could be held by no-one—as it belonged to ‘the people’ and only could be re-presented temporarily—but that society as such became unrepresentable because ‘all markers of certainty were disappearing.’ This is because democracy creates a ‘configuration of social relations in which diversity and opposition are made visible, ... political activity has the effect of erecting a stage on which conflict is acted out for all to see, and is represented as necessary, irreducible and legitimate, ... the being of the social presents itself in the shape of an endless series of questions, ... modern democracy is inaugurating an experience in which society is constantly in search of its own foundation’ (Lefort, 1988, pp. 228–29).

The central paradox of all modern democracies is, in other words, that inasmuch as representation is their key foundational principle, it is at the same time impossible to create representations that are generally accepted and endorsed. Hence the need for other and ever new forms of representation—in elections, in texts, in speech and images.

The implication of my argument is that performances and spectacles in public spaces—from the central squares to the street corner in the slum, from speeches to images—must move to the centre of our attention. These are the generative political moments par excellence, the heart of political society, and the site where historical imageries, the state and notions of community and ‘society’ become visible and effective. We must, in other words, chart and understand how political identities and notions of rights and citizenship are formed and given life through acts of representation.

Although integral to political modernity all over the world, the political spectacle in public space has an extraordinarily rich and varied history in India. Informed by, and drawing on the anti-colonial legacy of civil disobedience designed to mobilize millions of illiterate people, a vast repertoire of spectacular representations and styles of mobilization have been sustained by an ever more inclusive, but also intensely competitive democracy and public culture. In Maharashtra, the regional ethno-historical imagery organized around the eighteenth century warrior king Shivaji provided a wide repertoire of public performances that the Sena and other political actors have drawn on and further developed. There has also been a certain ‘banalization’ of public rituals and gestures originating in the nationalist movement,

and a proliferation of political performances at all levels of public life—from pupils in provincial schools staging a protest in Gandhian style, to farmers blocking roads in remote districts, to local councillors going on hunger strikes in their chambers in the municipality. There is often an almost travestic quality in these citational practices drawing on a vast reservoir of popularized national history and religious myths and imagery. Sometimes there is a tongue-in-cheek reversal of meanings of well-established symbols and often a very creative mixture of religious, historical and contemporary references in speech and images used for political and other public manifestations, as Raminder Kaur’s work on the Ganapati festival demonstrates so clearly (Kaur, 2002 and this volume). But let me return to the Shiv Sena.

In order to understand the emergence and trajectory of a movement like the Shiv Sena one needs, therefore, to look into the movement’s ability to sustain a high-profile performative presence in the public culture of the city since 1966. This performative capacity has got at least four dimensions: first, the Shiv Sena’s successful use of the ethno-historical imagery and at times xenophobic discourse of regional pride—inherited from the Samyukta Maharashtra Samiti and later authorized by the state government and the Congress party in the 1960s. Thackeray’s aggressive, xenophobic and popular-satirical discursive style twisted and renewed this register into a street-smart and non-nonsensical mode of being Maharashtrian that over a few years made the Shiv Sena widely popular among Marathi speakers in Mumbai.

The second dimension is the organizational and spatial grid of local units assisting local citizens, networks of self-help and organizations established by the movement since the 1960s in most parts of Mumbai, and elsewhere in Maharashtra in the 1980s. Often regarded as the backbone of the Shiv Sena, the efficiency and vibrancy of these local networks are often overestimated by Sainiks and observers alike. However, their real significance seems to lie in their rumoured strength and the spectacular coordinated actions and campaigns they occasionally make possible when replying to a call from Thackeray, the *Senapati* (army commander). The Sena networks are interwoven with families, male peer groups, business connections and other informal connections, that have made them integral parts of what Appadurai calls the ‘nervous system’ of the city (Appadurai, 2000).

Thirdly, violence is central to the Shiv Sena, both as a rhetorical style and promise of strength, as well as actual practice at the local and everyday level, and in public confrontations since the 1960s. The Sena’s

determination to use violence in most situations, its celebration of youth, masculinity and 'the ordinary', and the cynicism of its leadership, have since the 1960s created an unusually large space of *de facto* legal impunity for Sainiks and their leaders when acting in public, and a concomitant fear of the Sena among its adversaries and victims.

Finally, the Shiv Sena has a complex and ambiguous relationship with the world of electoral politics and political institutions. It has been aligned with a number of political formations but grew for years in the protective shadow of the Congress party. Since the 1980s the Shiv Sena has established close affiliations with the BJP, the major right-wing formation in Indian politics. It has also extended and consolidated its own web of alliances, and has engaged in ruthless institutional manipulation and corruption during its time in power in the Bombay Municipal Corporation, and later the state government in the 1990s. The simultaneity of formal, institutionalized politics, violent street-level agitation, and informal networking and local brokerage is a key feature of the Shiv Sena's political practices.

Let me examine in more detail what appears to be the organizational backbone of the movement.

THE SHAKHA GRID

After the initial success in 1966, Thackeray and his closest friends began to create a regular organization. Borrowing the RSS idea of daily meetings, the *shakha*, a wide network of local shakhas were set up very fast in the middle class as well as the low-income areas in Mumbai and its northern extension, Thane. The shakhas were small buildings with one or two simple rooms with chairs and often a picture or statue of Shivaji. There was always a saffron flag, *bhagwa dwaj*, outside the shakha, which provided a daily meeting place for the activists and their friends in the locality. The shakha was led by a *shakha pramukh*, and a lieutenant, the *gata-pramukh*, whose responsibilities were to enforce discipline among the young activists, arrange local religious festivals and celebrations of the important Ganapati festival and of course the Shivaji Jayanti, which remains a major occasion in the annual cycle of activities in the organization (see Jasper, 2002).

The conspicuous public celebration of these festivals is, it must be noted, not confined to the Shiv Sena; they have a long history in Mumbai and other cities in western India from the 1890s onwards. They are organized by a range of local *mandals* (committees) collecting

money from local traders and are often patronized by local politicians and businessmen.

The public celebrations of festivals with increasing pomp, expenditure, and grandeur in many localities in Mumbai is closely connected to the wider politics of representation of the locality, of the production of the neighbourhood, as Eckert puts it (Eckert, 2000, p. 39). To produce a neighbourhood is in some ways an extension of the identificatory effects of naming: to claim a certain identity, a belonging and thus by implication a set of entitlements for a particular area and the people living there. The festivals provide a site and a stage whereupon local organizations, upcoming politicians, parvenu businessmen, local brokers and strongmen flaunt and represent their power and status, or attempt to acquire respectability through visibility and patronage. The festivals, with their competing *mandals*, are in many ways rather precise representations of just how precarious and unstable both the meaning of the neighbourhood and its local configurations of power and prestige are. To be someone, to enjoy respect and authority is not a given fact, but needs to be reproduced through reiterative performances of various kinds. Festivals provide one such screen for projection of prestige and visibility of parties, organizations, and individuals and an occasion for confirmation of the identity of the neighbourhood.²

The Shiv Sena's unquestionable performative skills, ruthlessness in raising funds, and the determination of local Sainiks to remain the primary representative of the neighbourhood, have over the years made these festivals larger and more central sites of representation. The Shiv Sena has also transformed the symbolic importance and style of these celebrations in many areas of Mumbai into more aggressive celebrations

² In the early phase of the Shiv Sena's existence the organization especially promoted the Ganapati festival, as a quintessential Maharashtrian festival. Promoting Ganesh was a way to make Mumbai more Maharashtrian in complexion. In her recent analysis of the historical development of the iconographies of *mandap tableaux* displayed during the Ganapatiutsav, Raminder Kaur demonstrates convincingly how these tableaux, having been de-politicized and 'culturalized' after Independence, since the 1980s have taken an ever more direct political form in its themes as well as direct messages displayed. The Shiv Sena-sponsored *mandaps* have been crucial in this return to the political and nationalist dimensions of the Ganapatiutsav (Kaur, 1998, pp. 256–78, and this volume).

of Maharashtra community. In the 1980s the Sena incorporated other festivals, such as the Dussehra, and the Navratri festival originating in Gujarat, as part of its attempt to appeal to the wider Hindu community.

The shakhas have also been quite effective in projecting themselves as a representation of, if not the heart of, the neighbourhood, and, by implication, the Sena as a representative of ordinary and local people. The shakhas have been projected as the place to go for assistance and various forms of patronage. They receive local complaints over lack of civic amenities, corrupt officials, harassment of tenants by landlords, complaints over employers, quarrels in neighbourhoods and families, etc. The pramukh and the activists are expected to take care of these problems, either by solving them directly or by going to local officials, through the trade unions, or to the local members of the municipal corporation and other elected representatives of the area. They are also expected to be brokers (*dalal*) and 'social workers' of their areas, to put pressure on administration and politicians to improve roads, sewage, housing, water, etc. The support and sympathy the Shiv Sena has enjoyed in many neighbourhoods in between its spectacular political successes—and in particular its survival during almost ten years in the political wilderness between 1975 and 1984—was in many ways based on this network of such local welfare strategies. However, as in the case of the festivals, the Sainiks are far from alone in these endeavours to project themselves through these types of services and brokerage that have a long history in Mumbai, as well as elsewhere in India.

The popularity of Sainiks as brokers and protectors owes a lot to their reputation of violent ruthlessness and aggressiveness, and of being the protectors of the common man, employing the strength of the common man—numerical strength—and the language of the common man—his fists and muscles—to assert his rights *vis-à-vis* the establishment. 'Being a Shiv Sainik means that half the job is done' is one of the most popular one-liners circulating in the organization, emphasizing the commitment to action and affirming the idea of the Shiv Sena as resolute and effective. The aggressiveness of the Shiv Sainik as a means to achieve self-respect is an integral and crucial part of the Sainik identity, nurtured by the leadership and repeated in numerous stories and parables. Modhav Joshi, MLA in Thane City (West), brought out a crucial element in the Shiv Sena ethos—to gain respect through power, and if necessary violence, when he told me:

Thackeray has told us that you should be polite and talk to the person, but if he does not talk and shows you the law, there is also nature's law and I can use it—that is to hammer the person. I do not want *goondaism* (criminal methods, TBH) in the Shiv Sena and I want hundred per cent gentlemen. But if you do not allow me to speak, then how am I to express myself? ... I am not a beggar, no doubt I am needy and I too have some respect. If you simply throw me out I will not tolerate that! (Interview with Modhav Joshi, November 1992.)

The themes of respect, revenge and natural law were repeated by another veteran Shiv Sena leader. Pradhan asserted:

The principle of natural justice is also accepted by us, and this is the principle of natural justice—that whatever is mine is mine, and what is yours is yours. ... It is just like playing with fire. If you sit beside it, it will give you warmth, but if you play with it, it burns your house. Shiv Sena is that way. (Interview with Pradhan, February 1993.)

Observers of the Shiv Sena from Katzenstein to V.S. Naipaul ('in his admiring portrait of Shiv Sainiks in *India: A Million Mutinies Now*) and journalists generally assume that the shakha grid is the heart of the Sena i.e. that which explains the staying power of the movement. Many left wing activists look at this grid as the innermost secret of the Sena which achieves a density of identification, loyalty, and communication that the leftist parties never achieved.

My contention is, however, that the efficacy of the shakhas in terms of service provision is rather exaggerated. First, most localities in Mumbai have always harboured a number of competing centres of brokerage and influence, and the superiority of the Sena in this regard has been neither consistently self-evident nor stable.

Second, Shakhas are by no means fully functional around the year. They are often dormant and closed, and they often work only before and during the festival season in August to October. The functioning of local shakhas is often impeded by quarrels and rivalry between Sainiks over leadership and authority. These are often only overcome when a strong command from Thackeray, or the local district chief, impels Sainiks to embark on campaigns or protest actions of various sorts. The Shiv Sena is an open, informal organization at the local level without formal membership and devoid of effective social control. It exists mainly as a movement when it is engaged in various high-profile, and often violent actions. The 'actionist' ideology of the Shiv Sena is also reflected in its organization which in practice is often very far removed from the daily displays of effervescent devotion that Sena leaders like to claim.

Third, the dysfunction of the shakha does not necessarily mean that the Shiv Sena is absent from an area. It can be represented by known Sainiks of varying ranks, or people who are known to be associated with the Shiv Sena, in whose homes or offices ordinary people come to ask for help and favours. Or it can exist as a 'public mood', as traces of memory of past actions or incidents in the locality, as reputations of people associated with the Sena, and as rumours of the violence and deeds of the Shiv Sena as such, far away from the locality. I have met many people who declare themselves as Sainiks, but do not vote for the local Sena candidate, or who go to a Congress politician for help because his local reputation was better. I have also met people who ask a local Sena man for help, even vote for him because of his local reputation but who oppose the Shiv Sena at the general elections.

Similar observations could be made about other political formations and movements in India. This merely suggests that the entire idea of relatively stable 'support bases' and 'constituencies' of parties or movements is highly unstable and dependent on strategic performances as well as local configurations of power in different localities. Even a fairly organized movement like the Shiv Sena is vitally dependent on this continuous representation of itself in public spaces through signs, signatures, discourse, and rumours. The actual 'secret' of the Sena lies, in other words, in its incessant production of statements, one-liners and rumours, and in its capacity and will to stage violent high-profile actions, rather than in its effective physical presence in every neighbourhood in the city.

'NORMAL POLITICS' AND THE LOGIC OF ENTROPY

The following example illustrates the fragility of the Sena's power, even in an old so-called stronghold like Thane city—a big industrial city in the northern outskirts of the Greater Mumbai region where the Shiv Sena has had a sustained political presence since 1967. For more than twenty years, a populous low-income slum area in Thane known as Chandanwadi had been a Sena stronghold. The area, which has around 20,000 people, comprises a number of older *chawls*, some upgraded hutment areas and newer slums. The Shiv Sena shakha, painted in brilliant colours (in itself part of the performance), is placed next to the main road going through the area. This shakha had for years been famous for its spectacular mandap tableaux in the Ganapatiutsav and its many active Sainiks are always to be seen around the shakha at night.

Two brothers, rising businessmen, had been the leading Sena men in the area for a long time and they had the characteristics that are

quite typical of local Sena leaders and central to the Sena's profile: both of them had a reputation for violence and a history of being involved in various illegal activities. They were also seen as self-made, fearless, and courageous men who had been scarred by life and who, therefore, had a capacity for making the right choices and to protect the neighbourhood and get things done. The brothers belonged to the Maratha caste which further consolidated their reputation for action and violence. But this was not mentioned to me by the people unless I asked them specifically. During this time Chandanwadi was seen as a Sena territory and the local residents benefited regularly from the Sena's various high-profile actions—distributing free foodgrains, oil, school books, ambulance services, etc. The brothers also helped protect residents against police raids, especially in the southern end of the area, known for prostitution and illegal liquor breweries, and they helped local people who were harassed by money lenders.

The Sena's popularity in the area began to decline in 1989 after Thackeray forced all the Sena councillors in the Thane city to resign. Their fault lay in their inability to prevent the defection of four councillors to the Congress—an event that cost the Shiv Sena its dominance in the Thane Municipal Corporation. The two brothers began to quarrel and the local Sena district chief, Anand Dighe—whose life and reputation is larger than life and an ongoing spectacle (see Hansen, 2001, pp. 104–12)—decided to support one of the brothers against the other.

The quarrelling led to a certain inactivity and decline in the life of the shakha and in the Sena's credibility as protectors and suppliers of various services to the area. The shakha was more or less dormant for several years. As a result, a young man, Pawar—also a Maratha with a 'reputation' of violence and links to the underworld—emerged from the southern end of the area as an aspiring *dada* with considerable success. In the northern end of Chandanwadi, dominated by *bhaiyas* (nickname for north Indians), a north Indian Brahmin, owner of most of the land, and an aspiring builder, Bula Sheth, emerged as the new strongman. According to what he told me, his main interest in local politics was to get permission to clear the slums and build highrises.

The respect given to Bula Sheth had to do with the fact that he was a Brahmin, an educated man who knew the ways of the bureaucracy, could write letters, lent money to his tenants, and was known for being helpful and gentle. He ran a small dairy with about twenty cows around his house, and always sat outside on the porch of his house

demonstrating how approachable he was. Although I heard stories about how some of his men would evict tenants quite brutally, he retained this mild mannered, rural air about him—something many of the *bhaiyas* considered very endearing. He was quite realistic about politics:

I could never win a seat here, I am a bhaiya and the people in this ward would not vote for me. They are Maharashtrians and they like strong men like the More brothers. This is why I have decided to support Pawar. I was sure he could win the seat.

Supported by a rich maverick builder family in Thane—running hotels and bars all over the district, and a major financier of the local Congress party—Pawar soon emerged as a serious contender for power in Chandanwadi. He started his own Mitra Mandal (friends association)—a ubiquitous form of social institution and youth club found all over the larger metropolitan area—which soon began to organize religious festivals on a grand scale. Rumours of parties thrown by Pawar that served lots of meat and alcohol spread and he soon had a cohort of young men in Chandanwadi following him and working with him. Pawar now adopted the style and gestures of the proverbial *dada*-politician—dressed in white and wearing heavy golden chains and rings. He also acquired an impressive patron—the builder whose son drove Pawar all over the city in his shiny new Tata jeep and sat in his office as a permanent advisor to the only semi-literate Pawar.

In the municipal elections in 1992 Pawar linked up with Sheth and managed to win the seat as councillor in the ward. As a reward for this important victory, Pawar was given the post of member of the Standing Committee in the Municipal Corporation for a year which enabled him to pay back his debt. Pawar readily admitted this logic:

I was given this post in return for my victory in Chandanwadi. Since then I have issued many 'No Objection Certificates' to shopkeepers and builders in the area. They have also donated substantial amounts of money to the social work we carry out in our Mitra Mandal. (Interview in Thane city, October 1992.)

This and many similar processes in other parts of Thane indicated how much the image of the local Sainiks depended on the larger public image of the Sena as well as the capacity for sustained local actionism and service delivery. It also demonstrated that the performative capacity of the Sena in both these respects was rather more dependent on the access to resource flows in political institutions than its public image and self-projections would admit. The mode of functioning and the

logic of patronage governing the Sena at this level resembled rather closely that of any political party in India. Without spectacular action and violence performed in public, however, the Sena was reduced to a normal political mechanism and became bedeviled by the logic of entropy that seem to govern local politics in most Indian cities except in times of large political campaigning or sharpening of political or communal antagonisms.

Let me give a last twist to the story about how the Congress in turn took up Sena methods to retain a 'presence' as Pawar was losing his profile and ability to sustain his maverick image. While Anand Dighe in 1997 campaigned in the name of party discipline, Congress candidates in Chandanwadi, among them N. Pawar, embarked on a protest against the alleged demolition by the authorities of a small Ganesh temple in the neighbourhood. Employing the techniques that the Sena had honed and made common, Pawar declared a *bandh* (closure of shops) in the area, stopped traffic on the main road, and declared that he and other candidates would fast indefinitely until the city administration issued an official apology.

Interestingly, neither the Shiv Sena nor the BJP even commented on the issue which did not seem to have any major impact on the election result. The Shiv Sena's candidate won a convincing victory not least due to a very effective campaign run and controlled by Anand Dighe, who up until the last minute allowed rumours of his own possible candidature for the post of mayor to dominate the better part of the campaign. The winning candidate in Chandanwadi was a young man from an OBC community who was a loyal Sena activist but was relatively unknown in the neighborhood in his own right as a worker or strongman. So in this case, the Sena's ability to manage the mood once again overshadowed the range of local concerns—drainage, water connections, jobs, stable electricity supply—that many people in the area were complaining about.

CONCLUSION

The image of the Sainik as a defiant, violent plebeian male is obviously not always sociologically correct, as the above example indicates. The *dada* style of politics is also practised by other political formations just as the Sena also engages in rather 'normal' inconspicuous forms of politics. Yet the Sainiks who Thackeray addresses and seeks to create through speeches and other gestures, are nonetheless conceptualised as an abstract and generalized 'plebeian male' (see Hansen, 1996b).

Many, including regular middle class boys, find the Sena's call for a no-nonsense and violent masculinity both appealing and sensuous. This kind of 'ordinary guy' image has come evermore to the fore in Indian public culture over the past decades—including in the Hindi cinema and not unlike the way in which Hollywood has transformed the 'regular guy' into a lonely, often slightly deviant avenger type. The rhetorical prominence of the plebeian is, one could say, one of democracy's cultural consequences. But it is a figure that is truly symbolic in the sense that the 'plebeian male' cannot be determined sociologically, even less can a 'plebeian' constituency—it simply fragments into localities, class, and caste segments as in Chandanwadi.

The plebeian is a symbol whose invocation refers to something more intangible and yet more effective, namely what Foucault in one of his flashes of insight called 'plebness'—by which he meant a sentiment, a defiant collective mood that in some ways is the very limit of politics and governance (Foucault 1966, p. 52). In my understanding, plebness is a kind of register of resistance and reaction that inevitably is engendered by policies, governance, policing, in public cultures that celebrate courage, rights and freedom but are also marked by large 'grey' zones of partly unintelligible, unknown or unknowable social worlds—the *zopadpattis*, the slum worlds and its popular practices.

Many contributions to the Subaltern Studies series have been trying to capture this residue, and the entire series was always driven by a fascination for the opacity of the social worlds of ordinary people—often seen as relatively uncolonized, or as ungoverned forms of sociality. The Shiv Sena's invocation of 'plebness' demonstrates, I think, how problematic such an understanding can be and how ambivalent, violent and profoundly unheroic the plebeian register can be. Yet 'plebness' and plebeian styles of acting, appearing and speaking in public are undoubtedly very real and existing sentiments—with equally real and deeply ambivalent effects in the world—such as public violence, logics of 'reputations' and protection, and subsequent voting behaviour that seems to defy many of the assumptions in political sociology.

I think we should take seriously Chatterjee's suggestion that the actually existing political forms in Indian society may represent new and hitherto unseen forms of democratic politics (Chatterjee 2000). We must therefore plunge ourselves into the universes of discourse, action, and sentiment in these spaces that according to my own and many other people's experiences indeed are complex and chaotic but also imminently accessible and welcoming and by no means as opaque

as they may appear from a distance. Only thus may we begin to understand the complexities of these social worlds and come to grips with 'popular' or 'plebeian' identities as transient, if momentarily highly effective, performative registers.

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