THE MAHILA AGHADI: THE SHIV SENA WOMEN AND URBAN POLITICS

By

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Abstract

The paper takes into account the urban poor and political patronage with changing contours of ‘violence’ in Mumbai through the work of Shiv Sena’s women wing Mahila Aghadi. The paradoxical emancipation and empowerment of women within the patriarchal fold brings women to the public sphere realizing the benefits of collective violence simultaneously redefining the term social service with respect to legitimacy gained by coercive acts marking them as cases of ‘political violence’ rather than mere criminal acts. The significance of this study is that it provides insights into the informal interaction of urban poor with the state to access state security and the role of informal institutions such as Mahila Aghadi in widening the access to public space for women. The paper argues that it is the informal institutions established through political brokerage that provide the grey area for urban poor to become less vulnerable. While the state is not present everywhere, willingly or unwillingly, but the perception of state and discourse around it is inevitable and omnipresent.

Keywords: violence, state, informal institutions, mahila aghadi, urban politics

Introduction

There is an assertive need to deconstruct the category of the state to construct a more lucid one as a scattered entity debilitating the dichotomy of its ‘presence’ and ‘absence’ highlighting the formal institutions’ interaction with informal institutions pertinent to the conception of state. Max Weber said “sociologically, the state cannot be defined in terms of its ends. There is scarcely any task that some political association has not taken in hand, and there is no task that one could say has always been exclusive and peculiar to those associations which are designated as political ones: today the state, or historically, those associations which have been the predecessors of the modern state. Ultimately, one can define the modern state sociologically only in terms of the specific means peculiar to it, as to every political association, namely, the use of physical
force” (Weber 33). When the use of force by non-state actors in the informal sphere to pursue their goals is not checked, contained, controlled or punished by the state, it changes the concept of state associated with neutrality, justice and equality, albeit a more nuanced understanding of such phenomena calls for the study of informal institutions in the universe of politics in the developing countries. The venal politics along with use of force, unlawful activities and ethno-communal conflicts at the peri-urban areas and elsewhere point towards the aberrations in the state law, but their emergence, spread and sustenance is marked by the incentives provided to the actors involved in it by the underlying informal institutions marking a wider system of expectations and patterned behavior.

City, State and the Problem of Administration

According to provisional data from 2011 census, nearly 41.3 per cent population in Mumbai lives in slums (Deshmukh 34) which makes slum as an interesting site of political activities and location of urban poor as pertinent in shaping the political culture in urban areas. The inefficiency of state administration has been used as a justification for the ‘politics of direct action’ and violence as well as a grievance which drew light upon the alternatives in the form of Shiv Sena and gathered further support for the same. This can be traced back to the problems of administration in the Mumbai then called as Bombay. The state became the melting point for migrants from within Maharashtra as well as outside and this led to the growing problem of beggars, illicit hawkers, and unemployed laborers specially the increasing grievances regarding economic status of the Maharashtrians in the 1960’s. The findings of Tekchand Report published in 1964 and the perusal of various newspapers and journals by Sudha Gogate of the common grievances point out two important observations in context of the justification for politics of direct action and violence structured through the perception of state as inefficient in the urban context. First, the feelings of economic deprivation that existed among the Maharashtrians were further shaped, not created, by the Shiv Sena’s mouthpiece marmik within the frame of legitimate claims of Maharashtrians through an aggressive politics of intimidation, threats, protests and demonstrations that often turned into places of collective violence. Second, the dominant discourse was pumped
in by the reported stories of harassment wherein the identity of those harassing was clear, their numbers was posed as a threat to law and order and also the corruption and inefficiency of the state authorities in taking care of the problem was emphasized. For example, *Daily Maratha* (1965-67) narrates about clashes between hawkers and police in Dadar in North Mumbai wherein majority of hawkers reportedly were from Kerala (Gogate 127). There were reports of Municipal Department turning a blind eye to hawkers on the pavements and even if an honest policeman did pull them up, they intimidated the policeman collectively, ‘even brandishing a knife’ (Gogate 127). Such narratives give us an insight into the rise of Shiv Sena and its politics of direct action not merely as criminal or unlawful acts but as political actions that gained legitimacy and formed a part of political participation by the urban slum in the sphere of interaction between the informal institutions such as Mahila Aghadi and the formal institutions of the state. Such informal institutions are often justified as ‘substitutive’ informal institutions creating a range of possibilities for urban poor to access public place, social security such as livelihood and assert their rights through political patronage while rising as ‘political elites’ among the urban poor.

This should be juxtaposed with instances of violence involving immediate action, which Bal Thackeray called as ‘constructive violence’ promised to deliver prompt justice and remove bureaucratic bottlenecks that blocked growth (Purandare 105), in the earlier phase of Shiv Sena’s rise. As claimed by Purandare that Sena’s slow replacement of an inefficient system of delivery of amenities and services by its direct action was seen to be effective and were backed up by the voters in Parel (a district in Girangaon which was also the focus of Great Bombay textile strike of 1982) in 1970’s (Purandare 105). Another incident narrated by Purandare is of the hike in the prices of essential commodities in 1970’s followed by a massive anti-price agitation. Thackeray had warned traders that if they created artificial scarcity, the Sena would use its own methods to fight them (Purandare 105). The Shiv Sena womenthen stormed into several shops all over Mumbai, whose owners had claimed to have scarcity of Dalda ghee and brought out the hidden containers from godowns which were then sold to housewives and money
earned was handed down to owners. This is to further comment upon first, the relation between the coercive acts and needs of the urban poor. Such acts are therefore not marked as mere criminal acts even when they may call for criminal charges or other punitive action by the state. They become acts of resistance and political violence. Second, it reifies the narration propagated and maintained by the Sena of the inefficient and corrupt state which it claims to fill in for. As aptly and creatively said by Hansen “The profanity of the elected representative and the political realm in general could, in Lacanian terms, be seen as the “Real” of democratic practice, the almost unbearable truth of the profanity of power. Yet, this is exactly the core of the “jouissance of politics”: the pleasure derived from constantly revealing this profanity, of cynically “saying things as they really are.”” (Hansen 115).

Women’s question has traversed along the margins of being a revolutionary question, controversial, shocking and inappropriate to symbol of progress, modernity, monotony and status quo, at times not denying to have the potential of being used as a tool in a modus operandi of electoral politics. Shiv Sena too has not refused to raise it. Maharashtra, with 11 million people living in slums, has become the state with highest slum population. The census data designates slums in three different ways: notified, recognized and identified. Out of total slum population, 4.6 million residents live in ‘identified’ slums that lacks any legal status as a slum and has no access to legal protection or municipal services. Census data of 2011 shows as high as 41.3% population residing in slums of Greater Mumbai, one of the metropolitan cities. The urban slums have been a strong support base for Shiv Sena. The lack of clean drinking water, health care and infrastructure along with no claim to legal protection provides a very interesting example of how the interaction of formal institutions of democracy and informal sphere of urban poor gives rise to a semi-formal synthesis where power is as oscillatory as identities and law is as coercive as politics allows it to be. Such synthesis gives rise to an assertive need to deconstruct the category of state as a scattered entity debilitating the dichotomy of its ‘presence’ and ‘absence’ highlighting the informal sphere of procedures, representations and rules forming the part of governing processes. Kruijt, while analyzing the case of Latin America in 1980’s affected by mass poverty,
informality and social exclusion, uses the term “governance voids” (Kruijt 83) to assess the processes marking the rise of parallel and informal structures and hierarchies throughout Latin America. Albeit, the term has been used to refer to ungoverned areas where the representatives of law are absent or symbolically present, here I do not employ the presence or absence as analytic tools for looking at informal institutions.

**Women’s Front and the Agenda Behind**

More number of women from urban slum take part in workforce which means two things. First, their higher visibility in public place. Second, more vulnerability as access to public place with diluted possibilities of legal protection in case of violation of rights and greater obstacles in positions that challenge their traditional roles as mothers and wives, unequal pay and sexual abuse in workplace. This must be juxtaposed with the work of Atreyee Sen (2007) where a woman narrated her experience of sexual exploitation at workplace. Many women looked for job opportunities, the pressure to earn livelihood in the wake of de-industrialization, decreasing manufacturing sectors jobs and unemployment among men brought women out of their homes in search of jobs. One woman narrated how the informalization of work contained within great potential of risk of sexual exploitation and low wages (Sen). More supply of labor meant one was easily replaceable. This situation was used by the men who owned the resources sexually exploiting women who were too desperate to keep the job. Face sexual exploitation or unemployment. Shifting moralities as one woman said who remarked how morality had moved from bedroom to outside world signifying sexual exploitation in informal sector which also led to tacit acceptance of prevailing abuse at home and outside as a result of heightened frustrations until Mahila Aghadi (Shiv Sena’s women wing) came into the picture. Albeit it in no way exemplifies the reasons for creating Shiv Sena’s women’s front or its subsequent actions but partially attempts to understand its moral appeal and support base building it as an informal institution.

Bal Thackarey had once referred to Mahila Aghadi as “The Backbone of Shiv Sena” (Mankikar). The women Shiv Sainiks believe the Sena to be the same for them. Tarini Bedi traces the birth of Mahila Aghadi (Women’s
Front) in 1985 (7), which Shiv Sena women often translate as ‘women first’ or ‘women in front’, to the efforts of young Maharashtrian women of Bombay touched by the joblessness of their fathers and brothers and thereby attracted to Shiv Sena’s sons of the soil movement drawing awareness on the marginalization of Maharashtrians, othering of Muslims as sexual predators and aggressive outsiders along with migrants from other states as responsible for unemployment of Maharashtrians and from masculinist rhetoric of direct action to nationalist call saving Hindu culture from contamination. Bedi points out the common event weaved into multiple narratives of Aghadi’s inception as insertion of women’s body into public space. Aghadi gained more prominence and was integrated into the larger party structure through influence of Meena Tai (Thackeray’s late wife).

Politics in the urban peripheries is often precarious and unstable relying on the local power of the low level members of party, on elected or nominated posts or only as supporters. The reverberating opinion of the Shiv Sainiks has been that the party is interested mainly in samaj-kaaran (service to society) not Raj-kaaran (Politics) (Bedi 88), albeit the latter forms the part of their personal political ambitions that in turn relies on the motivation to highlight the former in the process of carving out their own areas of influence and extra legal authority well exemplified by number of cases of street justice, circumventing legal procedures and settling disputes through various legal and illegal ways that can well be documented as mere incidents and aberrations in the working of law in democracy at the cost of ignoring it as the basis of norm-setting and emergent forms of legal pluralism in context of third world politics. Any service to the society with scarce resources on the urban peripheries is prone to be politicized in the context of electoral exigencies of democratic procedures but far exceeds the ways in which political subjects are constructed, local power maintained and a dialectical relationship established between the party and the local power of its low level politicians.

Sen suggests a paradoxical empowerment of women through Shiv Sena, if empowerment at all, as Aghadi manipulated nationalist discourse to address localized gender interest. It emerged as a ‘sub-group’ through ideological and political patronage, it became popular by contesting restrictive decrees on women imposed
by patriarchal slum communities, and fundamentalist movements in general (Sen). Sen explores the emergence of Mahila Aghadi not only as a satellite of male-dominated nationalistic movement but also as a product of complex poor urban women and children. It is the latter than I intend to analyze and stress upon as subsuming shiv sena women within the nationalist ideologically consistent right wing movement and group would be a construction of a pseudo wall of consistent ideological stand that Shiv Sena has demolished with its selective actions and ever transient stands on social and political issues. The outcomes of Mahila Aghadi’s efforts at mobilizing women in neighborhoods under the dogmatic yet appealing leadership of Shiv Sena proved helpful in breaking the public/private dichotomy and if not making private as political but making it approachable within the informal social networks of Sena women well exemplified by the words of women Shiv Sainiks and party leaders: “Men go from door to door but the women are dashing because they get beyond the door into the kitchen. They can speak that language. When you get to the women in the kitchen that’s when you can influence everything else” (Bedi 100). The ability of women Shiv Sainiks to transgress the public and political is conducive to building networks of trust, accountability and political obligations. I prefer to call this as incidental feminism wherein the Sena was successful in invoking the name of Sena to stop exploitation, address everyday issues that affected women primarily such as putting a limit on dowry or threatening an abusive husband but not challenging the patriarchal structure and practices itself.

There is a transformative potential within the Shiv Sena politics reaffirmed by the women Shiv Sainiks as transforming the style of politics in Maharashtra marking the greater public political participation and visibility of women in public and political sphere through the engagement in everyday lives of people. They also reiterate the fact that how it has transformed them through such political affiliation as what many women called as their “Dashing Personality” (Bedi) that also marks the difference between them and other women politicians including Bharatiya Janata Party women politicians lacking the ability to enter into the field of action moving one closer to risks and dangers to body and image. It also provides the women Shiv Sainiks with
a horizontal benefit extended to family and friends within the vertical patronage of the party. Hence these “brokers” emerge as active agents who are simultaneously matrons and recipients of patronage (Bedi).

Extending or rather allowing myself to mangle the concept of security state by Iris Marion Young to draw similarity between the masculinist logic of protection by a security state, as Young exemplifies through USA and the erosion of democratic values of due process, separation of powers, free assembly and holding powerful actors responsible. Young looks at the benign form of masculinity whereby the protector’s role is glorified as a selfless sacrificing agent and those under their protection are grateful to them. I view Shiv Sena having the characteristic of ‘protector’ like masculinist party account for subordinate citizens. Citizens of a democratic state allow their leaders to adopt a stance of protector, also as Katzenstein believes that the social service function the Shakhas provided was the most important reason for its rise in the neighborhood (384), the party emerged as a paternal authority for the Maharashtrians in distress thereby reducing these citizens to position of subordinate or second class citizens like that of women in a patriarchal household. The Aghadi has played a significant role in changing this subordination into one which is not concomitant with powerlessness. I concur with Sen’s point of the transformative potential in agency which implies that gender roles are socially and culturally produced therefore each one contains the possibility of their transformation and redefinition. This was exemplified through work of Aghadi wherein the Shiv Sena men assumed women to be passive recipients of male dictates and saw ‘saving Hindu religion’ as the main purpose for their joining a fundamentalist movement. The ethnographic study points out how women were not participating merely because of their patriotic emotive function of nationalism and Hindutva but to experience a greater ‘freedom’ from limiting patriarchal values. Sena women realized the benefit of collective violence and enjoyed greater visibility in the public space also involving in illegal activities and using party membership to establish a clandestine relationship with the policemen. After 1992 riots, Sena women claimed to have better relationship with police officials who were reported to have sided with Hind
extremist forces during the Hindu Muslim riots.

**Women, Violence and Public Visibility**

The common thread weaving the fabric of women’s experiences was fundamental in bringing women together in Aghadi cutting across caste and class, albeit majority were urban slum dwellers. Concurring with the argument of Shilpa Phadke after an extensive fieldwork in Mumbai that making a claim to the right to take risks in public space rather than petitioning for safety right take women further in the struggle to access public space as citizens. Sena women members, through training women in militant activities, martial skills and taking part in violent activities did increase their sphere of taking risk with, what they claimed, as a ‘legitimate cause’ signifying loyalty to the party’s Hindutva campaign but concomitantly giving rise to two things. First, the increasing access to public space by Hindu Right wing women especially during communal tensions of 1992-93 which meant excluding Muslims from public space increasing the risk of being attacked. Sena women were seen patrolling the Muslim localities, there were reports of Aghadi women involved in illegal activities of looting Muslim owner’s shops, destruction of property and obstructing work of NGOs trying to rebuild Muslims houses after communal riots. Secondly, the access to public space was contingent upon the conformism of women to set of ideas and boundaries emanating from ideas disseminated through Bal Thackeray’s speeches, Party’s weekly magazine ‘Marmik’, pamphlets and interviews though not limited to the same. As wearing a saffron saree, Mangalsutra and other related feminine assets associated with a Hindu married woman earned them greater chances of acceptance and respectability. However there may be differences in the individual stands of local women Shiv Sainiks and the party’s macro-politics. This must be juxtaposed with the case of one of the Shiv Sena leaders in Pune named Durva Yadav who had been a nominated leader in Shiv Sena for almost two decades. She lived and worked in the red light district of Pune’s old city (Bedi, Tarini 2016). Bedi points out along with intricate details of the area, the influence of Durva in shaping the ways the state authorities interacted with the area known as Budhvar Peth (Wednesday market) and its residents as well as Durva’s own cause and way of
working, albeit not uncommon among women Shiv Sainiks, dashing and getting work done but in an uncommon area. Durva was commonly referred to as “our pramukh” (our leader) or “maalkin” (Landlady). She ran an NGO called Akhil Bharatiya Peth Devdasi Sanstha (All Bbudhvar Peth Devdasi Organization) that worked with sex workers in the area to spread awareness about HIV/AIDS and distribute condoms widely amongst the male clients who came in and out of the area during the day (Bedi 215). This is in stark contrast with Shiv Sena’s stand on ban on Mumbai Bar Dancers which rendered thousands of women jobless pushing them further into the flesh trade that runs parallel to licensed dance bars and clubs.

Shiv Sainik Bala Munde while addressing a group of women at her home remarked:
“if you enquire here, then everyone will first say that Munde is very loving, but she is dangerous. That is what gets my political work done. Everyone knows that I am daring, dashing that way.”

A similar claim of effectiveness through threats was made by other women Shiv Sainiks: “When we ask a man to come it is an order”, “we threaten them to ensure that they do whatever we say”, “If they do not come they will regret it”, “They know we will use violence” (Eckert 37). The invocation of threats and its subsequent effectiveness in carrying out the orders depends on the previous experiences and incidents of violence, its narratives, publicity, visibility, state’s inaction and the extra-legal connections.

The general pessimism towards the ability of formal state authorities to reach the peripheries of urban society and address the grievances of common people has combined well with the carving of extra legal authority as legitimate effectively pumped in by the deal of carrying out something that may not be legal in the dictionary of the state but yet be possible in the realm of urban politics. The politics of collective violence, greater visibility and the capacity to fight against state authorities such as police on one hand and establishing informal ties with them on the other forms the field of political possibilities “made possible” by the broader presence of a political party that has since its founding rewarded and encouraged public disorder, performative aggression and a local brokerage-style political agenda that connects people to the material and affective resources of urban life.
(Bedi 37). Sena provides them with an identity and belonging, with the most paradoxical balance between respectability and unconventional extra-legal means, providing them with patronage and immunity with each member’s potential to turn support into electoral victory. Dirk Kruijt, analyzing the rise of non-state armed actors in the form of youth gangs observed “a considerable segment of the youth in marginalized neighborhoods is unemployed and have no opportunities to become employable. They find a certain status, even identity and belonging, in gangs, a fact that explains the relative popularity of gang membership as a lifestyle” (93). A similar belonging with Shiv Sena functioning as the political and social face of the gangs is created in its members residing in the so called uncivil urban peripheries of metropolitan cities.

**Conclusion**

The working of Shiv Sena, with special focus on functioning of *Mahila Aghadi* as an informal institution of regularized patterns of interaction that are known, practiced, and regularly accepted through its everyday working underlines the milieu which makes its politics of violence and direct action possible and effective. The conditions within which *Aghadi* work mark a high degree of vulnerability in terms of legal status of residents and lack of basic services. The informal institutions provide the operational validity to Sena’s politics of direct action that does not exist without the presence of informalities within the formal institutions which make the state unresponsive, inefficient and inaccessible. Formalism refers to the chasm between the formal law and their implementation. This becomes a breeding ground for the rise of such informal institutions where Shiv Sena as a formal organization can provide violence as its distinct service for fulfilling tangible needs, providing benefits, privileges and solving problems that may or may not turn into electoral success but make it an indispensable patron in the life of urban poor as well as a body that provides platform for making ‘political elites’ among urban poor.


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**ABOUT THE AUTHOR**

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