

Shivshahi in the Mohalla

How Shiv Sena Entrenched itself in Bombay

This is part one of a series of three articles on Shiv Sena

by

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For many years, the Shiv Sena has dominated the Brihanmumbai Municipal Corporation (BMC). Bal Thackeray, the undisputed leader of the Party, was confident that this would be so again: “The Saffron flag will continue to be atop the corporation” (*The Times of India*, January 21, 2002). His confidence has been vindicated by the results of the recent municipal elections in Mumbai. Out of a total of 227 seats, Shiv Sena secured 98 as against 35 seats won by the BJP, 61 by the Sonia led Congress and 12 by the Congress faction headed by Sharad Pawar.

The Shiv Sena has been governing the city since 1985. It promised to beautify it, to make messy Bombay into *sundar* Mumbai, to make a Hindustan in Maharashtra. The Party was founded in 1966, first espousing regionalist claims within the newly created state of Maharashtra. It has made Hindu nationalism its central basis for mobilisation since the early 1980s. It is a party defined by its strategy of direct action, militant vision and aggressive rhetoric against those it defines as enemies, as well as a cult built around its supreme leader, Bal Thackeray. What is it in the Party’s specific practices and structures, in the way it expresses its ideology, and in its aggregated response to Mumbai and its historical situation that makes the Shiv Sena successful - successful in winning mass support, and in achieving numerous electoral victories in a democracy which it rhetorically and often practically despises?

Seen as ‘Problem Solvers’

When I ask why they vote for the Shiv Sena, voters often express an utterly pragmatic reasoning. A slum leader said: “Shrikant [a Shiv Sena leader] paid two lakhs from his own pocket to pave the roads here. Previously, we belonged to the Congress. Now we are with the Shiv Sena. The Congress only talked, but didn’t do anything. I joined the Shiv Sena because locally they have the strength. They are very dangerous persons. They killed so many Muslims, threw bombs and so on. Now they are leaders... Congress let us down. The Congress has been worked away from the hearts of the people.”

Last October, a whole housing society in Dharavi switched its electoral allegiance from the Congress to the Shiv Sena because the local *shakha pramukh* [leader of local branch] had promised to solve their problem regarding a water connection. In the nearby *zhopadpatt* (slum cluster), people hoped for some more toilets; and elsewhere it was the protection enjoyed against some builders that was traded against votes. Such deals are commonplace. Most parties have practised them for many years but there are many people who attested that the Shiv Sena actually delivers. A mill worker commented: “With the Shiv Sena we can solve problems. They were the first ones to bring water pipes. They did it in five years. I don’t know where the money came from. The roads were so bad that you would fall



Bal Thackeray : Larger than life projection

down if you walked around at night. Now they are paved. We got electricity from a dam. All children like the Sena and they love Bal Thackeray. The Congress has not managed this in 40 years.” Pragmatism, of course, is not empty concept. Pragmatism is the “ideology” of Sainiks. They claim to be pragmatic, to deliver, not to waste time on ideological debates but to get straight to solving problems.

Ever since its inception in 1966, the Shiv Sena has laid importance on its “social work” - a term which denotes a wide variety of activities. “Shiv Sena believes that service of people and unity of people are the only ways of social development. Therefore, Shiv Sena believes more in social activities than active politics,” proclaims Shivsena’s website. Sainiks claim that their own activities are not “politics”, but are instead based on “obvious” notions of what is good and what needs to be done.

“What is politics? Politics is just good administration. So our politicians don’t know politics,” opined the Sena MLA, Shrikant Samolkar. “They just come, talk and go. We solve problems,” felt Vinodh Kumble, an older member of the movement. The various services offered within the *shakha* structure are intricately connected to the violent agitation and militant posture of the party. Violent agitation and local services are the two sides of the stance of the Sena, as summed up in the slogan of a young *shakha* pramukh, “Our ideology is to get things done. Our method is force.”

Shakhas and Pramukhs

The location for getting things done is the *shakha*, the local branch where the organisational life of the party has its base. *Shakhas* are to be found in every part of Mumbai, as well as in most towns and villages of Maharashtra. There are 221 in Mumbai, one in every municipal ward. The “things” provided by the *shakhas* range from counselling to infrastructural improvements or protection. “The Shiv Sena draws its strength from identifying problems quickly. They started local shops. The Shiv Sena benefits from the *shakhas*. No other party has a *shakha* and they do not listen to the grievances of the people,” explained a young man from Dharavi. Just recently, Sainiks organised “clean up” drives and medical camps to celebrate Bal Thackeray’s 75th birthday. They pressurise the Municipality on behalf of their ward for water connections and other civic amenities, organise local self-help activities and collect funds for these activities. This explains why *shakhas* are more active in the areas of Mumbai which lack facilities and where residents have less access to state services or the financial power to secure them.

Many of the services that the *shakhas* can provide answer to felt needs. There are *shakhas* in affluent areas too, but these are active in different, and often less conspicuous ways because services for the affluent, who already have running water, who can pay a lawyer and a judge, and who send their children to a good school for certain, take a different form. The more visible presence of the Shiv Sena among the poorer sections of society is due to the latter’s need for the services the party provides rather than a habitual affinity or a “natural” disposition for the Shiv Sena’s modes of operation, as is sometimes assumed.

Employment Providers and Strike Breakers

Jobs, especially for unemployed youth, have always been one of the main areas of attention of the Shiv Sena in general, and its *shakhas* in particular. The initial platform of the Sena, when it was launched in 1966, was to secure 80 percent of the jobs in all sectors of the Mumbai economy for “Maharashtrians”. Unemployment and under-employment are pressing problems among the youth of Maharashtra. The job-market has been a major base of support for the Shiv Sena. *Shakha* pramukhs have always run informal employment services, priding themselves on “getting my boys a job” and using their clout in various ways to ensure that their clients would be employed.

The Sena secured many a job for its Sainiks by breaking the strikes of militant unions. Managements simply sacked unskilled workers and replaced them with Sainiks or the *shakhas*’ clients. Often, however, companies have been obliged to employ Sainiks in return for licenses and permits that can be secured through the Sena’s various wings particularly since the party holds the Brihanmumbai Municipality. The procurement of jobs provides each *shakha* pramukh with a large group of clients who are ready or are required to pay back the services simply by being “available” whenever the need arises for gathering a crowd.

Sena’s ‘Justice’ Delivery

Jurisdiction is another important function of the *shakhas*. Issues range from quarrels about the rights to a specific location of a hawker’s stall, disputes over garbage sites or noisiness, petty crime and cheating, to litigations over loans and property, to real estate disputes, which easily become deadly serious in a real-estate market like Mumbai’s. Sudha Churi and others explain these courts as supplementing official channels of justice, which common people had neither the time nor the money to go through. “For the people, anything is better than paying lawyers’ fees and then waiting endlessly for judgements. We have had lok panchayats [local governing councils] long before

they were introduced by law and I think this is just like the common lok adalat [people's court], as now favoured by the government." This reference to the incredible bottlenecks in the judicial system is mirrored in the complaints of people who had to deal with the official channels of litigations and is made all the more powerful by the accompanying reference to tradition. The simultaneous justifications of the shakhas' justice system by reference to "Indian tradition" and to new models of conflict resolution in Western countries is in tune with the Sena's claim to represent "Indian modernity". Senior Sena leader Madhukar Sarpotdar referred to the shakhas' role as that of mediator and arbitrator "as you in the West also have now." As Sarpotdar explained: "Some people go to the police, some go to the *shakha*. We then cooperate with the police."

The Sena's *shakhas* could thus provide their mother organisation with a legitimacy that the Sena-run government - inefficient as any other - could not. The localness of its activities and the involvement of its members and its clients affirm its self-representation as being concerned about pragmatic delivery; about everyday issues and the effective solution of these issues. Moreover, the *shakhas*' services as well as those of the Shiv Sena's organisational wings are supposed to be given as "gifts", not as the fulfilment of administrative duties; they are presented as though they were "voluntary services" to the community.

The *shakhas* are organised as self-sufficient, self-financing, and relatively autonomous institutions of local power with "sovereignty", that is, control and right to revenue, over their specific territory. This does not mean that the organisation cannot act as a close-knit network and as a tightly controlled "army" at times. Rather, the two modes of operation stand in complementary relation to each other: The *shakhas* function autonomously in their everyday activities. At the same time they are guided by certain general directives concerning the types of activities they should undertake, the overall intent of the movement, and the line of justification and explanation given out through *Saamna* (the party's newspaper) and through Thackeray's speeches. They thus establish local structures of power, control over

revenue, and the command over a clientele that can be mobilised when the party demands it.

Donations or Extortion?

One of the sources of funding for the shakhas' activities is the collection of "donations". Donations are collected in the "territory" of a *shakha*. The Raote tape so named after the chairman of the Sena's standing committee, the former Minister for Trade and Commerce, who, in 1988, delivered the following speech to a gathering of 77 traders in Dadar (and he was secretly recorded), provides insights into how donations are collected, as well as how claims to territorial control and revenue are justified. In addition he makes comments connecting his activities with Shiv Sena's communalist orientations.

"We are small people, none of us is a big man. All of us are *vada bhajiwalas* (snack sellers). We are only small persons, none of us is a giant. If you were giants I would have taken 10 or even 100 thousand rupees from you. If this area were under me, I would not have accepted less than 10,000 Rupees from each of you. I have informed you of the difference between big and small, as I understand. ... I am also a businessman. I spend seven-eight thousand every month out of my own pocket. I am not living on anyone's obligation. That is why I am undoubtedly a big shot. Do you know that I pay three lakhs income tax annually?"

"This is not my business. Understand I have never gone begging to anyone's door in my lifetime. This is the work of the organisation for which a few things have to be done... I have to build my *shakha*. The programme of the *shakha* has to be financed by the businessmen of the *shakha*. This is the minimum expectation. In the past 20 years, not a rupee has been collected from anyone... I don't like my boys going around asking for money from time to time. I have told them to collect it all at once, to go once to everybody and collect it once and for all. We shall give the reason for collecting in writing... I have taken the responsibility that no businessman is ever troubled. To date has any Shiv Sainik given any of you a slap or shown you a knife or done this or done that in the past year in any part of my area? It is one thing for Shiv Sena to do and another thing for someone to do in the name of



Sarpotdar and Raote

Shiv Sena. I am plainly telling you we are in no way connected. ... I don't care a damn for anyone. If a person of our area is threatened, I am willing to stand and resist myself.... During the Hindu-Muslim riots don't we go forward to receive bullets? Muslims are always fully ready but what we have is only sticks and stones. At that point of time we don't allow a situation to arise in which you may profit and we may die. We are not going to come to ask you to join in the battle with us. We have brains and you have money and if combined together we can conquer any kind of forces. Remember, these petty goondas are punks! They are not *dadas*. You have to think why we should unite. If Raote *sahib* stands to do something, then you should rally around him... As a soldier of the organisation, I am an obedient servant executing all the orders thrust upon me. ... Do you know when businessmen of my area stand behind me it is my duty to take their moral responsibility? Therefore I do not go after anybody. I know everything... Pursuing anybody to the point of ruination is not my aim. I do not wish to hit anybody in his belly. ...”

“When I stand up for you, you will have to stand behind me. I can collect money at any time. I shall collect money only once and never again. I have told my *shakha* pramukh that once I keep it in a fixed deposit then our *shakha* will run on it. I am of the view that one should not go begging for petty cash like two rupees. How long this process of taking out 5s and 10s and hundreds should go on? The boys only learn one thing: to collect money. And then they just do not do anything else, and then if somebody refuses to pay they carry a grudge that is given vent to somehow or other. They settle personal scores. Since my election you must not have experienced any such thing. I have not allowed a single conflict to take place. All the builders of my areas are happy. I never visit their sites and neither do my Sainiks. *Sala*, see in the other areas and you will find that after we leave, any Tom, Dick and Harry go and extort money. And what we get is an empty coconut shell...

I have every right over you, you do business in my area and that is why I have come to you. You may ask me what benefit have I taken from you. I am not the type who will take undue advantage of a weak man. I am only warning you

that if any of my boys do anything to you then you please do not come to me. I have given strict warnings to my boys to let me know whether anybody tries to extract money, overturns any business or breaks any glassware. That is wrong. Laxmi [goddess of wealth] is coming to their door. I have no business to stop your Laxmis to come to your door. ... You better be warned. You are not keeping in mind that a boy bears in mind how much respect he gets from a person of his area. After all, they are boys and they are short-tempered boys. How much do you think they will take revenge in some form or the other at some time or the other... Where merchants prosper the kingdom prospers - that is the principle of politics. ... Businessmen in my area must remain in a proper environment and must prosper. If not on my strength they should do so on their own and their safety is my responsibility if I am the king of that area. This is a lesson of politics. Anyone who understands this doctrine knows that if he doesn't follow it he'll perish. Remember, I have done nothing so far to squeeze you. When I book a Kalyanji-Anandji-Nite, I pay them one lakh rupees. I have not done it relying on your money. But I have had the moral courage to raise that money. You must understand what type of man you are dealing with. Today I am proceeding with plans, which most geniuses would not understand, and at some time I would require money. Collecting money all the time doesn't appeal to me. Nor is it possible for me. ... Today it is the business of the *shakha*. As much as possible I shell out from my own pocket. I am in no way an ordinary man.”

“You tell me what is your capacity. Just as it is your right to live as per your capacity, it is my right to take from you as per your capacity. You tell me what you are going to give me. Have you come here to fool me? You should have been mortally scared to talk to me like this, of giving only 5000 rupees. Merrily you take your money back. Not a single boy of mine will come to your house to question you why you did not pay. When you're raided don't come to me on your knees. Catch hold of politicians from other parties...”

“You all deserve *goondas* who will make you dance on sword and knifepoint. You only deserve people



On a “clean up drive”

who extort money. You don't like social workers that work for the public and in exchange demand money.... Is this your cooperation? ...Your approach to me is as a beggar who has come to your door and you are throwing a piece of bread at me. I don't need you. You don't know how to talk to me. Whether you pay me or not it won't make a difference to my work. I am here to serve the public."

"In order to serve the lives of your people in Bhiwandi I have slaughtered Muslims taking a sword in my hand. Still you don't know what's Diwankar Raote? I have carried you Gujaratis on my shoulders. ... When we receive stabs on our chest, we never rely on beggars like you. The Gujarati businessmen of Thane had given us truckloads of pav [local bread]. They can do only that. They can't take swords in their hands. Understand?"

"In one riot we have slaughtered 300-350 Muslims, and your [Gujarati] businessmen had witnessed it. What have you seen till now? You are happy here in Dadar. When the same Mohammedans will attack you and lift your women, you'll remember us. You will remember the Shivsainiks. Whatever are we doing playing with our own lives? Don't I have a wife and children? Why should I need to do all this? I look after the depressed men and women because basically I am a Shiv Sainik and when it comes to the Shiv Sena I throw aside everything else..."

"Our boys are ruined. Don't they have mothers and sisters? Don't they have their homes? They die, their families are ruined, and they never come to your door. When the real time comes you undervalue us. Businessmen from my area should help the organisation. That was the feeling. That is why I had sent my boys to your doorstep. You just behaved as if you were throwing a 10-paisa coin at a eunuch. Are you valuing us this way? All right, I am happy. Go. Mind you, you are challenging Diwankar Raote. Go. Diwankar Raote is not a weak man. I've told you everything openly. Diwankar Raote will never use his force for extortion. There is no question of anger. You'll have to hunt for a person who'll say that Diwankar Raote has taken money in the last five years. Such people don't come to us."

Mixing Crime with 'Social Service'

As is apparent from the Raote tape, social services are intricately and inextricably linked to various criminal activities. The funds acquired range from the small-scale extortion from small businessmen and petty traders, to big business contributions. Many a time it will be simply a fee

that the Sena charges for the services it can provide for industry or business, which include those of the "contract rough". Many of the Shiv Sena's voluntary activities are financed by these collections and they provide a livelihood for active members.

One Sainik, who had just been promoted, planned to give up his job because he thinks he can now make more money as a *shakha pramukh*. He maintains that corruption is everywhere. This referred not only to funds acquired as "donations", but also to the potential for bribes inherent in the influential position of a pramukh. One of his female colleagues enviously observed how unfortunate she was since the gents could go and ask for money. She said, "you know, extortion! But we women can't do that. It is not befitting." One of her male colleagues put his expectations simply: "The Sena will make me rich!"

But it is not only the *pramukhs* and their colleagues that benefit from the returns on their "services"; they are also able, like other *dadas*, the local strongmen, to employ people in these enterprises. Many have elaborated on their possibilities and have started flourishing businesses. Real estate, restaurants, travel etc. are among the favourite lines of all larger gangs - and also of successful Sainiks. The humble origins of the self-made men are happily proven with endearing photographs of chawl-rooms from which Bal Thackeray saved so many of Maharashtra's sons, now adorning large empty desks in panelled offices with marble floors and chairs upholstered in leather (or its imitation).

Substituting for the State

Such sources of revenue are obviously fiercely fought over. The increased access to the municipal resources and the say in the granting of public contracts, especially since the BMC victory of the Shiv Sena in 1985, has led to the establishment of more and more independent local fiefdoms which are tolerated by the headquarters as long as they fit in with the organisation's overall structures. Shootouts over the control over territories between *shakha pramukhs* as well as between Sainiks and the members of other gangs have left several Sainiks dead. Vithal Chavan, MLA for the Sena, was killed in such a case in 1992 and Khedari Redekar died in 1998. Shrikant Samolkar was once shot but survived and Shiv Sena Mayor, Vaidya, survived several attacks on his life in 1998 orchestrated by Chhota Shakeel, Dawood Ibrahim's aide.

The Shiv Sena *shakhas* have successfully integrated themselves into the institutional constellation of local governance. Like many institutions meant for the

articulation of local concerns and the state's agencies, or the state's concerns and local subjects, which have accompanied the city's politics ever since its massive growth, the Shiv Sena established structures of power by establishing institutions which at first targeted an identified failure of the local state.

Patronage Movement, Conflict Mediation

The Shiv Sena certainly did not fill a void but competed with various alternative providers of services like local self-help groups, NGOs, local gangs, political parties, all addressing the management of everyday affairs of work and living, housing and infrastructure, welfare and education, conflict mediation and associability, and supplementing the local state. In the competition for clients and territory, important for political clout and revenue respectively, the Sena has engaged in various activities and often brought about short-term results. Presented as a critique of paternal modes of governance, these short-term, spectacular results that often later fail but are direct and immediately responsive to needs, suggest an explicit alternative to bureaucratic organisation, an explicit rebuff to legitimacy through procedure, an explicit rebuff also to the norms of the Indian state and its Nehruvian idea of a



**Predatory symbols for predatory politics :
A roaring tiger is Shiv Sena's trademark**

developmental bureaucratic ethos. Although the Shiv Sena also retains the paternalism of "providing" for the people, it is not bureaucratic. The Shiv Sena is not merely a system of patronage but also a movement.

Common People's Culture ?

Local social and cultural activities do not translate into votes necessarily, but they provide the Sena with the opportunity to involve itself in the institutions that organise and represent the locality. Within the Shiv Sena, within its *shakhas*, there is more to the services they support than merely that they make up for the lack of needed civic amenities. There is more to the structures than the opportunities they provide for leadership positions: it is the way those services are run that is the key to their popularity. They require and obtain the community's participation and involvement. Dipankar Gupta termed it the "practical sensuous activity" (Gupta 1982, 1983) that the Left failed to offer, and that provided the platform for the Shiv Sena. Through the party's involvement, an involvement that is open for community participation, and through the reproduction and organisation of the practices of the locality, it creates a semblance of its own integration by integrating its activities with the neighbourhood people.

The Sena naturalises its forms and practices by merging and identifying them with everyday institutions of urban life. "I like the Sena for its social work. I don't like their Unions. Young people are active in the chawls, organise games and ambulances, hospitals. They keep in mind the needs of the people... They are working hard at the grass roots and they don't want fights. They arrange *pujas* and festivals, and promote Hindu culture. The son-of-the-soil idea is not bad. They improved that principle," explained a mill worker who was at the time on strike for his unpaid wages.

The particular transformation of the cultural institutions of urban Mumbai in the course of their identification with, or occupation by the Sena, disappears easily within the legends of the culture of the "common people". The Sena's concept of authenticity is an eclectic, sometimes contradictory playing with elements of various styles none claim to be "genuine", but all claim to be "popular", and thus "authentic" in the relevant meaning for the political representation of the people. Alleged cultural likeness in this concept produces understanding and understanding makes representation possible. The message is that the Sena accepts, promotes and elevates the culture of the "masses", and thus accepts, promotes and elevates the dreams and the aspirations of the "common people".

Thus it is not simply "the exploitation of dreams" (Lele



A Shiv Sena rally

1995) or the identity politics inherent in the Sena's rabid communalism and the concurrent construction of the clearly defined "in-group" identity. It also derives from the daily participation in the activities of the Sena, which potentially encompass and reshape the whole social reality of those involved with the movement. This also distinguishes the Sena from the Congress party, the one rival with an equally encompassing local network, and machinery that provides equal, or even superior, patronage.

All Encompassing Actionists

In its institutional integration the Shiv Sena has a vantage point in comparison to its competitors. While it competes in terms of clients with NGOs, community leaders or *dadās*, and while it competes for these clients in terms of votes with other political parties, it is the one organisation that offers it all. It has the potential to encompass all aspects of life of its members: their festivities, their disputes, their political representation and their aspirations, their dealing with everyday urban life, their prospects at work and at school, their security and their community, be it with their neighbourhood, their region or their nation. This does not mean that it is all these to all people. Rather, everybody can pick what suits them and ignore the rest, even though they might participate in it.

Moreover, within their actionist, participatory modus and their institutional integration the Shiv Sena's *shakhas* integrate the role of *mandal*, *dalal*, *dada*, and often that of *sarkar* — the State and its administration. It has integrated these various functions within one institution, namely the *shakha* and its *pramukh*. Possibly because of this integration it has evolved into a particularly apt provider of services to various and diverse interests in the city: for the State, it supplements and aids it in governing, for the "deprived", it provides them with services unattainable

from the civic authorities or simply with access to the administrative agencies; for industry and business it serves as contract rough; and generally acts as an enforcer to individuals and groups in various local conflicts. Because of this institutional integration it has been effective in extending its network in various neighbourhoods of the city and beyond. It has adapted its offers to the local needs and local tensions and re-integrated them within its loose but assertive overall party structure. The Sena's institutions always have something to offer: neighbourhood centres, self-help, and cultural activities, job exchanges in the *shakhas*, agitations and so on.

The *shakhas* thus appear as institutions well equipped to engage with the underbelly of liberalisation and the local globalisation processes. Globalisation is not "wiping out the *shakha* culture," as Gerard Heuzé once lamented. Nor is the *shakha* culture a voice of protest against the changes effected by globalisation. In times of increasing liberalisation that are defined by the increasing withdrawal of the state from its developmental promise, and the privatisation of development; the Shiv Sena also by-passes the state and organises the new world not only in an ideological manner that defines rights to participation, but also in a practical manner, establishing intermediary institutions and variable networks which adapt to the changing urban situation. □

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