

## Introduction

Ethnicity and ethnic conflict are often malaproposed terms that require ballpark at least, if not rigorous defining, before they are analyzed so as to limit the scope of this analysis to only those matters pertaining to the topic at hand.

Ethnicity, as suggested by Horowitz, is a sense of collective belonging that is based on a specific commonality. Descent, language, history, culture, race or religion can be the analogous binding (Varshney, 2003). Several scholars further this interpretation by speaking of a shared consciousness that emerges from the aforementioned characteristics, an intangible force that heightens and hardens this ethnic identity (Priya, 2016).

Ethnic conflict is a pluralistic inevitability (Varshney, 2003). It is a feature of vibrant, expressive democracies and is healthy for as long as it remains within the parameters of the existing polity. Debates, dissent and discourse in intra and inter ethnic forums is constructive and cathartic. What may be cathartic but is definitely not constructive is ethnic violence, a subset of ethnic conflict. Violence that stems from these primordial based-ethnic tensions is often led by a larger ethnic group asserting its identity or ideology on a particular, or combination of particular ethnic groups smaller in size or influence. This violence can be further categorized into a host of terms, such as riots, pogroms or civil wars.

Through this analysis, the dynamics, motives and manifestations of ethnic strife and tension will be brought out, using the backdrop of Maharashtra, a relatively well-off, industrialized state in Western India.

## Ethnic Players in Maharashtra

Borrowing from Caselli and Coleman's fantastic game theoretic model on ethnic conflict, a tangible economic basis for the current status-quo in Maharashtra can be made. The game involves two ethnic groups and a limited amount of resources available in the shared geographic proximity. One player has a higher human capital than the other. This capital is not strictly in terms of quantum, but in terms of access to resources, sphere of influence and general power. An example of this would be Apartheid in South Africa, where the Blacks had the undeniable majority in terms of numbers, however lacked the power to have substantial human capital over the Whites. While the model speaks of how ethnic violence is inherently detrimental to not just the general well-being of society but also to both actors themselves, as with all game theory models, it is based on rationality, a concept relatively unpopular in sociology (Caselli and Coleman, 2001).

In Maharashtra, the dominant ethnic group is the homogenous Marathi-speaking, caste Hindu population. This identity is typified by a single political party, the Shiv Sena. From its nascence in 1966, the primary motive of the Shiv Sena has been the protection of the 'Marathi Manos', the 'Sons of the Soil' (Palshikar, 2004). All other ideologies and motives are contingent splinters on their primary driving force. To ensure the economic and social protection of the Marathi populace, language and culture, the Sena's opponents began to burgeon.

On the initial receiving end of the Sena's anger were the South Indians and the Gujaratis, who were accused of being the primary recipients of jobs that the Marathis deserved. South Indian restaurants and citizens were harassed, quite possibly due to their proximity to the heartland of the movement, Dadar (Gaikwad, Nellis, 2016). This regarded ethnicity as justification for economic dissatisfaction.

Another prevailing hypothesis, similarly, uses ethnicity as a mean, rather than an end. With several mills in Bombay (as it was then called) shutting shop in the 1970s and 80s, there came a steep decline in the power that Labor Unions wielded. However, at the peak of textile production in the late 60s, congruent to when the Sena rose to prominence, there was academic backing to the Sena's rhetoric regarding how Marathi jobs have been lost. This led to the Sena flexing its muscle once again, this time directed at the Left parties, who sought to protect the rights of all workers equally. On June 6, 1970, members of the Shiv Sena murdered the sitting MLA, who was a CPI member. This was culmination of a reign of terror that the Shiv Sena perpetuated, destroying property of the then existing-Left labor unions (Dhawale, 2000).

With the Labor Unions crushed and the textile market itself fading, there rose a power vacuum in the unskilled labor market. The protection, security and unity that a Union provides no longer existed, creating an emotional and economic void among workers, which was capitalized on by the Sena. The Sena exploited this schism and mobilized workers against ethnic groups who posed a threat to the existing Marathi culture.

While the economic appeal of 'Shivaji's Army' is clear, there is an added element of jingoism and nationalism that created a multifaceted base for the Sena. By promoting Hindutva ideals such as castedness, homogeneity and unwritten eugenics, the Sena created fostered a collective identity caused by economic conditions, but manifested in a socio-political manner. In the aftermath of their consistently terrible electoral performances, capped off by their drubbing in the 1985 Lok Sabha and Assembly Elections, large scale recruitment and organization took place through the state, with an active on-ground, door-to-door campaign reinforcing the Sena's political motives.

What was initially anti-incumbent resentment, slowly transformed into a solid anti-migrant stance. This has been, in the recent past, directed at North Indian migrants who move to Mumbai, in pursuit of their dreams, however wind up as low-paid, low-skilled workers. To make this opinion more fervent and divisive, the Sena brought in ethno-linguistics. In a famed campaign

held in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, the Sena ordered all commercial establishments to have a signboard spelling the name of the establishment in Marathi (Menon, 2012). The economic fight had taken a linguistic turn, with several shops being picketed and trashed if they lacked this sign. This is visible even today, with Marathi-slang graffiti laden shutters lacing all seven islands of Mumbai, including the posh South Mumbai segments. It is safe to say that an aggressive form of protectionism is one that typifies the Sena, however this protectionism became increasingly juxtaposed against the normalcy of other ways of life. The Sena has grown into an invasive, all-encompassing social, political and economic hydra that controls large part of the lives of all Mumbaikars. This crass manifestation was exemplified in the Sena's activities in the late-2000s, where members of the party disrupted Valentine's day celebrations across the city (Palshikar, 2004). While there are several reservations one can have against the celebration of Valentine's day, it is unacceptable to engage in 'cultural policing' with absolute impunity, accosting and intimidating innocent couples. The many double-standards of the Party are shown through instances like this, advocating an anti-Western, Hindu-puritan stance, yet actively organizing pop-concerts by artists like Michael Jackson. These hypocrisies go unnoticed by the electorate, who seem unfazed by these multiple contradictions.

The Sena is now revered as a strategic partner for several national-level parties, a sign of their growing influence in the political spheres across the country. In no way is this an indication that the Shiv Sena will thrive in other states, it simply a reinforcement of the stranglehold that the Party has over Maharashtra. These alliances will play an important role in the years to come, especially as other Hindutva parties come to the fray, a situation where two parties promoting a similar form of Puritanism exist. Another facet of the Sena's malleable public image has come up with the new cadre of leaders. Grandson of the founder, Aditya Thackeray is a charismatic, approachable and relatable leader. He is very involved in targeting the burgeoning middle-class, with several campaigns addressing themes like sports in schools, fighting for restaurants to be open all night and organizing music festivals. These endeavors endear him to a previously untapped electorate. He is articulate and charming- however he does not exude power and control as his grandfather did. There remains little much to be said about the appeal and reach of the party, which have been established through their stellar performances in the elections as well as their ability to bring Mumbai to a standstill in the matter of seconds.

It is essential to ruminate over whether the Sena's ideology is a lasting one. While remaining agnostic toward the Sena, it is undeniable that their appeal is going to widen in the years to come. Condoned by a Hindi-jingoist party at the helm, the Sena will receive tacit support to continue their factitious behavior. A common critique of the Sons of the Soil concept is that the Marathi's were too, at one point, non-natives. This is fallacious simply because that invalidates any form of geographical ethnicity. It is a juvenile argument simply because it can be distilled down to the fact that all humans were native to a single part of the world, nullifying any historic geographic differences (Forsberg, 2009).

Personally, I reject any form of pluralism and heterogeneity, and thus I am of the opinion that the Shiv Sena's Marathi-first ideology is well-justified and culmination of economic hardship that has befallen a specific community. In no way do I condone any violent activities, yet it is a lesson in mobilization to observe how the Sena has grown from strength to strength in the past few decades. Protectionism, anti-diversity sentiments and populism have been validated by trends across the world, from Duterte in the Philippines to Trump in America, and will continue to be a reaction to the economic abandonment of the masses.

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