

Birthday Party in Saffron–Pune's Śivājī Jayantī Celebration in 2020

A Photo Essay

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Abstract

This photo essay on the public festival that celebrates the Maratha king-hero Śivājī was performed in the city of Pune, India, in 2020. The essay reflects upon the practice of photography as a research tool that not only provides the researcher with the opportunity to capture that which is not possible to convey with words alone, but also “frames” an aesthetic moment that serves as a visual commentary. During such public festivals, parts of the city become stages saturated with symbols and the theatricality of performing one's Hindu identity. The creative manipulation of symbols facilitates the construction of this practice with Hindu pride at its center: a habitus that potentially leads to collective activism and, if needed, violence. Public festivals are understood by the author as *Schaufenster* (shop windows) that allow him to observe and experience social rhythms firsthand and, at the same time, reflect on the role of the images and their circulation for the participants' construction of their identity. Primarily young men and increasingly young women are inexorably drawn into the mythicized Śivājī stories on social media, television, and cinema, developing a reactionary vision of themselves and the nation as proudly Hindu.

Keywords: Hindu nationalism, Maharashtra, Pune, religious festivals

On the morning of February 19, 2020, on a makeshift stage erected in one of the lanes adjacent to the K.E.M. Hospital in the neighborhood of Rāstā Peṭh in the city of Pune, a miniature wooden cradle saturated with marigolds stands next to a medium-sized statue of Śivājī Mahārāj. He is seated on his throne adorned with two peacocks placed on sculpted lions flanking him on each side. Garlanded with roses, daisies, and *bilva*-leaves, the king's sculpture cast in plaster of Paris holds a large sword surrounded by even more marigolds. At his feet lays a container with sweets for the passersby who stop to pay their respects. People who bow to the king and touch the flame burning in



Figure 1: Śivājī Mahārāj's cradle and statue on a makeshift altar in the neighborhood of Rāstā Peṭh.

front of him swing the flowery cradle as a sign of respect. The edible blessing is distributed by one of the boys, who is still finishing the final touches to the stage and setting up the sound system for the evening parade. It is the birthday celebration of the seventeenth-century founder of the Maratha Empire Śivājī Bhonsale “Mahārāj” (the great king).

He is probably one of the most politicized icons of India. As the Chhatrapati or “lord of the parasol,” a royal title used by the Maratha rulers for the paramount monarch, he is omnipresent in today’s Maharashtra and beyond. His name is found on schools, parks, streets, official buildings, comics, soap operas, and bumper stickers. The renaming of many vital landmarks into “Chhatrapati Shivaji” in Mumbai (from the Victoria train station in Colaba to the international airport) and the most recent plan to erect the

largest statue ever built of him are examples of his iconic power and the success of the Shiv Sena¹ who use him as an identitarian fetish.

Within the grand public festivals of Maharashtra, one dedicated to the elephant-headed god Gaṇeśa in the month *bhādrapada* (around August-September) is the most famous. It was popularized by the 19th century freedom fighter and activist Bal Gangadhar Tilak who used the ten-day festival as a neo-traditionalist platform for organizing speeches, cultural performances, and anti-British agitprop in an attempt to unify Indian society. Many also credit Tilak for establishing the public festival known as *Śivājī Jayantī* (also known as *Śiv Jayantī*) that commemorates Śivājī Mahārāj's birthday as a way to politically mobilize around a more inclusive and approachable hero than Gaṇeśa, who was seen as the patron God of Brahmins. Attempting to end a long controversy surrounding the date to celebrate the birth of the Maratha king, Maharashtra officially declared in 2001 that the state celebrations of Śivājī's birth should follow the Gregorian calendar.² Since then, the *Jayantī* is formally celebrated on February 19 across India each year.

By paying close attention to forms of popular religion in the public space and in particular to wayside shrines, my current research project looks at how specific biological, psychological, and social rhythms (Lefebvre 2004) orchestrate and produce everyday religion and how religion becomes visible and is experienced in the streets of old Pune.³ Public festivals such as the celebration of Śivājī Mahārāj's birthday are *Schaufenster* (shop windows) that allow us to observe and experience some of these rhythms first hand. During such festivals, parts of the city become stages saturated with symbols and the theatricality of performing one's identity.

My research on everyday religion uses the camera as an ethnographic research tool. Shrines and other "sacred" sites, as well as public events such as this festival, are captured through my photographic practice. These images are an indispensable tool

1 The Shiv Sena ("Army of Śivājī"), a nationalist Hindu party, was founded in 1966 by Bal Thackeray in Bombay to defend Maharashtrian interests against immigrants from South India, the Parsi and Gujarati elites, and Muslims at large. The Shiv Sena was an important partner of the BJP in Maharashtra with whom they ruled the state from roughly 1989 onwards and, most recently, through their National Democratic Alliance (1998–2019). However, after the Maharashtra elections in October 2019, Shiv Sena broke ties with the BJP. Despite a long history of schisms, temporal bans, and other controversies, the party has managed to remain in power. On November 28th, 2019 the current president of the Shiv Sena, Uddhay Thackeray, became the current Chief Minister of Maharashtra.

2 Śivājī was arguably born on the third day of the month *Phālguna* in 1551 according to the Hindu lunar calendar, which corresponds to February 19, 1630. However, due to recent political schisms within the party, the Shiv Sena and other ultranationalist groups celebrate his birthday according to the lunar Hindu calendar which thus varies each year.

3 <https://urbanrel.hypotheses.org/about> last accessed on 05.08.2020.

which not only provide the researcher with the opportunity to capture that which is not possible to convey only with words, but also “frame” an aesthetic moment. These aesthetic moments are both produced by the subjects as well as by the photographer. On the one hand, the still image is a commentary on the event. As McDougall argues, the image “[...] also becomes, through the denial of all other possible images, a reflection of thought” (MacDougall 2012, 123-124). On the other hand, the camera is a barrier between the subject and the photographer. The act of photographing turns the photographer into a thief who, by taking a still image without giving anything back, puts him or herself in a position of power. It is the researcher who, by choosing the moment of the capture, the subject matter, the angles, focal length and so on, executes power over those photographed, even in photographs in which the subjects decide to pose or present themselves in a particular way. During festivals such as Śivājī Jayantī people expect to be photographed, either by journalists, amateur photographers, or themselves via the now common practice of the “selfie.”

As a foreigner carrying an exciting piece of technology around my neck, I have also learned to navigate being a spectacle myself. While during Śivājī Jayantī I was certainly not a main protagonist, I become a supporting participant among other professionals documenting the event. Individuals or small groups often requested to be photographed either by queuing the photographer, by striking a pose, or by verbally asking to be portrayed. These individuals hope for more visibility, especially if they think the photographer is a journalist or has an otherwise large or prestigious audience. I often tried explaining that I was not a journalist but a scholar at the university, which was of little concern for those photographed. However, they often approved of the images shown in the image finder on the camera and even asked if I could send them a copy or if I was “going to post them on Facebook?” The sense of importance of one’s digital visibility has long reached urban Pune where most people have access to a mobile device. Nowadays, many measure their self-worth by the amount of looks and “likes” one is able to collect on social media.

In 2020, the public celebration of Śivājī Jayantī consisted of a procession in which several organizations paraded 85 allegorical carts (*ratha*) through an established route sanctioned by Pune’s municipal corporation (P.M.C.) in the old part of the city. These organizations can be either local neighborhood associations known as *mitra maṇḍaḷs* (friends’ circles), local or regional branches of political parties, Maratha family/caste



Figure 2: The "chariots" or themed allegorical carts during the parade celebrate Śivājī and his family. The themes revolve mainly around his military prowess.

associations, and in some cases even schools and other institutions. This spectacle is attended and enhanced by thousands of people of all ages and political affiliations dressing up for the occasion. Many wear saffron turbans (both men and women), the red half-moon *tilaka* on the forehead symbolically marking one's affiliation to the Marathas, colorful Maharashtrian 9-yard *nauvārī sārīs*, real and fantasy jewelry, plastic and iron swords and daggers, fake and real beards and mustaches, saffron flags and banners of all sizes, aviator sunglasses, and more. Many are personifying the king of kings himself, Maratha generals, soldiers and other heroes, while women embody the wife or mother of Śivājī. However, most women dress up as female heroes carrying weapons and a turban traditionally reserved for men. However, this almost androgenous costume, which incorporates both the traditional feminine attire and what many consider "masculine" elements such as aviator glasses, motorcycles, and weapons, is a relatively recent phenomenon.



Figure 3: Man dressed up as Śivājī enthroned on one of the procession chariots

Such costumes exploded in popularity in recent years with the rise of the “dashing ladies” of the Shiv Sena (Bedi 2016) but also of militarized training camps for girls such as those organized by the Sangh Parivar called Durgā Vāhinī (Durga’s Army) where discipline, physical strength, and self-control are emphasized (Mehta 2015). Menon also argues that in the case of Śivājī’s mother, many women “[...] deify Jijabai as an enlightened mother worthy of emulation, who fought for the Hindu nation through her son, Shivaji, by inculcating in him the values, ideology, strength and patriotism that the Hindu nation lacked” (Menon 2005, 105). Here we have, on the one hand, the familiar trope of motherhood and womanhood in service of men and the nation, and on the other, a reimagined ideal of women as embodying the primordial strength of the goddess as just, fierce, and violent, drawing from the figure of Bhavānī of Tuljāpur. Both women and men use symbols such as the emblematic sword of the hero-king.

For the few spontaneous and unprepared spectators, hawkers sell turbans, saffron flags, imprinted orange shawls, plastic swords for children, and other paraphernalia and souvenirs.

Ever since the festival was established in the city in 1870, it has been the subject of communal and caste tensions. However, one of the first significant outbreaks of violence was when the Shiv Sena orchestrated the Bhiwandi riots of 1970 during the celebrations of Śivājī Jayantī, which resulted in the deaths of over 250 people, mostly Muslims, and the arson and vandalism of Muslim-owned properties in that town (see Hansen 2001, 75).

The commission's findings paint a clear picture of the riots as the outcome of a long-standing complex of economic contradictions between Muslim weavers and Hindu traders, interwoven with escalating competition over public space and identity in conjunction with the annual religious processions from Moharram to Shivaji Jayanti, a competition fueled and organized by communal organizations throughout the 1960s
(Hansen 2001, 75).

Over the following decades, communal violence erupted and was mobilized by the Shiv Sena on several occasions, peaking during the riots of 1992-1993 in Bombay, when over a thousand people were killed and several thousand were wounded (Human Rights Watch 1995; Masselos 1996).

Political parties from a broad political spectrum—but especially the Shiv Sena and BJP—have continued to mobilize Śivājī's heroism for political gains. With Hindu nationalism defining the mainstream narrative across India, their political aspirations have increasingly become sacralized and ritualized into spectacles of Hindu majoritarianism. Primarily young men and increasingly young women are inexorably drawn into the mythicized Śivājī stories on social media, television, and cinema, weaving a reactionary vision of themselves and the nation as proudly Hindu.

Complex caste politics surrounding Śivājī seem to have turned the hero into a different kind of “untouchable:” one whose dignity and heroism should be left unquestioned, particularly by the diverging narratives produced by academia and secular forces. Case in point are the acts of violence carried out 2003-2004 by both members of the Pune branch of the Shiv Sena against the scholar S. Bahulkar and a few days later by the Sambhaji Brigade against the local Bhandarkar Research Institute and its staff. This violence followed the publication and public censure of a controversial book by the

American scholar James Laine (2003). The accusation was that Laine slandered both Śivājī and his mother Jījābāī for insinuating that either the spiritual teacher of Śivājī, the saint Samārtha Rāmdās, or his guardian Dādājī Koṇḍadeo could have been Śivājī's biological father, thereby portraying Jījābāī as an immoral wife and Śivājī an illegitimate child.

The Laine controversy, in some ways, was the beginning of a new chapter in the continuous censorship and pressure that right-wing groups are exercising on those who disrupt their core narratives. To name a recent example, in Goa in 2020, the right-wing Hindutva organization Hindu Janajagruti Samiti (H.J.S.) demanded the withdrawal of a Class XI textbook, which allegedly portrays King Śivājī as a plunderer.⁵ A spokesperson for the H.J.S. said: "No Hindu will tolerate such distorted history of the great kings of our motherland. The Goa government should immediately withdraw this history textbook, or else all *Shivpremis* (followers of Shivaji Maharaj) will come out on the streets to protest against it."⁶ While Marathas have had a long and complex history of identity disputes with other castes and of resentment against Brahmins, when it comes to mobilizing sentiments against non-Hindus, they can quickly become allies of Hindutva groups with a translocal agenda.

Given the presence of people of all ages, but particularly of schoolchildren (figures 4 and 5) and youngsters, one is tempted to read this event, at least in part, as an educational project in which a particular habitus is inscribed in them and reinforced every year. The creative manipulation of symbols facilitates the construction of this practice with Hindu pride at its center: a habitus that potentially leads to collective activism and, if needed, violence. Here the aesthetic and political representations collide. The aesthetic expression of ideal citizenship is projected onto the ruler Śivājī, thereby securing the political relationship between the representative and the represented.

Appealing to violence and "manliness" as a means for coping with the imagined threat from the Muslim minority is prominent in the many cities and urban centers in inland Maharashtra. Śivājī's militaristic aesthetic is perhaps most iconically represented by the

5 Historians have documented Śivājī's guerrilla warfare tactics, which involved among others, the raiding of villages, ports, and other strategic points. (See Gordon, 1993, 59–90.)

6 <https://thewire.in/politics/goa-chhatrapati-shivaji-history-hindu-janajagruti-samiti> last accessed on 07.08.2020.



Figure 4: Child dressed up as Śivājī holding a sword.



Figure 5: Adorned girl wearing a Maratha turban and a half-moon tika on her forehead.

Bhavānī Talvār or the mythical sword that, according to legend, was given to the hero Śivājī by the goddess Tuljā Bhavānī, who is also the “family deity” (*kuldaivat* or *kulsvāminī*) of the Maratha caste (figure 6). Not unlike Arthur’s Excalibur, this icon is powerful because the sword represents divine justice. Śivājī allegedly also slayed the Bijapur general Afzal Khan with it, and thus, for many, the sword stands for the victory



Figure 6:

A representation of the Bhavānī Talvār or the mythical sword given to Śivājī by the goddess Tuljā Bhavānī weighing 500 kg seen at the top of the chariot of the Samasta Kṣatrīya Rājput Samāj.

of *dharma* over *adharma* (and Hinduism over Islam).

For believers, the blade is the material embodiment of the Goddess Bhavānī (Jansen 1995, 15). During the Śivājī Jayantī celebration in 2020, the goddess and the sword’s presence was ubiquitous. The most dramatic cart installation was the massive sword on the chariot number 47 belonging to the Samasta Kṣatrīya Rājput Samāj, which

weighed 500 kg and measured six and a half meters.

However, the number of competing groups and their allegorical carts ironically destabilize the different accounts of identity by depicting clashing truth-claims about the Maratha hero. While the dominant narrative is indeed one colored by Hindutva, there are also other groups that see in Śivājī a symbol of unity between different religions (notably Muslims and Hindus), or an ideal leader and protector of the lower peasant castes beyond Brahmanical hegemony. Navigating through the different truth-



Figure 7:

A Paṇḍal of the Śrīmant Harjīraje Barge Pratiṣṭhan pulled by a tractor. Śivājī with the background of the map of India and a two-handed goddess dressed in a tricolor sārī also holding an Indian flag flanked by two golden lions.



*Figure 8 (Top):
Muslim women of
all ages march
along the parade of
the Maharashtra
Cosmopolitan
Education Society
(MCES) a
predominantly
Muslim school.*



*Figure 9 (right):
Young men taking
photographs with
their smartphones.*

claims projected onto such an empty signifier becomes confusing for the external observer. One may not be able to read the conflicting sociopolitical allegiances.

At first glance, the Śivājī Jayantī is a well-orchestrated spectacle and seems coherent and homogeneous. The fetishized aesthetics and the uniform color palette that saturate the streets disguise competing narratives of different actors and organizations. Both the thousands of bodies that participate in the celebration and the streets of Pune are socially produced spaces that carry relations, subjectivities, and power hierarchies. Some groups, like the Muslims (figure 7) or left-leaning organizations, consciously try to subvert and reclaim Śivājī to gain more visibility in the streets. These groups, however, parade at different moments and along different routes than the more extensive allegorical carts, distancing themselves from the dominant narrative at a very physical level. However, in the context of the Śivājī Jayantī celebrations, they generally find a sympathetic public to perform a distinct identity that tries to disrupt the narrative of a *Hindu Rashtra* as conceived by Hindutva ideologues by calling for a more inclusive and secular understanding of the Maratha hero king. Despite this, the success of disrupting the dominant narrative of Śivājī as “the Hindu king who drove away the Muslim threat and the protector of cows and Brahmins” seems limited at best and instead appears to drown in the sea of Hindutva majoritarianism. The groups that try to counter the Hindutva narrative are perhaps tolerated or even ignored by dominant groups because they unwillingly camouflage themselves in the crowd, amplifying Śivājī’s glory for the benefit of his saffronized persona.



Figure 10:
Young woman in a traditional nine-yard Sārī holding a sword and a shield posing to be photographed.



Figure 11: Śivaliṅgam made of flowers by members of the Nimbāḷkar family who are one of the 96 traditional Maratha clans.



Figure 12: Drummer of a Dhal-Tahs group accompanying one of the allegorical carts.

Contributor's biography

Borayin Larios teaches at the Department of South Asian, Tibetan and Buddhist Studies of the University of Vienna and is Assistant to the Chair of South Asian Studies. He authored *Embodying the Vedas: Traditional Vedic Schools of Contemporary Maharashtra* published by DeGruyter Open Access in 2017. Dr. Larios uses an interdisciplinary methodological approach, combining cultural anthropology, religious studies, and historical philology to understand the contemporary religious traditions of India. His current research project focuses on sacred space and popular religion in the city of Pune, Maharashtra. Together with Raphaël Voix he put together the special issue: "Wayside Shrines: Everyday Religion in Urban India," co-edited by SAMAJ and the European Association for South Asian Studies (EASAS).

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