

## **50 Years of Shiv Sena: Thriving on Popular Ideology**

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*From advocating 'Maharashtra for Maharashtrians' and militantly plugging the 'sons-of-the-soil' slogan the Shiv Sena has made a long journey to become a significant political power in Maharashtra. Shiv Sena's ideology plays a major role in drawing popular support and cultivating consensus on the appropriateness of action. This paper attempts to trace the ideological discourse of Shiv Sena on the grounds of which it has evolved from a nativist movement to a mass based political party. The paper argues that in its journey from a movement to a political party, Shiv Sena has deliberately kept its organisation and ideological base weak. It is consistent to its populist nature that it has remained fragile on both these sides right from the phase of mobilisation to the phase of routinisation.*

**[Key Words:** Nativism, populism, shifting ideology]

### **Introduction**

The Shiv Sena completed 50 years of its existence on 19<sup>th</sup> June 2016. Right From advocating 'Maharashtra for Maharashtrians' and militantly plugging the 'sons-of-the-soil' slogan, the Shiv Sena has made a long journey to become a significant political power in Maharashtra. Shiv Sena's ideology plays a major role in drawing popular support and cultivating consensus on the appropriateness of action. This paper attempts to trace the ideological discourse of Shiv Sena on the grounds of which it has evolved from a nativist movement to a mass based political party. The paper examines Sena's changing ideological stance built through views and ideas of Sena Supremo Bal Thackeray. The paper argues that the Sena has constantly thrived on populism and used popular concerns for political purpose. The paper further argues that populism of organisations like Shiv Sena feeds upon the space created by the imbalanced capitalist development between wealth and poverty on the one hand and between reality and aspirations on the other.

### **Sena's Nativism**

Shiv Sena was established on June 19, 1966 'to safeguard the welfare of the people of Maharashtra'. It emerged as a nativist movement and claimed to owe its origin to 'the bitter feelings of frustration taking hold of the rank and file of young Maharashtrians' (Shiv Sena Speaks 1967: 6).

At this point it is necessary to understand 'Nativism' as a concept. Ralph Linton has defined 'nativist movement' as any "conscious, organised attempt on the part of a society's members to revive or perpetuate selected aspects of its culture." (Linton 1943: 230). Such organised effort can arise when a community becomes conscious that there are cultures other than its own and that the existence of its own culture is threatened. Myron Weiner argues that nativism tends to be associated with a blockage to social mobility for the native population by a culturally distinguishable migrant population (Weiner 1978: 293). Such a conception of nativism has greater degree of migrant -native conflict involved in it.

Nativism can be seen as a response to frustrating situations and as an attempt to compensate for the frustrations of the members of a community. Although, the causes of nativistic movements are highly invariable, 'most of them have as a common denominator situation of inequality between the societies in contact.' (Linton 1943: 233)

In such a situation, certain current or remembered elements of a culture are selected for emphasis and given symbolic value. With a view to shape and carve out a unified cultural identity symbols are evolved, legends invented and history is reinterpreted. The elements revived become symbols of a period when the society was happy or great. Their usage is not magical, but rather psychological. Cultural elements used for symbolic purposes are selected realistically with practical contentions and with regard to the possibility of perpetuating them under current conditions.

The Samyukta Maharashtra Movement that fought for the unilingual state of Maharashtra in the mid 1950's carried on an effective propaganda in an emotionally charged atmosphere using myths, legends and stereotypes. Building upon the Marathi sentiments regarding their culture, language and history which were nurtured successfully during the Samyukta Maharashtra Movement, Shiv Sena presented itself as an organisation dedicated to the cause of the sons-of-the-soil. Shiv Sena believed that the Maharashtrians were being discriminated against in the capital of their own state, while migrants from other states, especially from South India were cornering most of the jobs and economic opportunities in the city. (Gupta 1982: 118)

Bal Thackeray, the founder and supremo of Shiv Sena had already developed and popularized the nativist ideology through *Marmik* (a Weekly, later to become Shiv Sena's Mouthpiece). In August 1964, an article appeared in *Marmik* on the declining status and employment opportunities for Maharashtrians in Mumbai. Since 1965, Thackeray started publishing lists of names of non-Maharashtrians working in different government or private jobs. These lists revealed that the number of Maharashtrians was just one or two percent of the total number of employed (Gupta 1982: 124). In 1965, *Marmik* also started a regular column 'Amchi Vyatha, Tumchi Katha' (Our Agony, Your Story) to deal specifically with the plight of Maharashtrians in Mumbai. Thackeray was successful in establishing that the Maharashtrians were

exploited by the 'outsiders' and were deprived of jobs and economic opportunities in their own city. It appealed to the linguistic and regional sentiments of the Maharashtrians. These articles evoked considerable response in the form of spate of letters on this issue and the whole campaign added to the popularity of Marmik. The encouragement from the readers kept building up till it convinced Thackeray that an organization called Shiv Sena should be formed to look after the interests of Marathi speaking people in Mumbai.

Shiv Sena secured a phenomenal response because it gave a face to the Maharashtrian resentment and insecurity against the influx of what they perceived as outsiders on their territory. The Sena played on the injured Maharashtrian pride to build its own image. It is interesting to note that Sena's initial nativism had little of cultural identity ethos and was more the manifestation of perceived relative deprivation in economic terms.

The injustice of the situation was shown as heightened by recalling the days, before India's independence, when the Maharashtrians were in the forefront of the national freedom movement. Newspaper cuttings showing parochialism in other states of South India where jobs and housing facilities were given on regional/parochial considerations, appeared in Marmik justifying Shiv Sena's demand for 80% of the jobs to be reserved for Maharashtrians. On 19<sup>th</sup> July, 1966 Thackeray published some guidelines in Marmik which were embodied in the pledge that 'Shivsainiks'(Sena workers) had to sign. Some of the guidelines are given below-

1. A Maharashtrian should not sell property to a non-Maharashtrian and if such a thing happens it should be reported to the local Shiv Sena office.
2. Maharashtrian employers should employ only Maharashtrians.
3. They should boycott udipi hotels and should not purchase any article from non-Maharashtrians.

So, migrants, particularly the South Indians were seen as the root cause of problems of Mumbai and Maharashtrians. Instead of taking any systematic stand, the Sena sought a naïve conception of reality ignoring that the migrant himself is an outcome/victim of uneven development. The simple way out for Sena was to arouse people's sentiments and use the language of kicking the 'Upare' (outsiders) out of the city. In those days (1966-69), many South Indian restaurants in the city were reportedly attacked by the Shivsainiks (Ranadive 1988: 18). In directing its anger against the South Indians, Shiv Sena was overlooking the fact that during 1965-71, 73% of the total entrants to Mumbai came from within Maharashtra itself.

The Sena antagonism against the outsiders remained focused on the South Indians. It is interesting to see how Shiv Sena targeted particularly the South Indians pinpointing them and blaming them for the economic difficulties faced by the Maharashtrians. Complaints were directed against the South Indians because they held jobs that Maharashtrians coveted. The South Indians competed with Maharashtrians for the white collar secured jobs that Maharashtrians preferentially aspired for.

Not going into the real issue of structure of exploitation and mal-development, the Shiv Sena thus found an easy way out by taking recourse to parochialism, by effectively exploiting the regional-linguistic sentiments of the Maharashtrian community, portraying South Indian community as the 'enemy' of the state, as the 'other'.

Shiv Sena had another charge against the South Indians that they were either communists or ideologically sympathetic to communism and thus against the welfare of the nation.

### **Stand of Anti-communism**

Right from its formation, Shiv Sena's anti-communism stand was evident. It declared in its manifesto, "*We are opposed to all communists as they are a positive danger to the welfare of the nation*".

Thackeray's anti-communist stance was both quite sharp and well-formed even before the Sena was established. The incidences such as the Sino-Indian border conflict and its manifestation in the Chinese aggression (1962) in a sense vindicated his claim that communists were anti-national. The Communist Party of India and the Communist Party of India (Marxist) according to Thackeray were bound hand and foot to Russia and China respectively (Gupta 1982: 134).

Shiv Sena's contempt was given complete expression in the early 1970's when its anti-communism campaign culminated in the murder of Krishna Desai, a CPI trade union leader from Bombay. Justifying this physical violence, Thackeray had publicly congratulated his Shivsainiks for the elimination of a communist.

With its characteristic militancy against the leftist stronghold in Bombay, Shiv Sena eventually broke the communist dominations in Bombay trade unions and industrial activities, particularly in the cotton textile mills. While condemning the communist activities as the work of anti-national interests, Thackeray promised that Shiv Sena would secure the legitimate needs and interests of the Maharashtrians in their own state and would fight to the last to safeguard the security and integrity of the country. It was and continues to be "*firmly and uncompromisingly opposed to the communist method and ideology....an evil it wanted to root out with determination from our land*". (Thackeray as cited by Gupta 1982).

Shiv Sena used its strong regional chauvinism to weaken the trade unions taking full note of a strong Marathi component in these unions. This regional identity appeal was so intense that some of the communist trade unionists' sons joined the Sena and became its militant activists (Engineer 1988: 15).

The Sena also used its weapon of violence and terror against the leftist force with little scruples. On August 11, 1968, the Bharatiya Kamgar Sena was established with a view to take over the working class movement from the communists, at least in Bombay to begin with. In course of time however, the sting and sharpness of the Sena's opposition to communism decreased. Nilu

Damle has shown this change of Shiv Sena's position vis-à-vis the Indian communists referring to Thackeray's changing quotes. "I can tolerate a South Indian who is anti-communist. I can even tolerate a Muslim because he is Indian. But I can never tolerate a communist because he is not an India" (Thackeray 1967). "I am against communists because the system which they want to establish goes against the principle of democracy" (Thackeray 1981). Contrastingly one of his statements in 1983 was "I am not a communist. But I strongly recommend an autocratic government as in Russia. After all these years of experience I have come to the conclusion that only practical socialism can solve our problems" (Thackeray 1983).

These statements show that little was Thackeray's concern for the consistency and that he could turn and twist Sena ideology according to pragmatic considerations. Shiv Sena never tried seriously to overcome such inconsistencies, its ideological base was hollow (Damle 1988: 125).

### **From Nativism to Hindutva**

Like its anti-migrant, anti-Communist stands, the Shiv Sena was also anti-Muslim. The Sena ideology always had streaks of communalism which remained dormant in its early phase of regional chauvinism. To neutralize the negative impact of its regionalist chauvinistic policies, the Shiv Sena was careful enough to extol the virtues of patriotism and national integration as the occasion demanded. To develop and popularize its own image it also had to create the 'other', anti-national, anti-Indian image of the sworn political enemies. And it labelled the communists and Muslims as the enemies, as being against the welfare of the nation.

In the 1970's, Sena could capitalize on the incidences such as the Indo-Pakistan war, communal riots in Maharashtra, objection raised by the Muslim minority to singing Vande Mataram in Bombay Municipal schools. It tended to emerge as a communal body at the slightest opportunity.

The Sena antagonism against the Muslims was further intensified in the context of rising revivalism and fundamentalism that characterized pan-Islamism. During and after the Emergency period (1975-77), when the Sena had supported Congress to save itself from the imposition of ban, its popularity seemed to decline. The sons-of-the-soil policy also did not deliver the desired political dividends. Now, Shiv Sena was in search of a new ideological plank with which it could regain its position. Shiv Sena was tactful enough to ride over the Hindutva (militant Hindu ideology) tide which was mounting all over the country since 1985 when the controversial Ayodhya issue over the birth place of the Hindu deity Sriram being occupied by a Mosque, the Babri Masjid in Ayodhya, Uttar Pradesh was revived. In this new outfit Sena was trying to earn popular support outside the Greater Bombay region. Since 1980's the Shiv Sena started advocating Hindutva with a view to create larger political constituency which would respond to an appeal made to its Hindu identity.

As pointed out by Dipankar Gupta (1982), Shiv Sena's position has rarely emerged as a development of its own ideology. Its Hindutva ideology

has prayed on the more developed ideological structures of other organizations like the RSS (Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangha).

With a view to projecting its image as the sole champion of the Hindu cause, Shiv Sena had to be one up and adopt an increasingly militant tone. Sena consciously adopted the 'Vyaghramudra', the roaring tiger emblem that symbolizes its militancy both in thought and action. For strengthening the binary 'we' and 'they' divide, the Muslim oppositional identity was deliberately evolved and juxtaposed through effective propaganda that projected the minorities as aggressive and the Hindu interests as 'under-siege'. In Sena's Hindutva, the religious and cultural meanings blend with each other. Thackeray has used symbols and images shared by the Maharashtrian community and thus tried to create a base of belonging to common historical and cultural heritage.

Exploiting the influence of Shivaji's life, his valour and his vision on the Maharashtrian cultural life, Shiv Sena has consciously used Shivaji's image. Shivaji's life and legend had been the major point of reference of the Sena, which admittedly derives its name and draws its inspiration from the national hero of Maharashtra, Shivaji – the Great (Shiv Sena Speaks 1967: 1).

Thackeray argues that he does not believe in Lokshahi (Democracy), because he adheres to Shivshahi (the benevolent rule of Shivaji Maharaj). Thackeray glorified his claims of benevolent dictatorship by equating it to Shivshahi. In its nativist project Sena thus effectively used Shivaji's popular image and in its Hindutva project also it has tried to lend credence to its proclamations by reinterpreting history and by narrowing Shivaji's 'Hindavi Swaraj' to a Hindu rule and to the present day ideology of 'Hindu Rashtra'. The saffron flag which was the emblem of Shivaji's sovereign Maratha rule is accepted by Sena and now given a new meaning of Hindutva. Patriotism for Shiv Sena is being pro-Hindu. Shiv Sena equates Hindutva with nationalism and believes that Hindutva is the cultural thread that binds all the castes and communities together. As stated by Thackeray 'the spirit of nationalism flows from this force of Hindutva' (Thackeray 1989:3).

So, in Sena's nationalist discourse, Shivaji was brought in more than a regional-national hero as a Hindu king combating the Muslim expansion. Just as in the regional mobilization, Hindutva was an incipient element; the Hindu communal mobilization of the Sena continues to retain regional identity and nativism as its subterranean elements. Again and again, whenever the Hindutva appeal was not thought to be adequate, Marathi pride has resurfaced.

Sena's blatant anti-minority stand was taken as an assurance especially by the upper and middle caste Hindus who see the minorities as a concrete threat to their aspirations. This however kept it away from the lot of Dalits and Navabouddhas (lower castes and newly converted Buddhists from the same ones). In this context it is significant to note that Shiv Sena had openly opposed the publication of the Riddles of Hinduism from the collected works of Dr. Ambedkar by the Maharashtra Government. It took out a protest march which

was joined by more than hundred thousand Shivsainiks from all over Maharashtra to protest against the Riddles. The menacing postures of the Sena could not bring down the organized Dalits. All the factions of the Dalits then united under the leadership of Prakash Ambedkar and staged a massive demonstration by almost half a million Dalits in support of the Dalits. This incidence was an evidence of growing consciousness and political mobilization of this section of society.

The Sena had to contain these changes and thus started propagating that it never was against the Dalits and the lower castes. It declared that it was against those Navabouddha leaders who were misleading their community to fulfil their own political aspirations.

Shiv Sena started talking of the unity of Shivshakti and Bhimshakti. But it never showed any repentance about atrocities committed on the Dalits by Shivsainiks, particularly in Marathwada in the 1970's. Shiv Sena's advocacy of Hindutva, of equality, justice seems to be dictated more by political expediency than by ideological commitment.

### **Sena's Populist Ideology**

Analysing Shiv Sena's journey from a nativist movement to its emergence as a full-fledged political party, one notices that from the 'sons-of-the-soil' and 'Marathi Manus' theme, the Sena had moved on to the Hindutva platform – a larger political area, forging many convenient political alliances on the way. It has not developed a sound ideological base. It has constantly shifted its ideological planks, according to sheer pragmatic calculations as the situation demanded, inconsistencies and contradictions notwithstanding.

Shiv Sena talks of Maharashtrian cause, but it never evolved any elaborate social-economic programme for the welfare of the sons-of-the-soil. It is interesting to note that the Sena which swears by Hinduism did not hesitate to take help of the Muslim League party in getting its candidate elected in the mayoral election of the Bombay Municipal Corporation in 1988.

The important question therefore is how does the Sena reconcile these inconsistencies? How can such an organization create large number of members and supporters?

It is the ideological discourse of the Sena, formulated in populist terms, which becomes important in securing large mass base and in outgrowing its narrow class base. Scholars like Palshikar (2004) see cultural populism as Sena's ideological strategy to reconcile its political stands. Here, it is necessary to understand the relation between power and ideology. In the game of power, search for consistencies is futile. When a movement accepts the inevitability of state power, this power becomes an end in itself. In such a process pragmatism of power renders ideology as false consciousness in a greater sense. This is typified in case of Shiv Sena in its journey from a localized movement to a broad-based political party.

Populism is a kind of blend of change as well as stability orientations and this fusion is achieved through a peculiar ideology that has a widespread

appeal. Populism corresponds to what Antonio Gramsci conceptualized as non-organic ideology, the less structured forms of thought that circulate among common people often contradictory and confused and compounded of folklore, myth, and day to day popular experiences. In this sense, popular ideology, is not the sole property of a single class or group. It is most often a mixture of two elements of which only one is the peculiar property of the popular classes and the other is superimposed by a process of transmission and adoption from outside. In such a fusion, slogans and symbols are used; radical terms are incorporated in popular speech.

Consistent to its populist nature the Shiv Sena has deliberately kept fragile its organization and ideology right from the phase of mobilisation to the phase of routinisation. In the process of outgrowing its narrow class base, the Sena formulated its ideological discourse meant for mass consumption, in populist terms. With a view to develop a unified identity it took recourse to symbols and rhetoric that provoke mass action. With a view to widen its support base, the Sena had to develop an ideology which was meant for mass consumption. In such a process then, articulation remains at the idiomatic metaphorical level. Idiom becomes more important than the substance.

As suggested by Bedi (2006), the Sena ideology which always thrives on the construction of the 'other', has also been successful in drawing women, mostly from middle class and lower middle class, in large numbers to Sena. '...the articulation of religious, linguistic, and 'moral' difference between the Maharashtrian, female Shiv Sainik and the 'other,' the enemy—migrants from south India, Muslims, migrants from north India, and more recently the westernized woman, has played a key part in their conceptions of political and moral power' (Bedi 2006:53).

While reviewing Shiv Sena's journey of 50 years, the paper argues that the Sena has changed its stance as the winds changed in politics, at times has even gone to the opposite extremes. Shiv Sena Supremo Bal Thackeray's personal opinion on any particular issue at a particular point of time has been the sole ideological thrust of the organisation. Even after his death, the Sena has kept his opinions and views alive and maintained a populist idiom that may be in real terms called "the Shiv Sena ideology". Thackeray consistently took up those issues which could be used to provoke people's emotions and thus win popular support. Sena has evolved a body of justification around these issues as it suited its convenience or expediency. It hardly took up issues which were consistent to its logical ideology. It rather changed its ideological discourse accordingly.

The paper views the present Sena ideology as echoing what Bal Thackeray wrote, said and reflected. Thackeray evolved rhetoric's and symbols reinterpreted the Maratha history selectively in the process of inclusion and exclusion of values and symbols defining 'we' and 'they'. He always created 'the other', the enemy against whom the identity needs to be asserted. In the 1960s this enemy was the immigrant South Indian community and 1980s

onwards, it was the Muslim community. When we understand Shiv Sena's constant effort to assert its own identity, we understand better its inconsistencies in action and thought, which portray its pragmatic politics. When its nativist ideology was losing its credence and with its growing political ambitions, it required to develop a wider ideological plank, Shiv Sena started championing the Hindu interests. Since 1980s, it started advocating 'Hindutva' in an aggressive manner seeking to create and consolidate a wider political constituency which responds to an appeal made to their Hindu identity.

### **Concluding remarks**

Lastly, the paper suggests that the growth of an organisation like Shiv Sena which always exhibited people's dreams and aspirations in the name of caste, religion, language or region has to be seen in the wider context of crisis of Indian political economy.

The path of a socialist development and a democratic polity could not take India beyond the competitive pluralist politics. The policy of rapid industrialisation and planned development could not bring betterment to masses. From the mid sixties onwards, pressures for accelerating growth process began to mount, both externally and internally as India's integration into the world economy proceeded. The increasing costs of world market integration, the growth of disillusionment with welfare state- mass democracy among the masses - all these factors have driven the elite to search for new ways to maintain their control. Shiv Sena's ideological discourse spelt increasingly in populist idiom should be analysed in this context where nurturing non-class identities serve the dominant interests.

As pointed out by Jayant Lele (1995), coalition politics in India has needed and received a form of value consensus that could keep expectant without fulfilling them. Electoral politics has helped in reinforcing primordial identities that seem to benefit not so much the masses, but the political elite who manipulate them. Regional nativist parties like Shiv Sena were successful in diverting popular discontent on minorities such as Muslims and Dalits rather than reflecting upon the deteriorating economic conditions. The Sena practised more instrumental revival of those symbols and practices in which are encapsulated dreams and aspirations about a future just society.

Thus, Sena's populism should be seen as the choice offered to people by those who want to control and manipulate mass consciousness, by those who want to control the means of public culture and can create images, metaphors, categories of thought and rhetoric with a view to communicate messages to arouse the public at large.

Lastly, the paper also suggests that in the changing political context which demands building new narratives like development and good governance, the Sena continues to play the same identity politics only with different targets. This has in fact resulted in its incapacity to expand on its own core base. It would be thus interesting to see whether and how keeping with its history of

shifting ideological planks, the Shiv Sena evolves new populist idioms for political gains.

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