

Inventing “women’s history”: Female valor, martial queens, and right-wing story-tellers in the Bombay slums

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Abstract: This article focuses on oral traditions created by slum women affiliated with the Hindu nationalist Shiv Sena movement in Bombay, and explores the ways in which these invented traditions allowed marginalized women to enter a martial, masculinist “Hindu” history. It shows how poor, rough women used the limited resources available in the slums, especially in the context of rising communal hostilities, to gain a “respectable past.” Furthermore, the article analyzes how everyday practices and performances of women’s strategic “history-telling” worked to politically mobilize poor women cadres and impacted gender dynamics in contested urban spaces. The invention of traditions of female martiality reflects the potential of right-wing political women to assert a controversial position within the dominantly patriarchal structures of the slums in particular, and the extremist movement in general. The article discusses the mytho-histories told by women to negotiate their present gendered social environment; paradoxically, the martial content of these historical stories also allowed women to nurture a perpetual threat of communal discord and renegotiate their position with male cadres within a violent movement.

Keywords: Bombay, nationalist pedagogy, oral histories, slum violence, women’s militancy

“Women cook, you don’t need history. Women stitch, you don’t need history. These are women’s roles. Women fight, suddenly you need history. So we have to create it, or we stay at home to cook and stitch. What options do we have?”

—Chandana, a Shiv Sena women’s wing member

Right-wing extremist movements and the martial imagination they mobilize are often seen to thrive on women’s vulnerabilities. These movements, almost invariably dominated by patriarchal relations, are not the usual place where one

would expect to find sustained, organized practices by women to resist their disempowerment and discrimination, or create new imaginations of a more gender equal society. My anthropological research among women in a Bombay slum—

who were active members of the women's branch of the right-wing Shiv Sena movement, the Mahila Aghadi—exposed myriad everyday political practices and performances of strategic “history-telling” through which women tacitly challenged the nature of gender dynamics within the dominantly patriarchal structures both of the slums and of the movement. This article explores the creative endeavors of these women soldiers—often referred to locally as “riot-makers from the slums”—to “invent traditions”¹ of female martiality, not only to emphasize their importance to the general movement, but also to use their martial image to violently wrest temporary social and economic benefits to survive in the slums. It was particularly in reaction to the challenges against women's militancy and allegations of “unnatural female ferociousness”² that the summoning of a history of women's martiality became important, as one of the ways to contest this backlash and prolong and legitimize women's activism. Before continuing with the ethnographic discussion of this story-telling by women in slum areas of Bombay, I first make some introductory remarks to situate my work in relation to broader academic research on the topic. I also introduce the concept of “mythohistories” that I use in this article to describe the complex effects of martial story-telling by Aghadi women in the Bombay slums.

Several scholars have debated the historical pedagogy of Hindu nationalism and the redirecting of history by nationalistic organizations; they have, however, focused primarily on radical schooling, hate-teaching in classrooms, vituperative speeches by militant leaders, and the re-writing of textbooks to disseminate knowledge about Hindu male pride (Benei 2001; Chatterjee 2005; T. Sarkar 1998). My research uses the lens of anthropology to explore the *oral* traditions of Hindutva history-making, in particular those controlled by slum women; the latter aimed to return women to a martial, masculinist Hindu history, using the limited resources available in the slums to construct a “respectable” past for militant women. In this sense my research touches on that by McKenna, who studied local battle songs by insurgents in the Philippines, conclud-

ing that there was “a notable misalignment between the official discourse of the rebellion and the language, perceptions and intentions of its ordinary adherents. Rank-and-file fighters and supporters shared certain motivations with movement leaders but possessed others that were more local, more situational, more “practical” than those enunciated in the authorized rhetoric of nationalist mobilization” (1996: 247). I observed similar patterns of disjunction between the official nationalist discourse and its local interpretations within the Aghadi women's story-telling practices.

Unlike in other movements, the Aghadi women could not fall back on an existing oral tradition on female militancy, such as that described by Lobao (1990) who studied the gendering of guerrilla struggles in Latin America. In the latter context, women warriors exchanged tales not only about their own experiences of collective violence, but also their predecessors' assertive actions: women's contemporary martiality, against real or imagined state oppression, was interpreted within the guerilla movement as the revenge of wronged mothers and wives, and women's violence became related to their traditional and historical expertise in mothering and their unconditional support to their household. In this way, female guerrillas avoided complete moral isolation within a society accustomed to women's feminine roles and structural subordination. The Aghadi members also used to circulate and publicize stories about their actions and achievements, but the recentness of collective female militancy within the movement made the Sena women both absent in “history,” and vulnerable to ridicule in the present. The Aghadi women were aware of the centrality of the medieval past to Sena identity politics, and constructed and championed a prestigious martial tradition to raise the self-esteem of Hindu women cadres in peripheral urban slums.

This research therefore to some extent challenges the assumption that martial societies necessarily thrive on women's silencing and suppression. Scholars such as Giles and Hyndman (2004) argue that militarism in society is understood as the array of customs, actions, and

thought associated with armies and wars, where the physical superiority of men is emphasized and “weakness” is associated with women. The Hindu nationalist movement also envisaged a martial Hindu society in the future. This article demonstrates “women’s logic” for making Aghadi cadres familiar with their martial past and for directing current thought and action within the movement toward contesting women’s defenselessness. “*Roz ka samaj mein aurat kamjor hain, sena samaj mein nahin*” (In everyday society women are weak, not in a martial society), summed up Radhika, a cadre.³

The story-telling styles and practices by these militant slum women thus open up new perspectives on gender and political violence. To capture its multi-faceted dimensions, I use the term “mytho-histories” to describe the stories, as they represent a collapse of time and space, past myth and contemporary reality, truth and fiction, stillness and change. The “formlessless” in the narratives could be molded strategically to contest present inequalities (Tambiah 1996) and to seek out a feminine voice in a community’s conception of its own past (Doniger 1999). The Aghadi women tried to place the past, the present, and the future in a continuum so that the imagined martial society of “a Hindu past,” marked by women’s aggression and autonomy, can be regarded as the model society of the future. The present can be described as that moment in the continuum that draws inspiration from the past and is at the same time engaged in the construction of the “ideal” future. I discuss the Aghadi’s efforts to manipulate and dramatize mytho-histories about martial Hindu kings and queens in order to highlight the importance and vibrancy of women’s roles in the past and in the present.

Most of the mytho-histories evolved through interactive engagements between the story-tellers and their audience, and this practice can be interpreted as one of the Aghadi’s informal mobilizational strategies towards creating a political community of poor women. For all the Aghadi women, narratives—whether “real,” constructed, or modified—could be furnished with authenticity through reiteration and repetition. As part

of the apparatus of myth-making in the slums, some women with oratory skills were involved in circulating stories. Some of the women narrators were former stage actresses and some were Aghadi leaders, but most of them were housewives with the time to “tell stories.” Groups of slum women would collectively or individually narrate tales to men, women, children, and to an odd anthropologist sitting around the narrator. Sometimes they were told in children’s parks or in the *shakhas* (local Shiv Sena offices). At other times, they were narrated in the temple complexes where the women met regularly to sing devotional songs. The slums even swapped story-tellers to avoid boredom. Several women contrived a “good time” (as opposed to a “good place”) to tell stories, so that these sessions did not clash with their favorite *saas-bahu* (mothers-in-law and daughters-in-law) soap operas. The scattered stories, most of them lost in the mists of time, were collected, coordinated and made conspicuous by the Aghadi women. As women’s histories were not part of any fixed, written texts, the story-tellers engineered and embellished these malleable stories with new and exciting narratives. Most of the sessions were interactive, which allowed the story-teller to gauge what kinds of stories interested a particular audience. Through repeated telling, the narrators would try to show how women’s warriorhood was integral to the tradition of Hindu militancy.

The rise of Hindu nationalism and the Mahila Aghadi

The Aghadi’s use of mytho-histories needs to be understood in the context of the increasing influence of the Hindu nationalist movement, whose violent manifestations in sporadic and sustained communal rioting has been an integral part of post-colonial politics in India. Between 1992–2002, the outbreak of large-scale Hindu-Muslim clashes has even led to the destruction of the cultural fabric of Bombay and Ahmedabad, two Indian cities better known globally for their cosmopolitan reputation and

industrial/corporate successes. On this map of violence, death, and destruction, Hindu fundamentalism gave birth to a cluster of organizations, which fostered national and most often local, political, social, and religious insecurities for many years. One such organization was the Shiv Sena (Shivaji's Army), a regional political party named after the martial Hindu king Shivaji.

The reasons for the rise of the Shiv Sena are debatable, but there is less doubt about the events that preceded the party's emergence as a political power. Maharashtra, the Indian state of which Bombay is the capital, has been a stronghold of the national, "secular" Congress party since Indian independence in 1947. Since the last quarter of the twentieth century, however, the Congress government faced increasing social and political challenges. The party became destabilized by internal feuds over policy debates, the onslaught of secessionist social movements (Katzenstein et al. 1998), the hostility of lower-caste groups and an energetic peasant struggle (Lele 1981, 1995), and high levels of unemployment, especially after the Bombay textile strike of 1982 (Bakshi 1984; Pinto and Fernandes 1996; Van Wersch 1984). The Shiv Sena emerged in the 1960s as a small grassroots cultural organization and grew under the patronage of select Congress leaders. The fledgling group offered to oust specific communist leaders who opposed Congress trade unionism. Instead of declaring openly their affiliation with the Congress party, Sena members focused on attacking Left leaders who spurned culture, tradition, and idol worship (Katzenstein et al. 1998). As the Sena grew in power and popularity, it eventually stepped out of the shadows of Congress ministers and contributed to the multiple disruptive elements that undermined the Congress dominance in the state (Banerjee 2000). The organization strategically exploited the societal, economic, and discursive transitions to find its way into the political fray (Eckert 2003). The party was officially launched in 1966 in Bombay under the charismatic leadership of Balasaheb Thackeray, who emerged as the most controversial and influential figure in Bombay's political and cultural landscape. His party won several

Municipal Elections, and in 1995 joined forces with the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP), a pan-Indian Hindu fundamentalist organization, to form the state government (Heuze 1995).

Since its inception as an ethno-centric cultural organization, Shiv Sena men have made headlines because of their violent and murderous activities in orchestrating communal riots not just in Bombay, but all over the state (Gupta 1982; Katzenstein 1979). Women played an instrumental role as well by creating and sustaining communal tension and orchestrating direct or indirect attacks on migrants and Muslims, well in keeping with the larger aims of an ethno-nationalist movement. The Mahila Aghadi or the women's front was formally inaugurated in 1985, a year after the Sena formed an alliance with the BJP. By that time, most Sena women in the slums had developed an aggressive public image as picketers, as running abuse brigades (groups of women that embarrassed "offenders" by shouting abuses in front of their homes/offices for hours), and as violent demonstrators. The Sena's affinity for organized violence peaked during the 1992–93 Bombay riots. In December 1992, Hindu fundamentalists in north India destroyed a mosque (the Babri Masjid) in the temple town of Ayodhya. The Shiv Sena, allegedly in connivance with the city police, clamped down on Muslims, because the latter had "dared" to hold public protests against majoritarian oppression. Bombay witnessed large-scale death, destruction, and unfettered violence for two months (in two phases, an initial one in December 1992 and a much more intense phase the following month). The riots saw "the unprecedented feminisation of violence" (Sarkar and Butalia 1996: 6), in which the Shiv Sena women's front organized attacks on Muslim ghettos. The Mahila Aghadi became prominent and the Sena women developed a reputation as notorious women "gangsters." Over the decades since 1960, the once submissive Sena women emerged as "sentinels" of the streets of Bombay, usually patrolling borders with Muslim slums.

I began my fieldwork in the Nirmal Nagar slum area in Bombay—a Sena stronghold—in 1999, when the party was removed from politi-

cal power in Maharashtra. After several weeks of visiting the area and establishing links with the local women, I was invited by one of the women leaders to live and work in the slums. I remained in Nirmal Nagar for a year, and returned for several months between 2001 and 2003. What made Nirmal Nigar unique was not only the local successes of the Shiv Sena (in spite of their state-wide electoral losses), but also the collective aggression displayed by the slum women in regulating social, economic, and political activities in the area. During my stay in Nirmal Nagar, the women party workers expressed their relief at their state-level political defeat. While in power, the women’s front was under greater compulsion to maintain a moderate façade and avoid embarrassing the party; once removed from power, the slum women could unrestrainedly promote a martial image that attracted poor women to the Aghadi.

My broader research suggests that the Mahila Aghadi manipulated the nationalist discourse to address more localized gender interests (see Sen 2007). The women’s wing, which drew its primary membership from the expansive slums of Bombay, emerged as a “sub-group” through ideological and political patronage; but it gained local popularity by contesting restrictive decrees on poor women. The Sena women loyalists were first or second generation migrants from the rural parts of Maharashtra, and became engaged in a variety of legal and illegal economic activities to sustain their families in the slums. For example, several women were fruit and vegetable vendors during the day and covertly sold marijuana at night. Most of the women were married, yet faced various domestic uncertainties. A small section of slum women consisted of working widows (who found security and sisterhood within the Sena camp), and “over-age” and unmarried women (whose life in the urban slums had prevented them from finding “suitable” partners). Almost all slum women had experienced extreme poverty, displacement and class discrimination, evictions, familial and kin alienation, domestic neglect, and sexual and financial vulnerabilities as workers within the informal/unskilled labor economy.

The women cadres used their martial image and their notorious reputation within the politics of urban fear for certain social and economic benefits, which enabled them to survive everyday life within the exclusivist ethos of a commercial city. These “benefits” ranged from securing material assets like illegal taps, electricity, and cable connections by threatening local suppliers, to more intangible advantages like ensuring women’s safety and mobility on the streets by thrashing male “predators.”

However, these activities by armed women became a spectacle in the slums of Bombay. Although several men in Sena-dominated constituencies remained ambiguous about female militancy, most male guardians within slum families became increasingly concerned about women’s violence in public. Male brutality was easily naturalized, while women’s martiality threatened to upturn gender hierarchies entrenched deeply in the slum areas. The women were keen to retain their “soldierly” duties, and at the same time, they resented being socially and politically ostracized for their commitment to the Aghadi’s martial rhetoric. Thus female soldiering, whether it involved running a system of brute justice to favor poor women or attacking Muslim ghettos, needed a gloss of religio-historical legitimacy. In the absence of a written or oral subaltern history of women, claiming close connections to martial queens in the past became an important strategy to justify women’s martiality at present. Thus cadres started coordinating a “poor women’s history” out of scattered stories about ruling-class women in the past. By forging and asserting universal ties of martial motherhood, female leadership, and women’s autonomy across class and time, the Aghadi women tried to secure a central role within the contemporary Sena movement. A substantial part of medieval Hindu history in Maharashtra concerns the life of Shivaji, the Shiv Sena being named after this local king. The party men in general and the women in particular were tactically obsessed with medieval mytho-histories, which developed around the role of this Hindu hero in challenging the Muslim rulers. The Aghadi felt that if women were

to be involved in the conception and sustenance of contemporary Hindu militarism, it was imperative to recover women's agency in the martial society of Shivaji's time.

Telling tales of Shivaji and soldierly women

There are diverse interpretations of medieval history in Maharashtra. Here I offer a brief overview of the iconization of Shivaji, as the Sena women's story-telling practices were etched in relief against the life of this controversial figure. Shivaji has been attributed several identities ranging from "the liberator of the Marathi nation" (Grant Duff 1873; Laine 2003; J. Sarkar 1992; Sen 1977; Takakhav 1998) to "a common bandit" (Lane-Poole 1893). According to most historians, he was born in 1630 to a petty landlord (*jagirdar*) Shahaji Bhonsle and his wife Jijabai and grew up to be a self-proclaimed king, *Chhatrapati*. He annexed the regions of several neighboring Muslim and Hindu rulers to his own *jagir* (land/property), but because he carried on a prolonged struggle against the former, he was glorified as a Marathi "Hindu" hero (Bakshi and Sharma 2000; Bhave 2000). Shivaji died in 1680. Excerpts from his life were compiled in a few manuscripts and his feats remained sparingly alive in local ballads. He emerged as an iconic national hero in the second half of the nineteenth century after Tilak, leader of the anti-colonial movement in Maharashtra, revived the *Chhatrapati's* "tales of gallantry" through celebration of the Shivaji festival (Bakshi and Sharma 2000). The festival was held in Bengal (under the initiative of Sarala Devi, a member of the Tagore family)⁴ and in Maharashtra to celebrate heroism, masculinity, and the success of a local leader in overthrowing a powerful "foreign" empire (Sinha 1995). Although the festival is no longer celebrated in Bengal, its popularity continues across Maharashtra. Even the national rail terminal and the international airport in Bombay are named after Shivaji.

The Shiv Sena was also inspired by this medieval ruler, their primary focus being Shivaji's attempts to carve a strong Hindu nation out of

a Muslim empire. Within this primarily masculinist discourse on a hero and his heroism, the Aghadi tried to give significance to the few scattered tales where women played an influential role in Shivaji's designs to create a *Hindu Padpadshahi*, a martial Hindu political and social empire. The narrators tried to characterize Shivaji as a man who was sensitive to women and gave recognition to women's "special" contribution to society. Shivaji's father abandoned Jijabai after his second marriage (J. Sarkar 1992). The Sena women explained that the proximate relationship between Shivaji and his mother and the absence of a strong male presence allowed him to respect the strength and ideals of women. In this context, the Sena women storytellers narrowed down and highlighted those "true tales" (*sacchi kahania*) in which their icon was fair and honorable to women from various social and political backgrounds.

The Aghadi drew careful attention to stories of Shivaji's protection of women and his support to martial queens, women foot soldiers and his "autonomist" mother. According to one mytho-history narrated by women, Shivaji withdrew an honor from one of his men, Raghoji, when he discovered by chance that this front-rank general lusted after a soldier's widow. Another tale is about "the brave Rani Savitribai," queen of Bellary. She was brought to Shivaji's court in chains, after her kingdom was raided by an arrogant general, Sakuji, in an act of vengeance. Shivaji apologized to the queen, chided his general for ill-treating a woman, and returned the kingdom to her. Yet another story is about a beautiful Muslim girl, the daughter of a local Maulana in Kalyana, who was captured and presented to Shivaji by one of his generals. Shivaji addressed the girl as his sister and kept her in safe custody until she was sent back to her family. The last story always ended with a prolonged phase of lamentation by the Sena women that similar treatment was not meted out to Hindu women captured by Muslim soldiers. The Sena women repeatedly portrayed the character of Shivaji as a leader with "the strength of a man, and the heart of a woman," as he was often described in the local ballads.

During the Aghadi meetings, these tales were retold by women story-tellers in the form of questions and answers, which gave the narration clarity and the feeling of immediacy. Their wild gesticulations, voice modulations, and the rolling of eyes while enacting the events that took place in a seventeenth-century court, allowed the past to filter into the present so that history was not “a history of long ago, but a history of just yesterday” (Daniel 1997: 27). For example, in the case of Rani Savitribai, the women usually told the story in the following style (with the words, *phir boley*, “then it was said,” used as interjections):

Courtier one: “Who is that woman covered in blood and bound in chains?” “That is Rani Savitribai, the glorious queen of Bellary,” whispered the second courtier. “She fought a great battle to free her small kingdom. I heard that she charged ahead on her horse, roaring like a wounded lioness, swinging her sword in the air, her hair flying in the wind. She was a leader of her troops, stronger than many kings, braver than many generals. But she was finally defeated by General Sakuji.”

Courtier one: “Hush, here comes our king.”

A courtroom of noblemen, aristocrats, and generals took their seats. The women shivered in sympathy for the wounded Hindu queen and sat huddled together behind the partition screens. The courtroom guards fell into muted silence. They all wondered, they all looked toward the throne.

Shivaji (in anger): “Sakuji, you whipped the queen? If you have insulted a woman, you have insulted my mother. You are dismissed in shame.”

Turning to Savitribai: “Mother, will you not pardon your own son?”

Savitribai, with tears in her eyes: “Son, I am glad that you showed respect for me. It has turned me into your compatriot. I will now fight with you for the Hindu Swaraj.”

And so she took her place beside Shivaji. Everyone in the court cheered.

The Shiv Sena women also clapped loudly. Through the narration of the stories as a dramatic dialogue, what could have been a possible royal courtroom drama was portrayed as an actuality. Kumar (2003), who collated folk tales from South Asia and studied how they can be molded to accommodate changing historical circumstances, argues that ambiguities in time and space have a challenging effect, forcing listeners to seek out morals and meanings for themselves. Starting at one point and emerging at another, a story mirrors the dimension of time in human life, though time may be perceived as linear, circular, or spiral depending on cultural context. The Sena women narrators depicted the events as a series of images that the women had viewed, as if they had been present during the enactment of this exchange. Most women were celebratory that a martial queen had been freed and given equal status as an independent Hindu ruler. Because the king had meted out justice to Rani Savitribai, he had “freed” all Hindu women throughout the generations. The noisy public cheering of Shivaji’s support for women became the wing’s covert strategy for recovering agency for women in history. The front tried to show that women, like the queen of Bellary, once unchained, were promising warriors in the struggle to carve out a martial Hindu society that existed in the past. The Sena women asserted that if they received similar treatment, then they had the capacity to mold a militaristic, Hindu-dominated society. Hence these stories claiming that women had a place in history and were linked to a rich tradition of Hindu martiality enhanced the self-respect of ordinary women cadres.

In this context, it is important to recall another tale of Shivaji outwitting a Muslim general, Afzal Khan. The Khan had invited Shivaji to come in peace to his tent to reach an amicable settlement. The general, however, had conspired to throttle the Marathi leader. Shivaji came unarmed but stuck the claws of a tiger to his fingers; so when the Khan jumped on Shivaji and grabbed his throat, Shivaji tore the general’s guts out. When news of the Muslim leader’s murder spread, the Khan’s army retreated from the spot. This story was narrated repeatedly

during various Shivaji festivals held in the pre-independence period (Ahluwalia 1984; Samarath 1975). The enemy then was the British. This story, which aimed to inspire the youth to display their cunning against colonial rulers, was usurped later by the right-wing movement to promote Hindu militancy (Sarkar and Butalia 1996). In the Sena *shakhas*, the story was reiterated and even enacted in children's drama, most of which were directed by women. Now the enemy is markedly the Muslims. Women, while narrating this story, seemed to relish the violence. The tales were rounded off with a glorification of strategic guerrilla warfare, a prerequisite for the creation of a martial society.

Several children had learned this particular anecdote by heart, and by acting out skits, had learned the value of remaining in a state of preparedness for counter-attacks and upholding a legacy of "bravery." Shivaji Jayanti—a festival to mark the birthday of Shivaji—generated enormous festivities in the slums and the *shakha* became the unit of coordination. Besides the food and the finery, the occasion was celebrated by organizing parades and the performance of Shivaji plays. During the Shivaji Jayanti that I witnessed in Bombay, there were queues of people wanting to play the parts of Shivaji and his victorious general in one narrative, and Afzal Khan and his defeated Army in the other. Most of the time the children practiced on the *shakha* premises. When they rehearsed without parental inspection, they would intercept their usual Marathi dialogues with Mumbaiiya colloquial Hindi abuses (often using the body language of film stars), which degraded the Muslim community. This made the other children roll in laughter. For example, a child enacting the character of Shivaji would say:

Shivaji: "*Abey chutia Afzal, tu mereku marega? Mereku? Rand ki aulad, tu us din mar gaya tha jis din tu landya ban gaya*" (You fucker Afzal, you will kill me? Kill me? Son of a whore, you died that day when you were circumcised).⁵

"That means he died as a child," one of the children explained to me, rubbing the tears of laughter from his eyes. While the performance of

violence sustained the larger Hindu nationalist understanding of history, women and children's dialogue with their past was easily negotiated through what Jeganathan describes as "violence in performance" (2000: 52). Over time, keeping alive the Marathi plays on Shivaji had turned into a crusade among some of the older members of the Aghadi. Shobha, a retired stage actress, said: "My drive is to keep alive the Shivaji performances through the children. It should not be a dying art. But the children after watching too many films, try and act out the role of Shivaji as Amitabh Bacchan [a megastar in Bombay]."

Although some defended the "authentic" folk versions, other women reformulated the plays along modern lines to make these adaptations popular among children. The motivation being: "Since the generation next should not forget the Shivaji tradition, let's repackage it." Most women were tolerant of their children experimenting with the plays, and replacing folk dialogues with popular, often unaesthetic, exchanges from famous Hindi films. On one occasion, when the army of Shivaji was dressed in modern paramilitary (green and brown patched) combat outfits with automatic toy weapons, the children were relieved that the army appeared more menacing and well-prepared for warfare. But they were not totally averse to traditional performances "as long as Shivaji got to beat the shit out of the Mughals and prove we won." Because women had a degree of control over their offspring, children's plays became another mode of expression to emphasize the mobility and mutability of history. The story about Afzal Khan's fate did not specifically involve the role of women in the past, yet its circulation highlighted women's involvement in promoting an illustrious Hindu history. Its enactment as plays and narratives gave significance to the initiatives of women in controlling the Shivaji tradition. Wherever there were tales of Shivaji, there were women. The physical and vocal visibility of women in these places reflected the urgency felt by the Sena women to not only incorporate their presence in history but also dictate how history was "told."

Another episode that women enjoyed narrating was a directive from Jijabai (Shivaji's mother)

to her son to recapture Kondana Fort (later renamed as Singhad), where Jijabai had remained imprisoned for a while. According to studies on Shivaji’s military successes, capturing the fort from the Mughals was of strategic importance for the Marathi leader (Bhave 2000). For the Sena women, however, it was a question of revenge against the Muslims. The directive was the proof of overt militancy in a wronged Hindu mother, who could boldly send her son to a “just” war without fearing for his life. The more contemporary celebration of Jijabai’s orders seemed to highlight the contribution of right-wing women in creating martial sons, well-trained for combat situations:

Jijabai: “My son, I have trained you to become the best warrior in the country. You have the blood of a proud Hindu mother running through your veins. You have been nurtured on my milk, the milk of purity and courage. I have unflinchingly put a sword in your hand. Will you not free the fort where your mother remained captive for long and take revenge for her humiliation?”

Shivaji: “O Mother, your valor runs in my blood. Your wish is my command.”

And the mighty king bowed his head before his gallant mother. Her spirit rode out with her son as his horse galloped toward Kondana.

This tale told by the story-tellers held up an ideal relationship between a Hindu mother and a good, fearless Hindu son; it became another ploy to emphasize women’s position in a continuing tradition of martial motherhood. After one of these interactive story-telling sessions, several women claimed to have a shared womb with Jijabai (“still giving birth to many Shivajis”) and this story of a mother instigating her son to fight for her honor was extensively circulated in the slums. Moreover, these women-centric mytho-histories became increasingly popular as nascent rebellions against the Sena men who still remained skeptical of women’s strength. The tales appealed for equality within a martial order and for sanctioning of women’s “warrior” status. “If Shivaji, the great Maratha ruler, had allowed a woman to be

his compatriot, what can our men say to oppose his ruling?” asked Nandini, who always played a primary role in the narration of these tales.

I often spoke to the Sena men about these mytho-histories and women’s desire to gain visibility within the movement, reaching two conclusions from my discussions. First, the men played a very nominal role in developing and narrating mytho-histories. Second, most men preferred titillating tales about Muslim women, who were objects of Shivaji’s generosity, even though the king had “the right” to abuse them to avenge the Mughals. They seemed curious about the Aghadi’s effort to revive tales of Shivaji’s “respect” for martial Hindu women. Chandan, a Sena aide, said: “These stories are quite sensational. I had never heard some of them in my life. I do wonder whether these women can really recreate a martial society.” “At least he is beginning to wonder,” his wife, an active Aghadi member, murmured to me.

Most men within the party referred to Thackeray’s late wife, Meena Thackeray, as Matoshree, the name used by Shivaji to reverentially address his mother. She was idolized as the “good” wife and mother, who supported Thackeray through all his endeavors, but stayed out of the political limelight. Aghadi leaders remained deferential in public; yet they categorically refused to accept Meena Thackeray as their icon. “To be honest, she was just too passive,” they would say. The image of an inspirational and militant mother, sustained within the tales of Shivaji, was obviously far more appealing for the Sena women. Because gender hierarchies were well-established within the slums and the political party, the vivid narratives on martial motherhood developed by the story-tellers remained a definite attempt to inspire a change in the orientation of men toward women’s active involvement in social reconstruction.

Narrating mytho-histories in negotiation with the present

Though the Sena women I met identified and narrated these highly illustrative stories as their

“history,” it was striking that not one of them had ever set foot in Raighad (Shivaji’s capital) or Shivneri (Shivaji’s birthplace) to pay their tribute to their great leader. Thus, there was a clear demarcation between heritage and the strategic use of history. Heritage was static, unchanging, boring, and of no social value to the women. History, however, could be a collection of spicy stories, imagined as reality merely through repetition. Performance theorists such as Turner (1974) and Schechner (2003), while discussing symbolic action in society, argued how in all ritualized movements there is at least a moment where those moving according to a cultural script are liberated from normative demands. In this space between two ordered worlds almost anything can happen. According to Turner, “In this interim liminality, the possibility exists of standing aside not only from one’s own social position but from all social positions and of formulating a potentially unlimited series of alternative social arrangements” (1974: 13–14). The dramatic telling of historical stories had the capacity of grabbing the attention of listeners; they were dynamic and malleable enough to be transformed through embellishments. A performative enactment of this history allowed a group of marginalized slum women to temporarily step outside a structure of social subordination and everyday economic struggles, and embody an unorthodox, honorable, and valorous identity. The Aghadi believed that the ritualized performance of a historical narrative in which warrior women played a visible role would enable poor women to re-create the egalitarian, militaristic society designed by Shivaji.

The practical use of mytho-history has a more unequivocal influence on the political advancement of a slum community. According to Daniel, assertions of academic history are logically future-oriented even though they may be about the past. Thus “history is not so much about *finding* truth as it is about *making* true” (Daniel 1997: 70). Insofar as it is future-oriented, history nurtures the hope that when a line of inquiry is pursued long enough, then there will be a congregation of academics who will agree that a definite picture about the past has emerged

from the inquiry. The assertions of mytho-histories, by contrast, insist that past “actualities” are contemporaneous, that what is now is what was then and what was then is what is now (Tambiah 1996). “It is this collapse of time, where past becomes present enactment, that characterizes myths” (Daniel 1997: 52). In a mythic world, the very same conditions and concerns that made past events possible still prevail. In the construction of mytho-histories by the Sena women, society in the past was marked by Muslim aggression, the Hindu effort to counter it, the aggressive role of women in public, and the subsequent creation of a martial society. The concerns at that time were to regain physical, cultural, and religious hegemony over the Muslims, reclaim land and honor taken away by them. The contingencies remain the same at present.

Indeed, the relation between the past and the present as viewed by the Sena women cannot be understood in temporal terms. Women thus did not imagine history as a written chronology or as a linear progression of episodes. Their narrations of history are performative, ritualistic, flexible, and have no relationship with unitary truths. Within the constraints of a masculinist discourse, tales of valor and justice had the primary function to “restore women to history and history to women.” While recovering their agency in the past, the Sena women also inextricably linked it to their agency at present. If the past casts light on the present, current actions must also enrich their past. According to an Aghadi leader, Neelamtai, “The Marathi women have always fought for their religion and honor. We are still fighting for our religion; it would make Shivaji really proud of us.” So Shivaji was not a chapter that has been closed; he is still being written. Marathi women are continuing to satisfy his aspirations for Hindu supremacy. Neelamtai rounds off the discussion by saying: “Through our heroic actions, we will become the glorious past for the next generation of Marathi Hindu women.” Sena women, thus, saw themselves as participants in the process of history. As “descendants” of newly constructed martial traditions, poor women sought to accentuate their roles in carrying out social and historical responsibilities.

The Sena women, however, were often hesitant to be too radical in recovering women’s agency. They preferred negotiation without any overt hostility to men and the movement. What surprised me was the definite unpopularity of Rani Laxmibai of Jhansi, the warrior queen in the 1857 revolt, among the Sena women. Laxmibai was the image of militant motherhood developed by radicals during the anti-colonial movement. The nationalist rebel leader Subhas Chandra Bose named the women’s wing of his self-styled Indian National Army after the martial queen. Laxmibai had led her troops not as a legitimate ruler, but as the regent of her infant son adopted as the prospective male heir in order to justify her role as head of state. Her classic battle line when the British announced the annexation of Jhansi—“*I will not give up my Jhansi to anyone*”—were the first words in women’s history that most enthusiastic girls learned at school. I thought that she would be the ideal female icon for the Sena women: an independent female warrior, a mother fighting for her son who defines her political legitimacy, a Hindu woman with a history of fighting the British in the mid-nineteenth century.

At first the Sena women were dismissive about Laxmibai; then they claimed that they were not well aware of her history. In course of time it became evident to me that the highly rebellious image of the Rani was not acceptable to the Mahila Aghadi or to the male members of the organization. The Aghadi cadres could be “affiliated” with a masculine hero (like the queen of Bellary’s comradeship with Shivaji), but the women could not be identified as completely independent actors (as the queen of Jhansi). This dawned on me when I met a notorious women Aghadi leader in Bhayander, Smita. She compared herself to Rani Laxmibai, and her female followers also referred to her by that name. Smita, who openly carried a gun and took no orders from the men, was severely criticized by male Sena members, and women cadres from other areas remained wary of her. Even though Rani Laxmibai acted on behalf of her son, she was a sovereign queen, independent of male aides. She was also the symbol of *streeshakti* (Hindu

women’s power) among women’s wings of parallel Hindu nationalist organizations, such as the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (the National Volunteers), which catered ideologically to educated middle- and upper-class women (Ganneri 2008).

The slum women in Bombay, however, desired to create a social and political community neither in isolation from men, nor as open rebels. The story-telling sessions were geared toward multiple ends for various groups of women. For example, they addressed a concern for creating an oral history exclusively for illiterate women; inculcated a sense of pride in poor women branded as petty gangsters; mobilized and retained slum women within a martial movement; identified story-telling and writing skits as an important political responsibility for women uninvolved in direct violence; created a culturally accepted recreational space for women and children to meet and celebrate their history; attempted to legitimize women’s autonomy in familial and public spheres in the near future; and strengthened the role of women and children as carriers of culture. But the stories and story-telling sessions were also an effort to seek acceptance, if not salutation, of martial women by the local men. As part of Shivaji’s Sena, men would be partially content to believe that women were granted rather than asserted their freedom. The women wanted their men to believe so, and thus disregarded the extreme self-reliance of Rani Laxmibai. The Aghadi women were instead making women prominent in a martial past, so that their conspicuous militant roles within the Sena movement would not be seen as female deviancy. Thus, the Aghadi was preoccupied with manipulating the past and shaping the present, so that a favorable position for Marathi Hindu women could be created in society.

Women’s mytho-histories and the reversal of war-time gender logics

This article sits rather awkwardly within the wider literature on story-telling events within communities marked by violence. The Shiv

Sena women employed mytho-histories as more than coping mechanisms for a community, and did not use them to build a comprehensive, viable, and peaceful community life in the context of war, as for example in Perera's account (2001) of ghost stories and demon possession in Sri Lanka, and Jackson's research (2002) on public story-telling in Sierra Leone. My research shows how strategic story-telling becomes a mechanism for prolonging conflict and celebrating a history of war and violence. While trying to talk and tell themselves into a history of Hindu women's martiality, the Aghadi members were also demonizing Muslims and precluding the possibility of peaceful negotiation with their enemies. They were in certain ways going beyond the Hindutva discourse to emphasize a future of perpetual militant preparedness. Marking a significant deviation from the pan-Indian Hindu nationalist movement and its models for the ideal social order, the Sena women's stories did not invoke "the mythic, Hindu past of Lord Ram" envisioned in the Hindutva discourse. "*Ramrajya nahi chahiye*" (we don't want Ram's kingdom), they said. During the peaceful and patriarchal reign of Lord Ram, women were put "safely" in their homes. Instead, the women's mytho-narratives focused on a medieval "historical, Hindu past" (Shivaji's *Hindu padpadshahi*), where women had achieved a degree of martiality and autonomy. The Aghadi, thus, was consciously trying to counter nostalgia for a serene Ramrajya, and promote an image of a society that was perpetually threatened by enemies. The latter society "required" men *and* women to organize themselves as an army, and women would have to carry out militaristic activities for the security of the Hindu community.

My research also puts into perspective other analyses on the co-relations between gender and militarized violence that occurs in the course of, and significantly, in the absence of direct conflict. The Sena women for instance tried to manipulate the general law formulated by Ruddick (1998) that "the culture of militarization—coercive power structures and practices, hierarchies and discipline—relies on patriarchal patterns

and patriarchy in turn relies on militarization ... War magnifies the already existing inequalities of peacetime" (ibid.: 212). To manage their survival, the Sena women were trying to place themselves in a long history of women's militancy. This also served to reverse the trend whereby a community under siege pressurizes women to embrace identity constructs that undermine their authority and autonomy. They were trying to construct a critical consciousness, typically using the politics of self-defense in a conflict situation, by developing gendered insights into a social framework that acknowledges the necessity of militarism not just to protect women, but also to ensure the survival of the Hindu society and religion. The Aghadi cadres can be seen as agents of social transformation, with the potential to upturn gross power imbalances within a social system that remains openly prejudicial against women. Women's experiences of everyday and extraordinary violence (extended from home to the street to the "battlefield" riot situations) are not homogenous, and thus their coping mechanisms are also diverse. The Sena women's visions were structured by the fact that women's expressions of support and resistance flow from their own cultural experiences of being discriminated and disempowered. If women feel that their indulgence in organized violence offered them relief from everyday moral restrictions, it was linked to their own immediate, maybe narrow, construction of women's visibility, social worth, and martial traditions.

Moreover, whereas cultural context and experience in story-telling are often emphasized in the study of narration of myths and legends, the Sena women constructed their mytho-histories in the relative absence of a strong tradition of women's martial story-telling. White (1987) argues that public telling of biographical narratives in any society is determined by cultural contexts and local "sense-making mechanisms." He maintains that members of a community with a strong tradition in telling tales can emphasize the dominance of one perspective over another, and reflect their own life's experiences in narrating myths and legends. That is when stories have the potential to become community

“histories.” Blackburn, who reinterprets White’s perspective in the context of Tamil prophecies, likewise argues that narrating life histories of influential and popular mythical characters can serve as a vehicle for “revealing historical wrongs, naming the guilty” and in due course, setting the record straight” (2004: 205). Unlike Blackburn’s rural informants, most Sena women did not have any real experience of traditional story-telling. Many poor women had been distanced from their village past; some of the younger women cadres had been born and/or raised in the slums of Bombay. The practice of public and interactive story-telling that was developed by the Aghadi members may have been rooted in certain traditions of narrating myths and legends in the remote past. Some of the practices may have even survived in individualized forms within a cluster of households (for example, grandmothers would tell night-time stories about ghosts and demons to children). But collective forms of story-telling were absent within the rush, squalor, and extreme poverty of the Bombay ghettos. This article highlights the strategic creativity among slum women to pursue the power of public story-telling and develop a common interpretative schema, peddle it successfully as a women’s history, and turn this practice into an instrumental tool for binding the interests of poor women from scattered urban slums. Women also strategically adopted the softer approach of story-telling to avoid direct confrontation with a male-dominated nationalist movement. However, within the limited social, material, and ideological capital accessible to slum women, the latter sought to contest—albeit through a culturally authorized form of women’s story-telling—the marginalization of women’s historical traditions.

Returning to a wider perspective on women, urbanism, and violence, this article identifies a number of vexed socio-political realities that determine the dynamism of right-wing movements in non-Western societies, particularly among subaltern groups. Women usually support nationalist movements from the side-lines, but at crucial points of communal tension, they can actively participate in violence to assert their

presence within the struggle (Bacchetta 2002). This article shows how poor women experience the social and emotional value of working collectively, even if within the context of a violent struggle. Women’s attempts to construct and restructure their “history” underline the experience of collective action as the most potent lever to reorganize male discursive practices. Though secular-feminist perspectives criticize right-wing women’s involvement in violence (Blee 2002; De Grazia 1992; Ferber 2003; Peto 1999), my research shows how Sena women’s reworking of the Hindu fundamentalist rhetoric becomes one of many strategies used by poor women to assert their freedom.

Although it would be hasty to conclude that the Sena women’s history-telling sessions had the potential to radically transform gender equations and militarize women in slum areas, especially considering the external system of law and order in Bombay, Singer’s (1997) argument that adding and condensing meanings while telling “historical” stories becomes a powerful method of developing new social identities becomes relevant here. Indeed, the awareness of poor women’s real and imagined connections with martial queens made the Aghadi members proud and assertive within their private, public, and political worlds. Their efforts reflect the initiatives of poor women to control their own history, determine their status within a contemporary social movement, and imagine a central role for women within a future social order.

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Notes

1. According to Eric Hobsbawm: “‘Invented tradition’ is taken to mean a set of practices, normally governed by overtly or tacitly accepted rules and of a ritual or symbolic nature, which seek to inculcate certain values and norms of behaviour by repetition, which automatically implies continuity with the past” (1983: 1).
2. I offer a detailed analysis of these strategies in *Shiv Sena Women: Violence and Communalism in a Bombay Slum*.
3. According to the Aghadi women, a *senā samāj* (army society) endorsed Shiv Sena’s version of violent, aggressive politics, marking the blurring of boundaries between army and civilian life. This concept is discussed at length in the chapter “Women, History and the Future Samaj;” in *Shiv Sena Women*.
4. The Tagores were a progressive Hindu family who took part in the anti-colonial struggle.
5. I have studied in detail the relationship between slum children and the Hindu nationalist discourse in Bombay in *Shiv Sena Women*.

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