Religious Procession as a Mediator for Social Intimacy:

Building Communal Harmony in Dharavi after the 1992 Mumbai Riot[1]

Reza Masoudi Nejad

02.
'Muharram' appeared in eight different transliterations, often transliterated 'Mohurrum', in archive materials. However 'Muharram' is the most common transliteration used in recent time.

Previous page: Women in the streets of Dharavi, 2012 Photo: Kosta Mathéy

I interviewed Bhau in his flat at the edge of Dharavi in Mumbai in April 2010. Bhau is his nickname, meaning 'the senior brother', a title that he is honoured with by the people of Dharavi. I was not there to see Dharavi, the biggest slum in Asia, but I interviewed him about the Muharram[2] procession in Dharavi. The interview revealed to me that Dharavi is socially much richer than I could imagine; it has to be recognised as one of the best cases for understanding how inter-communal harmony can be initiated and practised.

Bhau is a Hindu and was born in 1937 in Ahmad-Negar, which is dominated by Muslims. His parents moved into Dharavi when he was a 3-month old baby. He is a member of the *mohalla* committee[3] of Dharavi that pioneered a participatory initiation to create communal harmony after the 1992 riot between Hindu and Muslim communities. The riot was sparked throughout Indian cities after the destruction of the Babri Masjid (mosque) and turned into the most brutal unrest in the history of Mumbai.

The members of the *mohalla* committee are from all of the communities in Dharavi, including the Hindu majority and Muslim minority. Bhau explained that they were determined to do something to restore the community after the riot; they initiated a campaign using their own resources to create communal harmony. Bhau proudly commented that the campaign is now well known in India. As a part of the campaign, they began running *Muharram* and Ganpati[4] processions on the same route. Muharram procession is a ritual carried by Muslims and Ganpati procession is a Hindu ritual; he stated that this is a way that the two communities exercise respecting each other. Although I had heard of the campaign I had never heard, and was astonished to find out, that the two processions are carried out on the same route in Dharavi.

Religious rituals construct a '*self*' that 'not only integrates the believers but also places a symbolic boundary between them and outsiders' (Van deer Veer 1994, 11). As a procession is spatially dispersed, it is engaged with crossing borders and boundaries; thus it usually causes tension and violence among diverse religious and ethnic communities that reside in the same proximity. Although this seems to be extensively evidenced by endless examples of Hindu-Muslim conflict in the modern history of India, the case of Dharavi illuminates that religious procession can be a mediator for socio-religious intimacy as well. The two communities spatially orchestrated Muharram and Ganpati processions to not only establish but also maintain communal harmony. This paper is not aimed at explaining the details of the two rituals, but discussing the entwining of the two processions.

The genealogical link between Muharram and Ganpati

Ashura is the name of the 10th day of Muharram, the first month of the Islamic lunar calendar. Every year, Shi'a Muslims[5] observe Ashura as the day of the martyrdom of Hussein ibn Ali and his few companions in the tragic battle of Karbala in the late 7th century. The tragedy was the consequence of dispute over the legitimacy of the Umayyad authority. From the Shi'i point of view, the battle of Karbala is more than a historic battle over a political dispute and it has since transcended into 'meta-history' (Chelkowski 1988, 263).

Myth is classically known as an invented story; however as Calhoun (2002) explains: a myth is a story that 'contribute[s] to the elaboration of a cosmological system and to a cohesive social identity'. The tragedy of Ashura is 'the Shi'i myth', since the battle of Karbala is regarded by Shi'as 'as a cosmic event around which the entire history of the world, prior as well as subsequent to it, revolves' (Ayoub 1978, 141). The tragedy and its observance had a significant role in the process of establishing the division Muslims into Shi'a and Sunni sects[6]. Michael Fischer states that the tragedy 'provides a way of clearly demarcating Shi'ite understanding from the Sunni understanding of Islam and Islamic history' (1980, 21). The memory of the tragedy has profoundly influenced Shi'i creed and rituals to such a degree that Fischer (1980) has called it 'the Karbala paradigm' which Shi'i culture is constituted by.

Shi'a Muslims developed numerous rituals throughout history to observe the tragedy of Ashura. The rituals originated in their Arab environment in Iraq and were particularly developed in Iran during the Safavid era (16th-18th centuries), and diffused on the Indian subcontinent (Calmard 1996). Indians spread the rituals during colonial times as far as the Caribbean island of Trinidad (see Korom 1994, 2004). The remembrance of Ashura is a mourning ceremony accompanied by the bodily expression of grief including weeping, wailing and even flagellation, in the Middle East. However, it has been transformed into a festival in the Indian context.

The commemoration of Ashura signifies the division of Shi'a from Sunni communities in the Middle East. However it has metamorphosed into a non-Shi'i ritual in India. Hasnain (1988) has mentioned that in India not

03.
The community committee or neighbourhood committee.

04.
Also written *Ganapati*.

05.
Muslims are divided into two major sects of Sunnis, as majority, and Shi'as, as minority.

06.
The division of Muslims into Shi'i and Sunni sects initially emerged based on the dispute over the legitimate successor to the prophet prior to the tragedy of Ashura in the late 7th century (1963). However it was only in the eight century when a distinctive Imami Shi'i discourse began to emerge (Haider 2011; Newman 2012, 195).

only Shi'as but also Sunnis, especially the more liberal Hanafi School, commemorate the Karbala tragedy. Hindu communities were also involved in the commemoration in rural areas. He has particularly mentioned that some of the Hindu rulers of Gwalior and Jalpur were patrons of Muharram rituals for purposes of encouraging harmony between their Muslim and Hindu subjects (Husnain, 1988: 48). About Muharram in Bombay (Mumbai)[7] a large number of reports published in the Times of India (TOI) remark that not only Sunnis but also Hindus of lower orders participated in the Muharram processions in Mumbai (e.g. see TOI, Dec 14, 1880: 2; also see Kidambi, 2007; and Korom, 2003:142). The Sunni community of Konkonis not only dominated the Muslim community, but also claimed authority over the processions of Mumbai in the 19th century (see Masselos 1982).

The processions during Muharram in Mumbai included *tolis* processions and the *taboot* procession. The procession of *tolis* (or street-bands) took place for three to five nights usually during the 5th -10th of Muharram. Each *moholla* (neighbourhood) had its own band ready to parade through the various quarters of the city and fight with the bands of rival streets. However, the Ashura was mainly observed by the *taboot* procession (also written *tabut*) on the afternoon of Ashura day. The procession was named after the *taboot* (coffin) since the procession is in fact a symbolic funeral and participants carried symbolic coffins of Karbala martyrs throughout the procession. The procession on Ashura day was the greatest festival of Mumbai during the 19th century and Birdwood (1915) described it as the most picturesque event of South Asia during the late 19th century. Influenced by Hindu culture, this symbolic funeral had been directed towards a seafront in Mumbai. An article in the TOI even argues that the *taboot* procession "has been resorted to in India in imitation of the ostentatious processions of Hindus" (TOI, Oct 11, 1855: 6).

07.
Bombay was officially remained Mumbai in 1995

Muharram procession arriving on the shore of the Back Bay at Bombay, a wood engraving by Emile Bayard, 1878. (Ref: www.columbia.edu)

The historical reports during the most of 18th century show that the Muharram commemoration was generally peaceful. Nonetheless the *tolis* and *taboot* processions caused a major disturbance for everyday life of the city. As the processions gradually became more popular and increased in size, a tendency appears in official announcements for regulation of the festival of "half-naked people like tiger, beating drums and tom-tom[8] frightening other citizen fellow" (TOI, Jan 25, 1845: 64). Since the 1870s, the police regulations for Muharram were announced every year and the policing discourse gradually came to dominate the language of newspaper articles. Nonetheless, there are still enough articles or letters that demonstrate that the negative language of the police exaggerated the level of tension and violence during Muharram. For example, an article published in 1879 argued that the *taboot* procession passed peacefully in Mumbai with "smaller number of casualty than happen in London at every Lord Mayor's Show" (TOI, Jan 1879, republished on Jan 6, 1979: 8). As the commemoration during 1870s-80s was relatively free from serious violence, the author of an article who calls the Muharram ritual "the noisiest Indian festival" thankfully mentioned that "happily we are free from the unseemly riot between Hindoos and Mohamedans, which so frequently occur in the Northern districts..."(TOI, Oct 11, 1886: 3). In this period, Europeans were commonly occupied every balcony in Crawford Market, from where they enjoyed picturesque scenes of the procession passing along the Esplanade Cross Road.

The explosive growth of Mumbai during the late 19th century generated a constant change in the socio-religious and political landscape of the city, and tension between different socio-religious groups rose by late 1880s, and 1890s. The relatively peaceful commemoration of Ashura ended with the riot of 1893, a riot between Hindus and Muslims, which sparked during Muharram. The riot was the most serious riot of Mumbai during the 19th century and it has been extensively documented by numerous official reports. The Muharram celebration as an inter-communal festival in Mumbai came to an end with this riot. Edwardes, the Commissioner of Police of Bombay, argued that the riot of 1893 broke out as a result of the Hindu Nationalist movement led by Bal Gangadhar Tilak. Edwardes claimed that the movement was initially anti-British, but Tilak widened his movement against Muslims as well (Edwardes 1923, 104–105). The violence between Muslims and Hindus during the month of Muharram became very frequent after the riot. Therefore colonial authorities imposed tight regulations over Muharram. The 1893 riot did not interrupt the Muharram processions, however the riot caused a shift in the regulations. In 1895, the Commissioner of Police announced: "the license will be granted to Mahomednas [Muslims] only" (TOI, Jun 25, 1895: 3).

Mumbai was like a boiling pot and the different *mohollas*, that signified different ethnic groups, constantly competed with each other; the Muharram processions were an important medium by which the competition was practiced. This competition was particularly manifested by *tolis* processions during the 5th-10th of Muharram, when each *moholla* ran their procession through other localities and and fight with the

08.
A type of local drum.

bands of rival streets; this 'recalls the free-fighting which used once to take place between the various quarters of Gujarat and Kathiawar towns during the Holi festival' (TOI, Feb 17, 1908:6).

The fast-growing Mumbai intensified the negotiation between the ever increasing diverse groups. During the second half of the 1900s, tension gradually developed between some Sunni and Shi'a communities especially in 1908. Governor of Mumbai initiated a conciliation committee that included 50 influential members of Muslim communities; this unique committee was able to control the tension during Muharram in 1909. Despite the successful initiative in 1909, the conciliation committee was not called in following years. Instead, Edwardes, the Commissioner of Police, introduced new borders for the *tolis* processions in 1910, which cause anger and riot. Prior to the Muharram of 1912, Edwardes introduced yet another regulation. This regulation stipulated that the number of persons accompanying a procession should not exceed 30, all *tolis* processions were totally prohibited, and "the lifting and circulation of *tabuts* and *tazias* on tenth night shall be strictly confined to the limits of the respective *moholla*s in which each *tabut* or *tazia* is standing" (TOI, Oct 23, 1911:7).

The police regulations particularly targeted the processions as the source of violence, as Edwardes argued in a lecture: "There is no question of religion or religious fervor here. The *tolis* are irreligious rascality let loose for five days and nights, to play intolerable mischief in the streets and terrorise the peaceful house-holder" (TOI, Mar 10, 1911: 6). The day after the Ashura of 1912, a short report in Times of India narrates that, 'Friday was the last day of the Mohurram festival and it passed off in Bombay without any hitch whatsoever. No *tabut* procession took place, as there was no *tabut* to be taken out so far as the Mahomedan [Muslims] localities of native town were concerned' (TOI, Dec 21, 1912: 9). The reports published in Times of India in years after1912 indicate that the regulation (1912) indirectly stopped the procession; the reports show that the commemoration was limited to the religious service session in Shi'a-Muslim locations. Although the Muharram procession is still known as a Muslims ritual (both Shi'a and Sunni) in India, the procession was later revived in Mumbai as a Shi'i ritual (for more see Masoudi Nejad 2012). Dharavi, however, is an exceptional area in Mumbai, where the procession of Ashura day is dominated by Sunnis.

The riot of 1893 signifies not only a milestone in the history of the Muharram festival in Mumbai, but also the establishment of the Ganpati festival. Edwardes has explained:

09.
Bal Gangadhar Tilak, born 1856, was an Indian nationalist, journalist, teacher, social reformer, lawyer and an independence activist. He was the first popular leader of the Indian Independence Movement.

> *'The Hindu-Muhammadan [Muslims] riots of 1893 were directly responsible for the establishment in Western India of the annual public celebrations in honour of the Hindu god Ganpati, which subsequently developed into one of the chief features of the anti-British revolutionary movement in India. The riots left behind them a bitter legacy of sectarian rancour, which Bal Gangadhar Tilak[9] utilized for broadening his new anti-British movement, by enlisting in its support the ancient Hindu antagonism to Islam'* (Edwardes 1923, 104)*.*

Ganesh or Ganpati is the elephant-headed deity, who is known as the remover of obstacles and the god of auspiciousness. Ganesh was established literarily and iconographically by the fifth century and has been celebrated for centuries in India (Courtright 2005).[10] Ganesh has been celebrated in a ten-day festival in which temporary images of Ganesh are worshiped in home shrines (Zelliot and Feldhaus 2005, 5699). As Hansen (2001, 29) notes, the celebration had become a family-based festival among higher castes during the 19th century; the celebration concluded with the immersion of a small Ganesh idol in the nearby river. The modern history of the Ganpati festival, however, dates back to 1893, when Tilak gave the festival a distinctly political face. Tilak differed from other nationalist leaders in two ways: 'one was his use of Hindu religious symbols as expressions of Indian nationalism, and the other was his acceptance of violence as a legitimate political tool sanctioned by the Hindu tradition' (Embree 2005, 9198). The riot of 1893 provided the immediate cause for the reshaping of the domestic festival of Ganesh into a public manifestation of Hindu culture and the Hindu community (Krishnaswamy 1966, 214).

There is no doubt that Tilak re-invented the Ganpati celebration based on the Muharram festival, which had been the greatest festival of Mumbai. Tilak made the Ganpati festival a largely public affair, making the festival a community-based enterprise. While the immersion of Ganesh used to take place throughout the ten-day festival period, Tilak began having all the immersions take place on the 10th and final day. Moreover, each *mohallah* (neighbourhood) arranged the procession together, practising social solidarity among the community, as Muharram was/is organised.

As Edwardes observed, Tilak's objective was to make the procession, in which the god is borne to his final resting-place in the water, as offensive as possible to Muslims by closely imitating the Muharram procession, in which the *ta'zyehs* and *tabuts* are immersed in the sea. Edwardes explained:

> 'Tilak and his party inaugurated a Sarvajanik Ganpati or public Ganpati celebration, providing for the worship of the god in places accessible to the public [...], and arranging that the images of Ganpati should have their males or groups of attendants, like the Musalman [Muslims] tolis attending upon the tabuts'(Edwardes 1923, 104–105).

It is not a coincidence that Tilak initiated the modern Ganpati after the 1893 riot. Muharram was always an opportunity to challenge the British authority. The Hindus participated in Muharram, but they had not been influential enough to make the ritual their own annual Hindu anti-colonial demonstration. Therefore by reinventing the Ganpati festival, Tilak gave the Hindu community their own public ritual with which to challenge both the British authority and Muslim community[11] (also see Barnouw 1954:81). As Muralidharan explains, the anti-Muslim sentiment was especially obvious in the lyric of songs sung during the celebration (1994:13).

The Muharram ritual was developed in the Middle East, signifying the Shi'a-Sunni division; the ritual was then transmuted and Indianised on

10.
Also see Courtright (1977).

11.
The Muslim community is a minority group who represented the Islamic Mogul Empire that ruled India for a century before the British colonial power.

the subcontinent, where it is practised as an inter-communal festival intended to maintain a communal harmony between Hindus and Muslims (both Shi'as and Sunnis). However, the 19th century nationalist movement was aimed at delineating social and religious groups. Tilak reinvented the Ganpati celebration and innovatively created a public arena to mobilise Hindus against others. However, such an enterprise has ironically kept references to the Muharram ritual in its DNA, as it is based on the Indian-Muharram ritual. The two communities manifest and celebrate different myths through a community-based procession towards the sea where symbols are immersed. Nevertheless, the immersion has different meanings; it signifies the perpetual status of the martyrs of Karbala, and Hindus conceive it as rebirth of Ganesh.

The riot of 1992 and its aftermath in Dharavi

In 1992, the far right Hindu group demolished the Babri Masjid, built in 1528, in the northeast of India. In fact, there was a long-lasting dispute between Hindus and Muslims over the site of Babri Masjid (see Van deer Veer 1994, 2–11). The demolition of mosque described as the martyrdom of the mosque by many Muslims; and it sparked angry Muslims to take to the streets all over India in December 1992. One of the most violent confrontations between protestors, police, and Hindus took place in Mumbai and lasted for a couple of months. Within a few days some 200 people, mostly Muslims, were killed and hundreds wounded. During January 1993, Hindu gangs were systematically targeting, looting, and burning Muslim shops, houses and businesses. Shortly, the official death toll exceeded 800, forcing more than 150,000 (mostly Muslims) out of the city. Police forces have been blamed for supporting the violence against Muslims or ignoring it. In response, Muslim gangs affiliated with criminal networks in Mumbai arranged a series of bomb blasts across the city in a single day, targeting bus stations and the city's stock exchange (see Hansen 2001, 121–126). This period left a bitter memory that has changed the relationship between the two communities. When the riot smoke was gone, people were in shock at the level of brutality during this period. As Hansen explained, usually lower classes had been affected by previous riots; however the riot of 1992 severely affected middle classes as well.

   People, including Bhau, blame politicians for escalating hatred among communities. Thackeray, the leader of Shiv Sena party, has been particularly blamed for the brutal riot in Mumbai. Bhau explained that people were shocked when the riot had passed, asking why they should hate each other and burn down the houses and shops of others. He added: 'After the incident of Babri Masjid [...] everybody was coerced, Muslims were coerced, Hindus were coerced, [...] but we managed to create a peace' (interviewed April 2010 in Mumbai, Dharavi). During the interview, Bhau harshly criticised elites and argued that the only ones who could solve the problem were the people of Dharavi. He said: 'we managed to create a peace [in Dharavi]. [...] we never called any elite or secular person; we did it in very different manners'. Bhua added:

"We had to discuss it among ourselves [...] outsiders cannot solve the problem; we are the people who created the problem, let us solve the problem [...] within one year we had a fantastic result... We are not simply giving lectures, seminar[s], we do not believe in that [...] [the] elite class enjoy[s] the problem[s] of poor people [paraphrased]. [...] They enjoy it [at] our cost. They are not worried about our problems, they don't want to solve the problem; in fact they want these problems, then they can have another 10 seminars, so they can fly all over the world. I am very proud of my people. [...] So after one year we celebrated [the concilia-tion] together [...] with no seminar, nothing, no intellectual[s], no secular [people]. I did not allow any secular [people] to come to Dharavi. I said he's [the secular person] the most dangerous person for the community" (Interviewed, April 2010, Dharavi, Mumbai).

In the committee, they were committed to creating a peace in Dharavi by all means and with the resources that they had. He explained that one of the initiatives was to carry out the Muharram and Ganpati procession throughout the very same route. Knowing that tension always sparks when a Muslim procession passes a temple, or a Hindu procession passes a mosque, I was astonished to hear what Bhau had said and asked: *Same?* 'Same, and we insisted that' he replied. Bhau explained that some people suggested changing the routes of the processions in Dharavi, but he said:

"We [had to] learn how to cope [with] each other, changing the route will not solve the problem; let us do the same thing. [If] You are changing the route, you are running away from the problem [...] at the time of namaz [Muslims' prayer], Hindus are not allowed to play music; they have to pass [mosques] silently. This is mutual understanding [...] we should con-tinue this. That means we are not afraid of facing [the] problem, let us face the problem and let us try to find some solutions which will create a communal harmony and brotherhood among the community. If we shift the problem to somewhere else the same thing will continue. When you will [have] communal harmony and brotherhood then? (Interviewed, April 2010, Dharavi, Mumbai)

I interviewed Bhau in April, the hottest time in Mumbai, so he was not able to show me the procession route. He introduced me then to Moham-mad Ayoub Sheilh, a 39-year old Muslim, who gave me a ride throughout the route, showing me the Hindu temples and mosques that both proces-sions pass and that symbolically link the two communities (figure 2)[12]. The procession route ends at Mahim Bay, a place that is equally impor-tant for both Muslim and Hindu communities. The bay is where Muslims immerse their *ta'zyehs* and Hindus immerse Ganesh every year.

Bhau explained that both the Ganpati and Muharram processions were small events, but they became a major festival after the 1992 incident in Dharavi. Prior to 1992-93, there was only three *ta'zyehs* [in Dharavi], but now there are about 80 or 90 *ta'zyehs*'. He added that while tension still occurs during the processions it is something that can be controlled. Now prize are awarded to those who appropriately carry out their procession and question anyone who may make trouble.

12.
I had attached a GPS device to my camera; the meta-data of the pic-tures that I took throughout cap-tures the route

Religious rituals as a medium for social intimacy

It is a fact that in the riots of 1893 and 1992-93, far right Hindu-political parties legitimised violence against others by reinventing religious rituals based on the modern paradigm of nationalism. As Van deer Veer et al (1999) show, nationalism has been associated with secularism and relegating religion to a purely private realm, however religion and politics are entwined in complex ways in India and other Asian countries. While India has ever been the land of multiculturalism, the nationalist parties aimed at cleansing the country and called for an ethnically and religiously pure nation. India has usually been associated with Gandhi's non-violence notion, though both Tilak and Thackeray[13] have religiously glorified violence. Banerjee (2000) argues that the violence erupted in India not simply because of primordial hatred between different religious groups residing in close proximity, but rather violence tends to occur when social, political and ideological factors are manipulated to construct nationalist identities and movements.

While nationalist parties tried to invent Hindu identity through a process of eliminating others during the last century in India, common

13.
The leader of Shiv
Sena that was be-
hind the 1992 riot
in Mumbai

*Procession route
in Dharavi on a
regular day, 2012
Photo:
Kosta Mathéy*

people in Dharavi reversed the process, astonishingly by intertwining Muharram and Ganpati processions. By doing so, people of Dharavi have challenged the conventional narration that religious rituals always inflame the tension between communities. Dharavi residents initiated an intimacy between communities based on the paradigm of multiculturalism that has a long background in Indian culture. However the Muharram and Ganpati processions would not be entwined without the genealogical link between the two processions. This link was hidden to nationalist leaders who focused on splitting communities and identities; Tilak did not realise that his invented Ganpati procession based on Muharram would serve to link the two processions; a link that the people of Dharavi used a century later to orchestrate the processions along the same route and to create communal harmony. The two processions are organised along the same route, but they run at different times of the year. The processions pass through several religious places associated with both Hindus and Muslims; therefore they link all places as a single socio-cultural infrastructure. Here the route is a spatial medium by which the two processions are entwined and orchestrated as social practice to establish and maintain social intimacy.

The case of Dharavi reveals that it is not religious rituals that create violence, per se. Religious rituals can inflame sectarianism, but they can also be mediators for communal harmony. The rituals are a medium to manifest division as well as intimacy; the question is which one a community is willing to practise.

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