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JOURNALS + DIGITAL PUBLISHING

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Author(s): dan packel

Source: *Gastronomica: The Journal of Food and Culture*, Vol. 11, No. 1 (Spring 2011), pp. 67-70

Published by: [University of California Press](#)

Stable URL: <http://www.jstor.org/stable/10.1525/gfc.2011.11.1.67>

Accessed: 30/03/2011 22:48

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Snacking with the Sons of the Soil

ENTERING THE ANDHERI SPORTS COMPLEX, I tried to push aside my sense of trepidation. The congenial welcome helped: ladies clad in turquoise saris, sporting extensive nose jewelry, bowed behind clasped hands, while gentlemen in white kurta pyjamas, made formal with red embroidery, blew into their horns as I passed by. My appetite urged me along too; I was hungry and eager to sample good Maharashtrian fare. Still, the unsavory reputation of the Maharashtrian Navnirman Sena (MNS), the political party sponsoring this four-day-long food festival, was enough to give me pause.

A frequent presence on the front pages of Mumbai's newspapers, the MNS aims to represent the interests of Marathi speakers—contestants to the title of “original residency” in this surging, polyglot megapolis that is India's New York City and Hollywood rolled into one. More often than not, the MNS earns these column inches for its robust xenophobia, expressed both rhetorically and physically. Party chief Raj Thackeray's stock in trade involves vigorous denunciations of North Indian migrants and Pakistani “sympathizers.” Three years ago, in response to Thackeray's arrest for another spurt of anti-migrant posturing, his goons took to stopping taxis on the roads and assessing their drivers' identities. Those hailing from North India paid a price; many were beaten and even had their vehicles torched. This violence led to at least two deaths.

In the months prior to last April's food festival, Thackeray had urged party workers to pummel migrant slum dwellers who had fashioned illegal plumbing connections. He had also led a campaign against Bollywood superstar Shah Rukh Khan—whose offense was to utter conciliatory remarks toward Pakistani cricketers—by encouraging supporters to deface movie theaters that were screening Khan's latest film, *My Name Is Khan*. An explosion of popular support for Khan (largely expressed by cosmopolitan, liberal-minded elites far removed from Thackeray's base) along with a heavy police presence at theaters allowed the film's release to go forward, but not

before rowdies had smashed windows and torn down posters at a handful of theaters. Consequently, the party's plans for a food festival to celebrate the fiftieth anniversary of Maharashtra's statehood seemed a little out of character.

But digging deeper, it started to make more sense to me. While agitations command notice during a slow news cycle, an important anniversary ensured that plenty of attention would already be coming the party's way. Meanwhile, the Shiv Sena—Mumbai's original Marathi chauvinist party, and

If violence and rhetorical saber rattling constitute one side of the party's strategy for demonstrating its presence, then currying favor by appealing to people's palates is a way to come across a little more gently.

Raj Thackeray's political home before he split with his uncle Bal—was undertaking a massive blood drive to celebrate the milestone. Since the split, Raj and the MNS have been hard at work trying to outdo the Shiv Sena as the true representatives of the “sons of the soil.” This food festival was an opportunity to earn some points in this particular contest, as well as to generate goodwill from the larger community.

Nevertheless, a familiar spirit of injury also underpinned the event. Just as Thackeray argued that Marathis were having their jobs and privileges usurped by new arrivals from elsewhere in India, he was also concerned that their traditional food was losing a similar battle. When I asked



Rita Gupta, vice-president of the party's Women's Wing, about the genesis of the festival, she told me that it came straight from the leader. "Mr. Raj Thackeray had all these ideas in his mind. All these other foods, Kashmiri, Punjabi, Gujarati... they have festivals. Why not Maharashtrian food?"

On this point, finally, Thackeray may have a fair grievance. Mumbai is an excellent restaurant city, offering outstanding North Indian vegetarian fare, meat-intensive Muslim dishes like *biryanis* and kabobs, fine south Indian snacks, and delicious fresh seafood (some of which does bear the stamp of the Konkan region along the state's coast), among other options. But good Maharashtrian food is surprisingly difficult to find. Barring a few exceptions, the only place to taste it is in someone's home.

A food festival was a chance for the MNS to exert a little "soft power." If violence and rhetorical saber rattling constitute one side of the party's strategy for demonstrating its presence, then currying favor by appealing to people's palates is a way to come across a little more gently. "The idea is that Maharashtra has completed fifty years, but people still don't realize what the state offers," said Gupta. My own ignorance and curiosity drew me to the festival.

Once I entered the stadium and passed the welcoming committee, I paused to take stock. Booths offering food were lined up alongside the edge of the cricket field, grouped according to the five regions of the state: Konkan, Western Maharashtra, Khandesh, Vidarbha, and Marathwada. Behind them were panels displaying images of temples,

fortresses, forested hillsides—places of historic, scenic, and religious import, designed to stoke Marathi pride. Other signals reinforced a sense this was an event firmly directed at a select audience. With the exception of a booth representing the English-language *Hindustan Times*, all signage was in Marathi.

That's not to say that my wife and I felt unwelcome on either of the two nights that we showed up at the festival. On our first visit, one stage of our meal was interrupted by a roving hostess bearing a wireless microphone, who asked us (initially in Marathi) what we were eating and whether or not we liked it. This representative of a party that had successfully demanded that mobile phones in Mumbai provide "user busy" messages in Marathi, in addition to English and Hindi, was not at all upset that we responded to the query in Hindi, owing to our ignorance of Marathi.

Glancing around the event, I sensed that the festival was drawing a genteel crowd rather than the lumpen element that heeded Thackeray's incitements to violence. An affable tablemate named Jaywant revealed that his daughter was enrolled in an English-language school. Two nights later a family told us about their recent visit to relatives in London and recommended a local tailor to my wife. It was difficult to imagine any of the attendees on either evening hurling rocks at windows or beating Hindi-speaking migrants with sticks.

No one was above pushing and shoving to get to the food, however. While the first night we attended was quiet (owing to a fast day on which followers of the god



Shiva avoid meat), two nights later the grounds were crowded enough that we had to battle for both food and seating. Clearly there was a constituency intrigued to sample regional specialties. The elbowing was worth it to get my hands on the delicious vegetarian *thalipeeth*, a button-shaped cake made from whole grains mixed with onions, then fried and served with peanut chutney and a chili-studded yogurt. Or small crabs served in a spicy, messy, brown masala sauce—a specialty of the Konkan region that I had not yet encountered in multiple visits to restaurants claiming to serve Konkan fare. Luckily, on both of the hot, muggy nights there was no wait to get a glass of *kairi panna*—a refreshing sweet elixir made from the cooked, spiced pulp of green mangoes—another new discovery.

The food stalls, I later discovered, were staffed primarily by large catering businesses, but there were also some small, family-based outfits, women’s community groups, and a few restaurants, all from Mumbai. My initial assumptions were slightly off. A Marathi home isn’t the only place to get authentic Maharashtrian food in the city; one can also finagle an invitation to a Marathi wedding.

In addition to the Maharashtrian food, the festival featured costumed men and women performing folk dances while drums thumped away. A bullock cart hauled children around. And in a city where film is both an obsession and a crucial part of the local economy, there were Marathi film stars on hand to take the microphone and offer some platitudes. “We have to keep the people entertained very well

Above: MNS chief Raj Thackeray at a press conference in Mumbai, October 31, 2008. Left: Janta Dal activists shout slogans and burn an effigy of Raj Thackeray, November 10, 2009.

ABOVE: PHOTOGRAPH BY INDRANIL MUKHERJEE/AFP/GETTY IMAGES. LEFT: PHOTOGRAPH BY RAHUL IRANI/INDIA TODAY GROUP/GETTY IMAGES.

while they eat,” explained Gupta. Looking around at the contented crowd, it seemed like the party was succeeding.

Just as competition is the sine qua non of the political sphere, this politically motivated festival also needed a contest. According to Gupta, this component, too, was “Raj Sir’s” idea. From each of Mumbai’s thirty-six wards in the Vidhan Sabha, or state legislature, the party had selected one woman to compete for the title of “best cook in the city.” On each night of the festival a heat of housewives, positioned on a dais in the middle of the grounds, toiled away in front of gas stoves, each assembling a signature dish. Restaurateurs and other bigshots were on hand to determine who would advance to the finals at the conclusion of the festival.

Although Gupta invited me to the cooking-competition finals, I got the dates wrong. The food festival was only part of the run-up to Maharashtra Day on May 1, and the MNS had a different program lined up for the eve of the celebration. When I returned to the Sports Complex on April 30, all vestiges of the festival were gone; the finals had taken place the previous day. Party workers had assembled a sprawling stage framed by an elaborate set. Again here were a fortress, a temple, mountains—but the scale and detail dwarfed those from the food festival. A sea of chairs

extended back from the foot of the stage. Although hawkers were moving up and down the aisles, the culinary offerings had severely declined. Instead of chili-driven Kolhapuri mutton *biryani* and piquant prawns masala, the young men proffered stale popcorn and limpid vegetable sandwiches on white bread. It was lousy food for a celebration, but I was hungry. I sat back with a paper sleeve of popcorn.

Since the MNS's founding in 2006, many outside observers have highlighted the fascist tendencies of the organization: the xenophobic ideology, the cultivation of a mob of dissatisfied, economically marginalized "sons of the soil," whipped into a frenzy by the demagogic rantings of a charismatic leader. The party's stage show drove the similarities home. Heavily choreographed traditional dances were punctuated by flash pots shooting fire into the air. Video screens flashed frequent images of the Hindu god Ganesha, whose elephant-trunked visage is especially revered among Maharashtrians. Party leaders led cheers of "Jai Maharashtra" and "Jai Shivaji" from the stage, affirming the state, the people, and Shivaji—the fabled warlord who had chased out the Mughal aggressors in the seventeenth century. After about an hour, I found the program's managed atmosphere of triumphalism and melodrama—coupled with the humidity—tough to take.

Several days after the festival I read an article about the event written by prominent Mumbai food critic Vikram Doctor in the city's *Economic Times*. Doctor begins his story, titled "Food Festivals and Election Feasts," with an anecdote about the "fascist-lite" British National Party. In Britain's recent electoral campaign, image managers for the BNP had evidently stationed a jar of Marmite in the background during a television address by leader Nick Griffin. Brand owner Unilever wasn't pleased; they threatened to sue the BNP, who first denied using the brand, then claimed it was in retaliation for an ad spoof run by Marmite featuring an election campaign between a "Love Party" and a "Hate Party." The staunchly anti-immigrant BNP took exception to the implicit message of the advertisement, and Griffin warned that he would eat a jar of Marmite on live television unless Unilever backed down.

"This interesting new approach to product endorsement might suggest revenue raising opportunities for many marginal parties: 'pay us or we'll use your product!'" wrote Doctor. Owing either to an embrace of subtlety or even a trace of fear, he never explicitly linked the political programs of Maharashtra's two parties, but the allusion is obvious. Yet there is one key difference. While much of Doctor's highbrow readership shares an aversion to the MNS's brand of politics, a mass base ensures that it is more than just a marginal party. The current tally of thirteen seats in the State Assembly gives it a modicum of real clout.

Doctor noted that, unlike the United Kingdom example, the Maharashtrian food festival is "not directly linked to an election, but no one doubts that it's just a congenial way—one of the few congenial ways that the MNS has ever tried—to raise the party's profile before the next round of state elections."

The Friday night party rally I happened upon helped to clarify this point. If this event—with its reserved admission policy, carefully deployed symbols, and overriding air of bombast—seemed designed to stir up the stalwarts, then the food festival was an effort to expand the party's reach. Not toward the entirety of Mumbai's population—the party's explicit Marathi-first sentiments place natural limits on the extent of their appeal. But the MNS was not looking simply to elevate the profile of Maharashtrian cooking; they were aiming to lure in the Marathi middle class, first through the stomach, then through the heart. These people—comfortable enough to be less worried about losing out on jobs and privileges—might, when they next step into the voting booth, instead think back to a delicious (and identity-affirming) dish or two that they enjoyed on an April night. At least that's what Raj Thackeray, Rita Gupta, and the rest of the MNS leadership hope. ◉