

From Distrust to Reconciliation

The Making of the *Ganesh Utsav* in Maharashtra

○ Dinesh Thite

For the last twenty-five years, Imam Moiddin Khan has been the president of the Gurusvarya Jagobadada Vastad Talim Trust – one of Pune's oldest and most respected Ganapati mandals. He became the treasurer of the Trust at the young age of fifteen and he has handled all its economic affairs for the last fifty years, especially after he became its president, by unanimous vote, in 1978. Since then, he has also been responsible for the Trust's celebration of the Ganapati *Mahotsav*, the annual Ganapati festival, including preparations for the *Ganesh Yaag* and the immersion procession of the Ganesh tableau – all strictly per Hindu ritual tradition. While he remains a faithful follower of Islam who offers *namaz* regularly in the Jama Masjid, one of Pune's most important mosques, it is under his presidency that this mandal has received awards for three consecutive years for organising the most disciplined immersion procession in the city. The members of the mandal never misbehave. All religious requirements are met in full. There is no compulsion or coercion while

collecting contributions, as happens in some other mandals where young men employ strong-arm tactics to extract funds from local citizens. Nor does this mandal play the ear-shattering pop music common in several other mandals. During the *Ganesh Yaag*, on the birthday of Ganapati, the mandal arranges food for around fifteen hundred people. Reciprocally, as Imam Khan told us, Hindu members of the mandal organise a celebration to honour Moula Ali Kandhuri every year in the Marathi month of *Aashadh*.

Imam Khan's Muslim neighbours, near his home in Nana Peth, are proud of his being the President of the Gurusvarya Jagobadada Ganapati Mandal. When he was asked whether other Muslims object to his leading the

Ganapati festival celebrations and his enthusiastic participation in Hindu religious rituals, he said he saw no contradiction between being a good Muslim and playing an active role in Ganapati festivities. To prove his point, he tells you that his three daughters and two sons are all married and well settled. Had there been any opposition from his community to his involvement with the festival, it would have been difficult for their family to find grooms for their daughters and brides for their sons. The father-in-law of one of his daughters, Gulab Bhai Ghodewale, even proudly displays the newspaper photograph of Imam Moiddin Khan receiving the best mandal award to fellow villagers in Jejuri. Gulab Bhai himself is an active

sharer in cross-faith festivities – Jejuri is important to Maharashtra Hindus because it houses the temple of Khandoba and, yearly, it is Gulab Bhai's horse that leads the Khandoba procession.

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Iman Moiddin Khan, President of Pune's Gurusvarya Jagobadada Vastad Talim Trust with the mandal's Ganapati idol.

Phule Peth. Everyday, she offers a certain red flower to the Ganapati idol of the Mandal – a flower considered dear to the god. She fasts, along with other Ganapati devotees, on Chaturthi, the fourth day in the Hindu monthly calendar. Nobody in her house or in the locality finds it odd that a Muslim girl has such an attachment to Ganapati. Sabina's brother Sameer is one of the mandal's office bearers. This mandal too has a long history of local Muslim participation; one of its senior-most members is a Muslim, Mannubhai Daudkhane. The mandal also celebrates the Muslim festival: the Ramzan Id. According to its activists, there has never been any communal tension in their locality despite the mixed population of Hindu and Muslim communities. It is the outsiders who create tension, they said.

These two examples of the participation of Pune's Muslims in the famous Ganapati festival are not unique. The festival is celebrated all over Maharashtra for ten days in the months of August-September. Ganapati mandals are groups of local people who organise celebrations in their neighbourhoods with money gathered through local contributions. There are about forty thousand such mandals in Maharashtra, with about four thousand in Pune alone. During the festival, the Ganapati idol is brought in a procession to be established in the mandal's *pandal*. Each *pandal* is elaborately decorated with tableaus. Hundreds and thousands in each neighbourhood witness the daily rituals and cultural programmes organised during the festival. At the end of ten days, the idol is taken out in a procession for immersion in water. Wherever there is a mixed population of Hindus and Muslims, and where Muslims are not a preponderant majority, the participation of Muslims in the Ganapati festivals is fairly common.

But this scenario contrasts with the circumstances in which the Ganapati festival as a public celebration was started a century ago.

Riots and Reactions

It was after the first Hindu-Muslim communal riots in Bombay (now Mumbai) in 1893 that the Ganapati festival as a public festival was started in Pune. These riots were the first of their kind, though clashes between Muslims and Parsis had occurred in 1850 and again in 1874. The riots began in Prabaspattan, in Gujarat, and then spread to Bombay. On 11th August 1893, a major communal riot broke out – the Shiva temple in Hanuman lane was attacked; reprisals followed the next day. Tensions spiraled out of control for the next two days; life and property remained at risk for nearly a week and it took a month for the violence to abate. About seventy-five people were killed and three hundred and fifty were injured; ultimately, around twelve hundred people were arrested. Thousands fled the city. In Pune, these incidents vitiated the atmosphere and led to uneasiness in the relationship between the Hindu and Muslim communities. (Kelkar, 1988 [1923]: 332-339) The riots

caused a strong reaction across the Hindu community and public meetings were called to air the community's concerns. It was during such gatherings that the concept of celebrating the Ganapati festival in a public manner was put forward and finalised, in a deliberate attempt to unite Hindu citizenry.

Celebrating the Ganapati festival as a domestic religious event was a well-established tradition in Maharashtra; its festivities saw great fervour in the days of the Peshwas, the Brahmin Prime Ministers of the Maratha chieftains of old. But it was in 1893 that mass participation became integral to the observances. The nationalist leader Lokmanya Tilak was the one of the leading lights of this novel attempt and, thanks to his intellectual sponsorship, this public festival took root and made deep inroads across Maharashtra.

There are various versions of the beginnings of the Ganapati festival as a public event. According to Wolpert, in the aftermath of the Bombay riots Pune's Hindu population had been urged by its orthodox leaders to boycott the Muslim Moharram festival, which,



Devotees in their thousands converge for the annual Ganapati procession.

until 1893, had been celebrated jointly by adherents of both religions. In 1893, a separate Hindu festival was begun, designed to wean the Hindu lower classes away from festivals honouring a 'foreign' deity by providing them with an equally attractive alternative. Strengthening communal consciousness in this way served to bolster Hindu nationalist aspirations. (Wolpert, 1962: 66) Each September, Hindus now marched in throngs behind giant images of their own god, instead of joining the procession of the Muslims who carried the *tabuts*, the colourful replicas of the Karbala tombs of Mohammed's martyred grandsons. (Wolpert, 1962: 66-68)

It may appear that the Ganapati festival was propagated with the sole purpose of developing a deterrent to the Muslims, but, in fact, the festival has played many roles, becoming a platform for various social, cultural, religious and political developments. Raising the occasion to a public event bridged the increasing gap between Brahmins and non-Brahmins. Tilak is said to have devised this plan with an eye to organising the Hindu community and developing a grass-roots level integration. As Courtright says, "The levels of energy released so destructively during the riots over cow protection did not go unnoticed by Tilak. For some time he had been searching for a way to bridge the gap between the Brahmins and non-Brahmins and find an appropriate context in which to build a new grassroots unity between them.

Tilak believed that such a display of unity should be dramatic and take place under the guidance of Brahmins as the traditional and natural leaders of society." (Courtright, 2001: 233)

Tilak's Contribution

Wolpert has noted that Annasahib Patwardhan provided the inspiration and Tilak the publicity



Ganapati on his way through the crowds.

which catapulted the Ganapati celebration from a purely private religious function to the most important and best-attended public festival of western India within a few years. While Tilak has been widely credited for starting the public Ganapati festival, there are some conflicting reports about his part in its beginnings. These are available in a book commemorating sixty years of the festival, edited by J. S. Karandikar, and in a biography of Tilak by N. C. Kelkar. Importantly both Karandikar and Kelkar were

devoted to Tilak. In 1893, in the month of *Shrawan* (this month in the Indian calendar precedes the month of *Bhadrapada*, in which the Ganapati festival is celebrated), a meeting of Pune's leading personalities was arranged in the house of Bhau Rangari. It was decided in discussions here that the

Ganapati festival be celebrated as a public event. Accordingly, Bhau Rangari, Ganapatrao Ghotawadekar and Nanasaheb Khasagiwale installed Ganapati idols and took out an immersion procession on the day of *Anantchaturdashi*. Tilak appreciated this idea and wrote an article supporting it. (Karandikar, 1953:3 [part 1]) However, his name is not mentioned among those present in the meeting and it is very clear that Tilak was not one of the festival's founding fathers though he supported it and in 1894 himself installed an idol of Ganapati for the public festival in Winchurkar Wada. (Karandikar, 1953: preface p. 9)

Kelkar has provided a different version in his biography of Tilak, widely considered to be one of the most reliable. According to him, one day, while public opinion about the riots was still being mobilised, notable personalities like Tilak and Namjoshi met in the mansion of Babamaharaj and it was at this meeting that the concept of giving a new twist to the festival was put forward and finalised. Of those present, persons like Ganapatrao Ghotawadekar were staunch *Ganapatya* (belonging to a cult whose revered god is Ganapati) and they had been celebrating this

festival for a long time. Conservatives like Balasaheb Natu were obviously favorable to this idea. Tilak was not one for rituals, but he used to worship the Ganapati idol by bringing it home. These Brahmins were joined enthusiastically by non-Brahmins like Dagadusheth Halawai, Bhorkar Vakil, Bandoba Tarwade, Gawade Patil and Bhausahab Rangari. In the very first year the festival as celebrated served as a model for other celebrants. Next year it grew in scale and fanfare as the number of public Ganapati idols and cultural troupes increased. Meanwhile, the movement to boycott the *tabuts* gained momentum. Thus, the Ganapati festival had the advantage of what Kelkar calls the 'spared festive spirit', meaning that with the withdrawal of the Hindu masses from the observance of Mohurrum, and with no other public festival to engage their energies, their enthusiasm and efforts were 'spared' for the Ganapati festival instead. (Kelkar, 1988 [1923]:420)

Deepening Divides

At one time, about ninety percent of the *tabuts* in Pune were installed by Hindus – a custom that ended with the riots of 1893. Within a year, the number of Muslim *tabuts* in Pune increased from forty to sixty, but those of Hindus were only twenty-five instead of one hundred, as previously. "Although the festival was not started to tease the Muslims, the intention was to unite the Hindu community with respect to the Hindu versus Muslim conflict and to teach the Hindu community how to establish their rights without getting afraid of the Muslims." (Kelkar, 1988 [1923], p 348-351)

It has often been alleged that the Ganapati festival was a Hindu mobilisation attempt against Muslims. Cashman has opined that the 1894 Ganapati festival was promoted as a counterpart to the Moharram procession. By copying certain

aspects of the Moharram procession and by urging Hindus to boycott the Muslim festival, the organisers hoped to wean away those Hindu artisans, musicians and dancers who had freely participated in Moharram in previous years. (Cashman, 1975, 78)

But the relationship between the Hindu and Muslim communities is only one aspect of the many consequences of the Ganapati festival. It also turned out to be useful in countering the political, social and cultural influence of British rule. In fact, mass collective participation was also the saving of the festival, for such participation had already long since dwindled. The Hindu community of the time felt itself to be under attack; the influence of British rule, the recent communal riots and reformist efforts within the community itself were all seen as posing a challenge to the established Hindu way of life. Moderates, with their programmes of reform, were inspired in the main by their British education. However noble their intentions, their attempts were leading to a rejection of the entire Hindu system and, thus, to a crisis of identity among its followers. In such a situation, the Ganapati festival sponsors felt it necessary to project the Hindu community as united and also to assert its way of life. In this regard, the Ganapati festival turned out to be useful. Tilak's role in developing the festival to mobilise people against alien British rule was commented upon. "By encouraging Hindus of all communities to join in a common quasi-political festival, Tilak was challenging the British thesis that Hindu society was divided and that the elite Brahmins were out of step with their society." (Cashman, 1975, 79)

A Unity of Opposition

Interestingly, opposition to the Ganapati festival provided a common agenda to several otherwise antagonistic groups, both Muslim and Hindu. Muslim leaders considered the

Ganapati festival to be an imitation of their Moharram processions, representing a deliberate attempt at organising Hindus against Muslims. In fact, September 1894 saw Pune's first Hindu-Muslim communal riot. But, before this riot, influential Muslims of the city had complained of "inflammatory" Ganapati pamphlets in which Moharram was "ridiculed" and *tabuts* were described in "such offensive and disparaging language" as would only "incite the more inflammable sections of the two communities to breaches of the peace and bloodshed." These petitioners appealed for government censorship of Ganapati songs and the forbiddance of "all mimicry, by the Hindus of Poona, of the rites, usages and observances connected with the Mohurrum." (as quoted in Cashman, 1975, 93) In 1894, some of these leaders petitioned the British government to put an outright ban on the Ganapati festival, calling it "a conspiracy against Muslims". But the British government did not do anything except assure Muslim leaders that it would take every precaution against hurt to their sentiments or harm to their interests. (Gadgil, 1968, 551)

However, the Muslims were not alone in opposing the Ganapati festival. The Hindu orthodoxy feared that such a celebration of a religious festival on the streets, sans prohibitions or traditional restraints, would corrupt religious practice and endanger the Hindu religion. Such an objection was raised in an anonymous letter of 1910 complaining to the British rulers against the festival and demanding that it be banned. The person who wrote the letter evidently feared that the festival endangered the Hindu religion, not to mention the suffering he claims the citizens of Pune were subjected to due to the behaviour of the festival's proponents. The orthodox boycotted the festival, calling it 'a corrupt practice'; the

educated class tried to make a mockery of it. (Gadgil, 1968, p-551-552)

Despite the social and political conditions prevailing at the time and the stiff opposition to the festival by Muslims, reformists, Satyashodhak Samajists and the Brahmin orthodoxy, the promoters of the Ganapati festival nevertheless succeeded in developing a social platform where people belonging to all castes came together to perform a common activity for at least a few days, overcoming the divisions in society. Also, the public Ganapati festival turned out to be a rupture in the Brahminical way of celebrating it. With the festival taking to the streets, anybody belonging to any caste could perform rituals in reverence to Lord Ganapati according to his/her understanding at any public place. This

development took away the religious, social and cultural privilege of celebrating the Ganapati festival and opened worship to everybody. (No wonder orthodox Hindus have been opposing the festival right from its beginning.)

Lessons in Harmony

It may appear, from reports of some communal disturbances, that the Ganapati festival and the activities related to it have been the cause of estrangement between the Hindu and Muslim communities. However, there have also been many contemporary examples of cooperation and reconciliation between the two communities, engendered by some of the festival celebrations. A very important sign



The Ganapati pandal of the Ram-Rahim Mitra Mandal.

of this reconciliation is that many Muslims participate in their neighbourhood Ganapati festival through the Ganapati mandal in their locality. In spite of the fact that the Ganapati festival is a Hindu observance, Hindus rarely seem to mind Muslim participation. Such interactions between the two communities often lead to better communication and social peace. In 1985, when the Ganapati festival and Moharram were celebrated simultaneously, a local news item read, "The Sainath Tarun Mandal in the camp area will celebrate both the festivals in the same *pandal*. The idol of Ganapati and the *tabut* of Moharram will be installed in the same *pandal*. After the *aarti* is performed before

Ganapati, the holy book of the Muslims, that is the Koran, will be read in front of the *tabut*. Common committee has been formed for both the festivals." (Kesari, 11-9-1985, p. 5) There is another such report: "The Sangamwadi Mitra Mandal in Yerwada has installed Ganapati and *tabut* together. The *tabut* of Dadubhai Babanbhai Sheikh is 101 years old." (Kesari, 24-9-1985, p. 1)

In 2003, the Krantiratra Chandreshkar Aazad Mandal of Kasaba Peth, Pune presented the scene of '*Katha Ganarayachya Aartichi*' (the story of the *aarti* of Ganapati). The Ganapati *aarti* was composed by the 17th century poet-saint, Ramdas, spiritual guide to the warrior-king Shivaji and one of the early mobilisers of Marathi-speaking Hindus against Muslim rule. However, the modern scene, depicting the circumstances of the Ramdas composition, was created by a Muslim – Imtiyaz Sheikh –

who has been decorating Ganapati mandals for the last thirty-five years. The members of the mandal are proud of his contribution and have acknowledged him as the artist on the handbill explaining the decoration.

Childhood Bonds

The co-participation of the Hindu and Muslim communities in the Ganapati festival is institutionalised in two mandals, both named Ram-Rahim Mandal. The Ram-Rahim Mandal of 164, Ghorpade Peth, Pune, was established twenty-five years ago and had both Hindu and Muslim members, including advocate Mohan Wadekar (currently the President of the city unit of the Republican Party of India), and friends Dilip Ruikar, Harun Mujawar,

Jayant Deshpande and Shamim Sheikh. 164, Ghorpade Peth is a large property with over a hundred and twenty-five families residing in it, once including both Hindus and Muslims in equal numbers. In common practice, groups of boys in a locality, who play together as children, form a Ganapati mandal when they reach their adolescence. The custom was followed here as well, with the results outlined in the following newspaper report: "The local Muslims have taken up all the responsibility for the Ganapati festival to be celebrated by the Ram-Rahim Mitra mandal in Ghorpade Peth. The president and all other office bearers of the mandal are Muslims. An activist of the mandal, Vilas Kulange says that the Muslims took the decision to celebrate 'Ganeshotsava of Hindus' so that the cordial relationship between the Hindu and Muslim communities will be maintained forever. He said that the young boys would also be participating in the Ganapati festival." (*Kesari*, 3-9-1997, p. 5)

When I visited the mandal in September 2003, however, I found that the Ram-Rahim Mandal in Ghorpade Peth had lost its dynamism. Many of the Hindus who lived in the locality moved to other areas – either to flats or to slums depending on their fortunes. Hence, the proportion of the Hindus was reduced to twenty-five per cent, of which, it is said, only five percent are economically well-off. The Hindus, having become the minority community, prefer to keep a low profile. While there is no enmity towards their Muslim neighbours, the Hindus feel alienated. On the other hand, it is claimed that the Muslims have grown more assertive, after their numbers have increased. A community hall in the locality, once used by all, has slowly been taken over by the Muslims. The Ganapati mandal now helps in the

Ramazan Id celebration, though not everyone participates, I was informed.

Affirming Togetherness

The Ram-Rahim Ganapati Mandal, established to express harmony between two communities, had its rise and fall based on the Hindu-Muslim demographic balance in the neighbourhood. But that is not the end of such endeavours. One Ram-Rahim Ganapati mandal may have withered over the last decade, but another was established and has been celebrating the festival enthusiastically during the same period. Importantly, this mandal, the Ram-Rahim Mitra Mandal, was established after the demolition of the Babri mosque and the subsequent Bombay riots of 1992-93. (The Hindu-Muslim communal strife in Bombay in 1992-93 marked, in a sense, a century of riots.) The demise of one Ram-Rahim Mandal and the emergence of another helps in understanding the social dynamics behind the co-participation of both Hindu and Muslim communities in the Ganapati festival and how the celebrations work as a platform of reconciliation.

The members of the Ram-Rahim Mitra Mandal live in the ninth and tenth rows of Patil Estate, a huge slum in Shivajinagar, on the Mumbai-Pune highway. In rows nine and ten, Muslims constitute about eighty per cent of the population, the rest being composed of Hindus (Marathas and Dalits), Christians and Sikhs. The Ram-Rahim Mitra Mandal has twenty-five members of which about fifteen are Muslim. However, the treasurer of the mandal, Sandeep Gole, claims that their group represents more than Hindu-Muslim unity as it also includes Christian and Sikh members. In 2003, the president of the mandal was Bhablu Sarjeet (a Sikh), the working

president Asif Sheikh and the secretary Fakir Mohammed Kabir. Muslim members of the mandal participate in all its religious activities. They freely touch the Ganapati idol. The chief of celebrations is Said Bohri. He sponsors the Ganapati idol, every year and also performs the religious rituals for the Ganapati idol.

In spite of financial constraints, the Ram-Rahim Mitra Mandal tries to celebrate the Ganapati festival with as much fervour as possible. Other than the Ganapati festival the mandal also celebrates Republic Day, Independence Day and Ramazan. At last year's Ganapati celebration, very simple decoration was used on the *pandal*, and slogans were written inside expressing their shared grief with all those affected by the Mumbai bomb blasts of the previous month. The mandal had followed all the instructions in the model code of conduct prepared by the police and had also obtained all relevant permissions from government agencies. There was no loudspeaker, thus avoiding noise pollution. A saffron flag was fluttering on the *pandal*.

Beyond Discord

It is the characteristically accommodating nature of the Ganapati festival that has paved the way for the participation in it of people belonging to non-Hindu communities. Some examples relating to the Muslim community have been noted, but there is no dearth of such examples regarding Christians as well. The Ganapati festival is not a communal and exclusive festival – its open, liberal character has made all the difference and hence there is little Hindu opposition to Muslim participation in the festival of their god. Anyone who wants to participate in the festival has access to the platform of the Ganapati mandal in his locality and the only condition for



Streets overflow on the day of the immersion.

joining a mandal is that one has to be a resident of the locality and be acquainted with other members of the mandal. Hence, anywhere there is a mixed Hindu-Muslim population is likely to be a neighbourhood where Muslims participate in the Ganapati festival.

Mandals create circumstances where members communicate with each other and develop an understanding. Such social communication helps in times of crisis. It has been a common experience that whenever there is a problem or a crisis, like a fire, the members of the Ganapati mandal rush to help. Ganapati mandals have become local social institutions.

The participation of Muslims in the festival of a Hindu god and the tolerance of this participation by their Hindu neighbours has a strategic imperative: a deeper interaction

between the two communities reduces the possibility of fierce conflict whenever a communal riot takes place. The arrangement is mutually beneficial. It must be noted, however, that where there is little possibility of conflict and no need for an extra understanding with neighbours, there is no such enthusiastic participation. The rise and fall of the Ram-Rahim Mandal in Ghorpade Peth, with its changing demographic equations, and the establishment of the Ram-Rahim Mitra Mandal in Patil Estate make this strategic participation clear. When the residents of Ghorpade Peth were almost equally divided among Hindu and Muslim communities and both required some kind of social platform for communication, the Ram-Rahim Mandal flourished. But as the balance tilted in favour of Muslims, and Hindus started keeping a low profile, the possibility of conflict waned and the

mandal lost its glory. On the other hand, the Ram-Rahim Mitra Mandal in Patil Estate was established by boys belonging to the Muslim-dominated rows of the slum after the demolition of the Babri mosque and the subsequent riots. This mandal became a means for Muslims in the neighbourhood to send a message of goodwill to the residents of the Hindu-dominated rows of the slum, who have their own Ganapati mandals.

The Ganapati festival does not solve the basic problem of communal strife, yet it certainly helps in reducing tension. Its social utility lies in developing an understanding between Hindu and Muslim communities. Some evidence, perhaps, of its success in this role was observable during the disturbances of 1992-93. Even as North and West India erupted in hate, Pune city managed to remain relatively calm, with almost no violence.

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