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Caste Riots and Working Class Neighbourhoods in Bombay, 1974

The themes of violence, riots and pogroms, especially in the urban industrial context has long attracted scholars' attention. In the Indian context investigation into such themes has been largely dominated by the study of violence between Hindus and Muslims. The city of Mumbai which was a major industrial centre in the country also has a long history of violence. Like most other cities research has been restricted to violence among Hindus and Muslims. However, there remains a major gap in the literature that examines the violence involving Dalits (mainly Neo-Buddhists) and caste Hindus in the working class areas of Mumbai. This paper proposes to fill this gap by examining a rather understudied phenomenon of violence in Mumbai's history which erupted in the early 1970s between Dalits and the high caste Hindus in the working class areas of Worli and Naigaum. Similar to the anti-Muslim communal pogroms in various parts of the country the state and particularly its police machinery remained complicit with the caste Hindus during the 1974 riots. The riots lasted for about 40 days from 5th January to 16th February 1974 and continued to erupt on various occasions thereafter. It is worth mentioning here that the Worli area has historically been a *ballekilla* (stronghold) of Ambedkarite movement and the Dalits in this region have had clashes with the caste Hindus on various occasions.

The 1974 riots took place against the backdrop of the South Bombay bye-elections which the newly formed Dalit Panthers decided to boycott. Various factions of Republican Party of India (RPI) and the Shiv Sena supported the Congress candidate. Since Congress relied heavily on the Dalit votes Panther's growing appeal especially amongst the Dalit youths had become a worrisome situation for the former. The Dalit Panthers emerged in the socio-political context of the early 1970s. After the decline of Communists during the later 1960s in the working class areas in Mumbai, Dalit Panthers emerged as the most militant, aggressive and vocal force in Mumbai. In a very short span of time Dalit Panthers became popular, mostly attracting Dalit youths all over Maharashtra. The arrival of the Dalit Panthers posed a challenge to the various factions of the RPI, the Congress led state and the Shiv Sena. It is against this backdrop this paper addresses the following questions: What were the underlying social, economic and political tensions between the Dalits and the caste Hindus in the working class areas, particularly Worli and Naigaum areas, which resulted in the riots of 1974? What does the 1974 riots tells us about the nature and role of the state in post-colonial India? Are there any similarities between the 1974 riots with the various Hindu-Muslim riots in the city? Does the investigation of 1974 caste riots provide any insights in understanding the violence between Hindus and Muslims? This paper relies on interviews with the residents of Worli and Naigaum area and social and political activists conducted by the author between 2008 and 2009. In addition, newspapers reports, journals published in Marathi language, and the report on the inquiry of these riots will be consulted.