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SUMEET MHASKAR

Indian Muslims in a Global City:  
Socio-Political Effects on Economic  
Preferences in Contemporary Mumbai



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MMG Working Paper 13-04

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## Abstract

This paper examines the effects of socio-political processes on economic preferences in Mumbai by focussing on the case of Muslim ex-millworkers. The argument of this paper is that the feeling of *karahiyat* [Urdu: nausea, disgust, hate, etc.] combined with suspicion, in terms of terrorism and mafia, creates barriers for Muslims' employment and self-employment opportunities. The argument is substantiated by using the survey data of 924 ex-millworkers and in-depth interviews with 80 ex-millworkers collected during 2008-09 and 2010-11. The findings presented in this paper suggest that economic liberalisation in India is not contributing to the dissolution of social institutions such as caste, religion, and gender. This paper concludes that Muslims in contemporary Mumbai face a combination of unfavourable exclusion and unfavourable inclusion.

**Keywords:** Mumbai, Muslims, occupations, exclusion, post-industrial economy

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## 1. Introduction<sup>1</sup>

Muslims the world over have become a subject of great academic and policy interests. Without doubt this interest was generated after the September 11 attacks on the twin towers. In India, home to the third-largest Muslim population in the world,<sup>2</sup> the debates came to the fore mainly after the publication of the Sachar Committee report in 2006 (Sachar 2006). The Sachar Committee was constituted to report on the social, economic and educational condition of Muslims in India. The report noted that compared to other communities, Muslims remain on the margins in terms of their access to education, infrastructure, and credit as well as employment in public and private sectors.<sup>3</sup> Similarly, the study by Thorat and Newman (2010, 23) on the formal urban labour market in India offers evidence of continued discriminatory barriers for highly qualified Muslims (and Dalits).

On the other hand, modernisation theorists argued that India's adoption of liberalisation policies is expected to eliminate discrimination based on caste, religion, and gender because more emphasis will be placed on the 'efficiency and skill' of the worker (Panini 1996, 60). This claim is not new. Modernisation theorists have long argued that industrialisation and urbanisation, and the associated ideas of modernity, such as the rationalities of the state, big businesses, and planned development, will reduce the influence of social institutions such as caste, religion, and language (e.g. Srinivas 1969, 270). While both views discussed above refer to the formal labour market, little is known about the informal economy where most of the Indian work-

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- 1 This paper is based on my doctoral research (Mhaskar 2012). I would like to thank Anthony Heath and Nandini Goptu for their suggestions. This paper has also benefited from discussions at the following conferences and seminars where I have presented an earlier draft of this paper: Department of Society and Globalisation, Roskilde University; CISCA, Aarhus University; Department of Sociology, Harvard University, and South Asia D.Phil Colloquium, University of Oxford. I would also like to thank Subodh More, Prabodhan Pol, Harish Wankhede, Suhas Bhasme, Yashpal Jogdand, Priscilla Solano, Christian Lund, Uwe Skoda, Kenneth Nielsen, Marianne Qvortrup Fibiger, and Nate Roberts for their suggestions on the earlier draft of this paper. Suggestions provided by anonymous referees also helped me to improve this paper in a significant way. All errors are mine.
  - 2 According to the 2001 Census, Muslims, numbering 138 million people, constitute 13.4 per cent of India's population. The 2011 Census is expected to give 'a much higher figure, around 170 million' (Gayer and Jaffrelot 2011, 1).
  - 3 Even in comparison with the Dalits, Muslims were seen as worse off on various fronts (Sachar 2006).

force is located.<sup>4</sup> Moreover, even less is known about the manifold forms of exclusion associated with caste, gender, and religion in the informal economy. Among these social institutions, this paper looks at minority religious identity, with a particular focus on Muslim ex-millworkers and their economic preferences in contemporary Mumbai.

A caveat is necessary here as caste specific variation within the Muslim community<sup>5</sup> has been a subject of intense debate in recent years. Hence, it would have been interesting to analyse, comparatively, occupational choices for Muslim caste groups such as *Ashrafs* (high caste Muslims), *Ajlafs* (backward caste Muslims), and *Arzals* (Muslim ex-untouchables). However, since the majority of my sample consists of *Ashraf* Muslims, it is not possible to do a broader comparison. Nonetheless, this paper hopes to shed light on the general situation of Muslims in India. This may provide leads for future research.

The paper seeks to investigate the following questions: What trends are emerging in terms of the survival and coping strategies employed by Muslim ex-millworkers vis-à-vis non-Muslim ex-millworkers? How are Muslims, as a marginalised community, coping with the challenges posed by changes in the political economy? Broadly speaking, what is happening to religion as a social institution in the context of neo-liberal urban socio-economic transformation and how far are the existing inequalities and hierarchies strengthened? To answer these questions, this paper will rely on qualitative and quantitative data collected between August 2008 and August 2009 and from December 2010 to January 2011. The qualitative data includes 80 in-depth

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4 According to the National Sample Survey of Employment and Unemployment carried out in 2004-05, the Indian workforce consists of about 457 million workers. Of the total workforce, more than 92 per cent work in the informal sector. Breman's (2004) study on the Ahmedabad textile mill closures examines the occupational choices of the ex-millworkers and documents the discrimination faced by Dalit and Muslim ex-millworkers. However, it does not tell us much about the various occupations different caste groups have been engaged in vis-à-vis these two groups.

5 Although Islamic religious scriptures do not recommend any kind of hierarchy based on caste, Indian Muslims follow caste-based divisions similar to Hindus. Indian Muslims can be 'divided into two major ethnic groups: those who claimed to be descendants of Muslim immigrants, Syeds, Sheikhs, Mughals, and Pathans, often collectively known as ashraf ['noble'], and those of indigenous origin whose ancestors had converted to Islam. The latter may be subdivided into three distinct groups: converts from High caste Hindus such as Muslim Rajputs [also belong to the Ashraf group], converts from clean occupational castes such as Julahas and Qassabs [known as Ajlafs ('commoners')], and converts from unclean occupations castes such as Bhangis and Chamars [known as Arzals ('despicable')] (Robinson 1974, 24).



interviews with ex-millworkers in Mumbai who have lost their jobs since the late 1990s; semi-structured interviews with all major trade union leaders and government officials; and informal discussions with political activists, social workers, and various other actors engaged in varied ways with the issues of Mumbai millworkers. In survey data terms, information was collected on 924 ex-millworkers' households who have stayed in Mumbai, and 113 households of ex-millworkers that have migrated back to their villages.

The paper is structured in the following way: In the opening section I explain the central argument of this paper. Following this I outline the case of the city of Mumbai and Muslims with particular reference to the cotton textile industry. After this, I examine Muslim ex-millworkers' occupational choices in relation to non-Muslim ex-millworkers. I argue that the feeling of *karahiya* (Urdu word meaning aversion, nausea, disgust, dislike, disdain, detest, loathing, abhorrence, disagreeableness and hideousness) combined with suspicion, in terms of terrorism and mafia activities, creates barriers for Muslims' employment and self-employment opportunities. I also argue that the rise of Hindu extremist and nativist politics, led by the Shiv Sena<sup>6</sup> and the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP), who have been ruling Mumbai's civic bodies for the last few decades, are further causing vulnerabilities among Muslims.

Finally, I argue that lack of political patronage deters Muslims from engaging in certain kinds of small business. Muslims are thus pushed towards occupations which are both of low social status and provide meagre economic earnings. Thus, as seen through Amartya Sen's (2000, 28-9) concepts, Muslims in Mumbai face unfavourable exclusion and unfavourable inclusion. The former suggests that Muslims 'are being *kept out* (or at least left out)' while the latter indicates that they 'are being included – maybe even forced to be included – on deeply unfavourable terms' (*ibid.*, 28-9, emphasis in the original). The factors influencing Muslims' contemporary situation range from the local to the international. In the conclusion I return to the questions posed in this section.

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6 Shiv Sena literally means the 'Army of Shiva', derived from the name of Shivaji, the legendary warrior king of seventeenth-century western India and founder of the Maratha empire (Katzenstein 1973, 387).

## 2. Muslims and *Karahiyat*: The Argument

I would like start the paper by explaining my central argument. The central argument of this paper is that the feeling of *karahiyat* among non-Muslims has negative implications for Muslims' employment and self-employment opportunities. *Karahiyat* is an Urdu word which has several meanings such as aversion, nausea, disgust, dislike, disdain, detest, loathing, abhorrence, disagreeableness and hideousness. The word *karahiyat* captures wide-ranging emotions which can have negative implications for Muslims' social, political, and economic rights. The feeling of *karahiyat* (nausea and disgust), which Muslims sense in non-Muslims is believed by them to come from non-Muslims' prejudices against their food habits, and most particularly the fact that Muslims consume beef. During my fieldwork, one of my Hindu informants felt extremely uncomfortable when he accompanied me to the Muslim neighbourhoods in Zakeria Bander. He was apprehensive about being offered tea or food by the Muslim ex-millworkers. In fact, the moment he introduced me to the Muslim informants he left the place (see also Contractor 2011, 37).

The consumption of beef by Muslims is one of the important factors that determine the social distancing by non-Muslims. Although in Mumbai the consumption of beef is commonly associated with Muslims, it is also eaten by a section of Dalits. In fact, historically, the consumption of beef, including carrion, has been most closely associated with Dalits, and this continues to be the case in most of India. The importance of beef eating to contemporary Dalit politics is exemplified by the arguments of B. R. Ambedkar (1990, 350), who theorised that once the cow was made a 'sacred' animal by the Brahmins, beef-eating became a sacrilege.<sup>7</sup> Once beef-eating became a matter of sacrilege, the ones who consumed it—politically vanquished Buddhists, according to Ambedkar's argument—were portrayed as 'guilty of sin and [therefore] unfit for association' (ibid., 353). Following Ambedkar, one can argue that those non-Muslims who have *karahiyat* (nausea, disgust) against the beef-eating Muslims do so due to the general environment of contempt against the latter community, which is spread and carried out by the Hindu extremists. Thus, 'a purely secular matter' of beef-eating became 'a matter of religion' (ibid., 350). This has had important political ramifications as protecting the cow became a tool for mobilising Hindus, which was usually directed against Muslims. In fact, cow slaughter also became the pretext for Hindu-Muslim riots (for an historical account, see Pandey

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<sup>7</sup> It is important to note here that, historically speaking, all Hindus, especially Brahmins, once consumed beef (Jha 2002).

1983). Today, cow slaughtering not only a matter of sacrilege, but is also considered illegal in many Indian states.

In addition to food habits, generally speaking Muslims are stereotyped as being 'dirty' and 'abusive' towards their women folk (Khan 2007, 1528). The uncleanness of the areas dominated by Muslims (and Dalits) is itself the result of the inferior municipal services provided to these 'outsider' groups by city government; the chauvinist caste-Hindu Shiv Sena, in alliance with the BJP, has been ruling Mumbai's civic bodies since 1985 and is widely seen to deliberately neglect areas dominated by Muslims and Dalits (see also Contractor 2011, 35-36). This uneven treatment by the state contributes to perpetuating the stereotypes of Muslims as unclean – stereotypes which Muslims themselves explain in terms of *karahiya* (dislike).

Muslim dominated areas are portrayed by non-Muslims as spaces for illegal activities, crime and prostitution. These impressions about Muslims and their neighbourhoods are further reinforced by films and the popular media. Muslims also bear the brunt of India's Partition and their loyalty is always in question. Muslim dominated neighbourhoods are also branded as 'mini Pakistan' (Khan 2007, 1529). As Muslims are pushed into ghettos, particularly since the 1992-93 pogroms (ibid., 1528-29), Hindu extremist propaganda against Muslims exacerbates the feelings of *karahiya* that Muslims perceive on the part of non-Muslims.

International events such as the 9/11 terrorist attack in the US and the propaganda carried out by the western media have resulted in equating terrorism with Islam. This has added fuel to the propaganda carried out by Hindu extremists. All these factors have severe implications for Muslims' economic preferences. The most common response from non-Muslim employers I interviewed as to why Muslims are not hired was that they do not want to get into 'any trouble'. 'Trouble' here refers to fears that Muslim employees might be associated with a terrorist organisation or the mafia. Discrimination faced by Muslims is not restricted to employment. In the matters of housing, Muslims face discrimination across social classes. My own search for an accommodation during the fieldwork in the Lalbaug-Parel area as well as conversations with numerous individuals and friends (Muslims and non-Muslims) revealed these barriers for Muslims in the housing market (Also see Khan 2007, 1528-29). The discussion above suggests that on various fronts, discrimination against Muslims is quite widespread in the city of Mumbai. Having explained my argument I will now outline the transformation of Mumbai into a global city and its changing political economy.

### 3. Transforming Mumbai: From an Industrial to a Global City

The city of Mumbai and its Muslim population provides an interesting site to examine socio-political implications for economic preferences. According to the 2011 census (provisional), Greater Mumbai is the largest metropolis in India with a population of 18.4 million people, with Muslims accounting for around 19 per cent of the city's population. Mumbai, India's commercial and finance capital, and the capital of Maharashtra State, was one of the first Indian cities to undergo the raft of economic, technological and social changes associated with the growth of capitalism. Even today it holds its economic importance. Mumbai accounts for about 40 per cent (USD 15 billion) of the total share of Maharashtra's economy. Greater Mumbai alone contributes about USD 10 billion to the state's economy. The city also contributes around 33 per cent of all-India income tax collections, 60 per cent of all-India customs duty collections, 20 per cent of all-India central excise tax collections, and 40 per cent of the country's foreign trade and significant quantum of corporate taxes (MCGM 2005, n.p.). The textile industry, the backbone of Mumbai's economy, has been a crucial site for understanding the social, political, and economic processes in the city (Chandavarkar 1994; 1998; Wersch 1992; Morris 1965; Adarkar et al. 2004).

The politico-economic developments that have been unfolding in the city over the past two decades will constitute a watershed in the city's history, and inaugurate a new beginning. In the last two decades, Mumbai has experienced industrial decline, similar to other cities in the west (see D'Monte 2002). All the 58 textile mills in *Girangaon*<sup>8</sup> (village of textile mills) have been closed down, retrenching more than 100,000 workers.<sup>9</sup> The closure of textile mills had a direct implication for the industries that were dependent on the textile industry, such as engineering, dyeing and chemicals,

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8 The term Girangaon was coined by Vithal Varerkar in his classic novel *Dhavta Dhota*, written in 1933 in Marathi (Varerkar 1972).

9 Of the 58 textile mills in Mumbai, 32 are privately owned, 25 are owned by the National Textile Corporation, and one by Maharashtra State Textile Corporation. Century Mills was the last one to close down in the year 2006. At present, only two textile mills (Tata Mills and Poddar Mills) owned and managed by the National Textile Corporation (NTC), Government of India, are functioning partially. In these mills the workers are employed (or re-employed after retrenchment) on a contractual basis. On 16 November 2007, *DNA: Daily News and Analysis* reported that the NTC had entered into a joint venture with a private corporation called Pantaloons. However, when this work was about to begin on 21 January 2010, a *Hindustan Times* correspondent reported that the mill was set on fire. This has raised doubts as to whether the state is willing to restart any mill given the massive real estate value of the mill land.

marketing and transport. Furthermore, it also affected small businesses in a significant way. Mumbai has gradually transformed from an industrial economy into a service sector economy.<sup>10</sup> The service sector includes banking, insurance, Business Process Outsourcing (BPO), and Information Technology enabled services. Mumbai has thus witnessed both the creation of new employment opportunities in the service sector (and a growing new middle class), as well as layoffs in the manufacturing sector.

Since the 1990s, changes in India's political economy have also affected Mumbai in a significant way. Mumbai was suddenly expected to adapt itself to the role of the 'world class' city where international businesses could locate themselves and link the Indian economy with the global economy (Weinstein 2008, 33). As a result, the state placed more emphasis on 'environment friendly' industries such as banking, insurance and Information Technology enabled services. Thus, under the pretext of establishing 'environment friendly' industries the state contributed to the dispersal of the manufacturing units from the city. This affected the retrenched textile millworkers in a major way as the service sector economy demanded altogether different skills and knowledge. This economic transformation also affected the textile workers' neighbourhoods, which are undergoing gentrification. In fact, the restructuring of spaces once occupied by the textile industry and working-class neighbourhoods is central to Mumbai's transformation into a 'world class' city. These complex dimensions play a significant role in shaping the socio-political and economic process that led to the textile mills' closure and the subsequent emergence of the post-industrial economy.

In terms of Mumbai's politics, successive events since the early 1990s have contributed to the general climate of suspicion and fear towards Muslims. These include bomb blasts in 1993 after the anti-Muslim pogrom, bomb blasts in two taxis in 2003, the explosion of seven bombs in local trains in 2006, and finally a terrorist attack at the Taj Mahal Hotel in 2008. Extra-local political developments have similarly increased the vulnerability of Muslims. In 1996, the Shiv Sena-BJP led government came to power in Maharashtra against the backdrop of the 1992-93 communal pogroms. At the national level the National Democratic Alliance government, led

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10 The number of establishments in financing, insurance, real estate, and business services increased from 31,501 establishments to 79,255, with employment increasing from 303,557 to 753,624 during the period 1980-1998 (Ghorpade 2005, 44). In terms of its employment share, the service sector contributed 19.6 per cent in 1983, 'which increased to 25 percent in 1993, while the finance share was 7.6 percent in the 1983 and it rose to 11.5 percent in 1993' (Bhowmik and More 2001, 4823).

by the BJP, came to power in 1999. In the adjoining state of Gujarat, the incumbent chief minister Narendra Modi of the BJP rode to power against the backdrop of communal pogroms in both 2002 and 2007. At the international level, the 9/11 attack on the twin towers by Al-Qaeda meant that Islam increasingly came to be equated with terrorism. This is *inter alia* documented in the Sachar Committee report. The report notes how Muslims are being looked upon with a greater degree of suspicion by non-Muslims as well as state institutions (Sachar 2006, 11). This general context of growing anti-Muslim sentiments complicated matters for Muslims, especially with regards to employment and self-employment.

In the last few years, there has been a re-emergence of nativist politics in Mumbai through the Maharashtra Navanirman Sena (MNS). Like the Shiv Sena, the MNS too champions the cause of the 'sons of the soil' and argues for preferential treatment for Marathi speakers in matters of employment and self-employment. While the MNS claims to protect the rights of the 'locals', and as such carried out attacks on north Indian 'outsiders', Muslims are evidently not included in the category 'local'.

#### 4. Muslims and Mumbai's Textile Industry

During the mid-nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, industrialisation took place in the major cities in the Indian subcontinent. Different social groups migrated within the framework of caste, kinship and village connections to work in these cities (for Mumbai, see Chandavarkar 1994). The migration of Muslim labourers, especially the *julaha-ansaris* (Muslim weaver's caste), from North India to the Mumbai textile mills, goes back to the mid-nineteenth century. With the decline of courtly patronage in northern India, particularly in the aftermath of the 1857 revolt, *julaha-ansari* weavers migrated to various parts of the country. A large group came to Mumbai city and were mainly concentrated in areas such as Nagpada, Mominpura, Madanpura and Kamathipura (Hansen 2001, 160; Kulkarni 2004, 120). Their numbers grew rapidly with the construction of railways (Kidambi 2007, 120). *Julaha-ansaris* are *Ajlaf* Muslims.

Social institutions such as caste and religion were reproduced in the cities as a result of the strategies employed by capital for recruitment, labour supply and labour control (Chandavarkar 1994, 10). Caste and religion was also used by the workers to obtain and secure control over scarce jobs. Among various social groups, heredi-



tary weaving castes such as the *julaha-ansari* Muslims were successful in claiming weaving occupations in the textile mills. Also, as Chandavarkar notes, *julaha-ansaris* ‘appropriated important areas of control over their own labour.’ Not only were the *julaha-ansari* weavers in a position to refuse to work in the night shifts; their ‘average earnings were reputed to exceed those of their Hindu counterparts’ (Chandavarkar 1994, 320).

As with most mill workers, a large group of Muslim weavers lived in proximity to their workplace. Although the overall number of Muslims in the textile mill was not very high,<sup>11</sup> they were quite dominant in the weaving section in the mills located in areas of central Mumbai such as Jacob Circle, Madanpura and Byculla (ibid., 226). For instance, in the weaving department of the Indian manufacturing mill, ‘almost everyone was Muslim’ (Newman 1981, 42). In the Hindustan Mills, one of the Maratha caste respondents informed me that the proportion of Muslims was so high that the textile mill almost stopped functioning during *namaz* (prayer) timings. In addition, there were large concentrations of handloom-weaving (later on powerlooms) workshops in the Madanpura region (Kidambi 2007, 33).

Besides *julaha-ansari* weavers, *Ashraf* and *Arzal* Muslims also worked in the textile mills. Although Muslims were dominant in the weaving department, there were textile mills that discriminated against them. As an example, the Century Textile Mills had an unwritten policy of not employing Muslims. In fact, a Dalit ex-millworker respondent from the same mill claimed that the management only dealt with Muslims when they had very little choice. Such was the case with scrap metal collection, an occupation commonly known to be exclusive to Muslims.

Since workers relied on caste, kinship and village networks to obtain and protect their jobs, rivalries over jobs acquired a communal edge. Tellingly, the working-class districts became centres for most of the conflicts or riots that broke out between Hindus and Muslims. The communal riots were, at least in part, triggered by the mill owners’ recruitment of Muslim workers as strike breakers (Bhattacharya 1981). This was the case during the 1928-29 strikes. By employing Muslim workers as strike breakers, employers were able to manipulate the communal factor to bring the strikes to an end. This also helped the employers and the state to keep the working classes fragmented along communal lines.

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11 As per the survey conducted by the Bombay Mill Owners Association (Gokhale 1957, 116) in 1941, of the total workforce Muslim men and women constituted 5 per cent and 1 per cent, respectively.

#### 4.1. *Muslim as 'Neo-untouchables': Expulsion from the Workforce*

In terms of the social composition of the textile workforce, very little information is available after the Bombay Mill Owners' Association (BMOA) 1941 and 1955<sup>12</sup> surveys (Gokhale 1957, 116).<sup>13</sup> To the best of my knowledge, my own survey conducted in 2009 among ex-millworkers is the only other large-sample effort to collect this kind of data. Of course, by this time all the textile mills had closed down. There is a gap of more than six decades, which can only be filled through reliance on other kinds of sources to examine the changes that took place in the social composition of the workforce.

From the 1940s onwards, the textile industry was challenged by technological innovations and competition from other textile sectors. This resulted, in some cases, in a gradual reduction of the workforce in the textile mills (Hansen 2001, 162). For instance, Muslim men and women constituted about 5 and 1 per cent, respectively, of the total textile workforce in the 1941. By 1955, however, the proportion of Muslim men and women had decreased to 3 and 0.6 per cent, respectively (Gokhale 1957, 13). Of the total number of Muslim men, nearly 55 per cent worked in the weaving shed, and they constituted nearly 5 per cent of total workforce in this department (*ibid.*, 84). This decline in the Muslim workers can be attributed to growing anti-Muslim sentiments after the 1946 communal riots. These riots erupted in the background of the sub-continent being partitioned into India and Pakistan<sup>14</sup>. Muslim mill workers were attacked by the Hindus, to which the former retaliated with violence (Prakash 2010, 142).

In 1946, RMMS, known for colluding with the employers, became 'the sole representative of the textile workers, under the Bombay Industrial Relations Act 1946' (Wersch 1992, 66). It is quite possible that the RMMS exploited 'nationalist' feelings amongst non-Muslim workers to get rid of the Muslim workers. In this regard, one

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12 While the survey conducted by Bombay Mill Owners Association in 1940 (Gokhale 1957: 116) collected information on worker's caste same information was not collected in the 1955 survey.

13 Patel's (1963) study on the Ratnagiri labour migrants has *jati* specific information on 500 millworkers. However, it does not tell us much about the social composition of the workforce. The only study that has some information on the social composition of the workforce was conducted by Deshpande in the late 1970s and has a sample of 208 mill workers (cited in Holmstrom 1984, 40-1). Although the study by Deshpande has *jati* and religion specific information, it only provides evidence for two departments, weaving shed (weavers) and spinning (doffer boy).

14 *Times of India*, 4 September 1946.



of my Maratha caste respondents from the Hindustan Mills, where Muslims constituted about 50 per cent of the total workforce till 1979, claimed that RMMS followed a deliberate policy of not recruiting Muslims. As a result, when the Hindustan mills closed down at the beginning of twenty-first century, the proportion of Muslims had dropped to 10 per cent. Furthermore, Muslim mill workers were also Communist sympathisers. Thus, by getting rid of Muslim mill workers, RMMS not only helped the employers to rationalise the workforce, but also contributed to diminishing Communist influence in the population.

As jobs became scarcer, ‘older conflicts and prejudices between the various communities were revived’ (Hansen 2001, 163). Interestingly, the prejudice expressed by high caste Hindus against Dalits, to prevent them from working in the weaving shed (Chandavarkar 1994, 226-7), had been regularly articulated against Muslims since the 1960s.<sup>15</sup> As Hansen (2001, 163) notes:

One of these conflicts [between Hindus and Muslims] had to do with the threading of the large looms in the weaving shed, an operation that was often done by *ansaris* and required that they wet the cotton thread with their mouths. Non-Muslim workers would then regard the cloth as polluted and would refuse to touch.

It is important to note here that, historically, caste Hindus have been ‘less apprehensive of such contact with Muslim weavers’ (Chandavarkar 1994, 227). How did this change come about, and why were Muslims unable to hold on to their jobs in the later period? As a hereditary weaver’s caste, *julaha-ansaris* have successfully bargained for their conditions of work. However, starting in the 1960s, employers were keen on rationalising the workforce. Furthermore, since the 1970s and particularly during the 1982-83 strike, mill owners had begun sub-contracting their work to the powerlooms in Bhiwandi. The arrival of automatic weaving machines in a few textile mills also challenged *julaha-ansaris*’ claim for skilled work. Most importantly, the prevalence of anti-Muslim sentiment after the partition meant that Muslims were the easiest target for the rationalisation of the workforce.

Another crucial factor that contributed to the marginalisation of Muslims was the split in the Communist-led Girni Kamgar Union (Mill Workers’ Union) in the

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15 Caste Hindus, especially the Marathas, objected to the employment of Dalits in the weaving department on the grounds ‘that the yarn sometimes had to be sucked on to the shuttle from bobbins’ (Chandavarkar 1994, 226-7). This issue brought the Communists in conflict with Ambedkar as the latter critiqued the former for not addressing this issue.

late 1960s.<sup>16</sup> This split among the Communists resulted in the fragmentation of the opposition to the RMMS. The Communists were, therefore, unable to stall the expulsion of Muslims. In many cases RMMS officials were also active *Shiv Sainiks* (Shiv Sena Activists) in their neighbourhoods. Even the ones who supported the Communists inside the textile mills were in some cases Shiv Sena supporters.<sup>17</sup> These factors together worked against Muslim mill workers and led to their dismissal. From the mid-1970s onwards, the situation further intensified with the growing influence of the Bharatiya Kamgar Sena (BKS), the Shiv Sena's trade union (Bhowmik 1998, 152; Hansen 2001, 163). The BKS was 'opposed [to] the idea of class conflict and sought to broker the peace between mill owners and workers' (Prakash 2010, 254). As a result, the employers favoured BKS as they could get rid of the militant Communist unions. The Congress-ruled state too supported the Shiv Sena and the BKS as the latter helped in reducing the Communist dominance in the working class districts (Gupta 1982, 82-3).

#### 4.2. *Decline of Muslim Mill workers – Communal Pogroms and Beyond*

While the Shiv Sena began as a nativist political movement and party in the 1960s, arguing for a preferential treatment for the 'sons of the soil' (see Gupta 1982; Katzenstein 1973), it took an explicitly Hindutva turn in 1984 (Hansen 2001, 76). In 1984, active participation of *Shiv Sainiks* was seen in the communal pogroms that took place in the Bhiwandi region (Hansen 2001, 77). Again, *Shiv Sainiks* played a prominent role as perpetrators during the 1992-93 anti-Muslim pogroms in Mumbai, which erupted in the wake of the Babri Masjid demolition by Hindu extremists (ibid., 121-59). During the anti-Muslim pogroms, *Shiv Sainiks* became more aggressive, and on occasion violent, towards the Muslim millworkers. In many factories, members

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16 In the mid-1960s, the Communist Party of India (CPI) underwent a major split, which led to the formation of the Communist Party of India (Marxist) (CPI [M]) (Stern 1965: 72-3). This split resulted in the fragmentation of the Girni Kamgar Union as CPI (M) formed its own union – Lal Bavta Mill Mazdoor Union (LBMMU), and the Lal Nishan Party, a regional communist party, also established its own union, Kapad Kamgar Sanghatana (KKS) (Bhattacharjee 1989: M-71). The newly formed Communist unions competed with the GKU in a process that weakened its opposition to the RMMS (ibid: M-71). In fact, this division of the Left unions also paved the way for the formation of Girni Kamgar Sena (GKS), Shiv Sena's textile union, in the early 1980s.

17 As BKS leader Datta Salve noted: 'We did not like what we saw. The workers were shouting *Lal Baluta Zindabad* (long live the Red Flag) in the factories but were Shiv Sainiks outside' (Gupta 1982, 82).

of the Shiv Sena union threatened Muslim workers, and where the latter protested, physical force was used (Date and Fernandez 1993; Date 1992). Even in the Mazgaon Docks, where the Shiv Sena union was not dominant, workers owing allegiance to the Sena threatened Muslim workers (Date and Fernandez 1993).

Owing to the disturbed circumstances of the city, and the insecurity felt by Muslim workers, they were often unable to report for work for long periods and consequently, in many cases, they faced dismissal. After the 1992-93 pogroms, as Muslim workers began to return for work, the management refused to take them back on the pretext that there would be disturbances again. In many cases Muslims lost their jobs. In the Bombay Dyeing textile mills, a Muslim worker was not allowed to resume his work. At the intervention of Datta Samant's Union, the then Chief Minister of Maharashtra ordered the mill management not to discriminate against Muslims and the worker was re-instated. This was an exceptional case but in many cases Muslims did lose their jobs.

Other factors for the decline of the Muslim workforce include diversification of the Muslim youth to non-textile occupations. During one of the group discussions in the Muslim neighbourhoods of Madanpura, I was told that many of the youngsters received technical training<sup>18</sup> and went into non-textile occupations. Respondents also cited a fear of tuberculosis, to which the textile millworkers were especially vulnerable, among the Muslim youth who preferred other occupations such as taxi driving.

The decline of Muslim millworkers was also reflected in my survey. According to my survey, Muslims constitute 3 per cent of the total workforce. Nearly half of the Muslim men worked in the weaving shed, and nearly 27 per cent worked in the dyeing and processing department. Although Muslims constitute 3 per cent of the workforce, similar to the BMOA 1955 survey (Gokhale 1957, 14) and the 1979 study (Holmstrom 1984, 40-1), this is due to the special effort made by me to include Muslim workers in the sample. In the weaving shed, where the Julaha-Ansari weavers were historically dominant, there was an absolute decline. During my fieldwork in the Muslim neighbourhoods of central Mumbai, I found it extremely difficult to locate ex-millworkers from Muslim community who had lost their jobs since the late 1990s. In most cases, the mill workers I met had lost their jobs during the 1982-83 strike. This suggests that the expulsion of Muslim mill workers took place in a big

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18 The institution they referred to was the M.H. Saboo Siddik College of Engineering, which is located in a Muslim dominated area and is a minority institution that reserves 50 per cent of the seats for Muslims.

way. It is against this backdrop that I now move on to examine the economic preferences of Muslim ex-millworkers in post-industrial Mumbai.

## 5. Muslim Ex-Millworkers in Post-Industrial Mumbai

The post-industrial economy in Mumbai, as mentioned previously, is dominated by the service sector. This transformation of Mumbai from an industrial economy into a service sector economy has posed a challenge for ex-millworkers as the latter requires a workforce with altogether different skills and knowledge. The retrenched mill workers, whether skilled or unskilled, therefore have to rely on the informal sector for their livelihood. The social institutions such as caste and religion add another dimension to individual's occupational chances. I therefore examine the findings from survey data and the narratives of ex-millworkers to see whether being a Muslim minority affected occupational choices.

**Distribution of Ex-Millworkers by Caste, Religion and Post Textile Mill Closure Occupation**<sup>19</sup> (Frequency)

	SE in Traditional Caste Based	SE in Industry, Repair or Pro-	SE in Trade - Daily Products	SE in Fast Food, Tea & Juice	SE in Service	WL in Industry, Repair or Pro-	WL in Cleaning & Manual Work	WL in Security, Courier & Shops	WL in Service	WL in Clerical, Supervision &	Total
High Caste Hindus	1	10	30	6	15	27	23	102	7	2	223
Hindu OBCs	13	24	17	11	10	28	20	91	11	6	231
Dalits	3	-	9	-	2	6	3	23	3	1	50
Muslims	-	10	5	-	2	7	5	6	2	1	38
Miscellaneous	1	3	4	2	1	4	5	14	-	1	35
Total	18	47	65	19	30	72	56	236	23	11	577

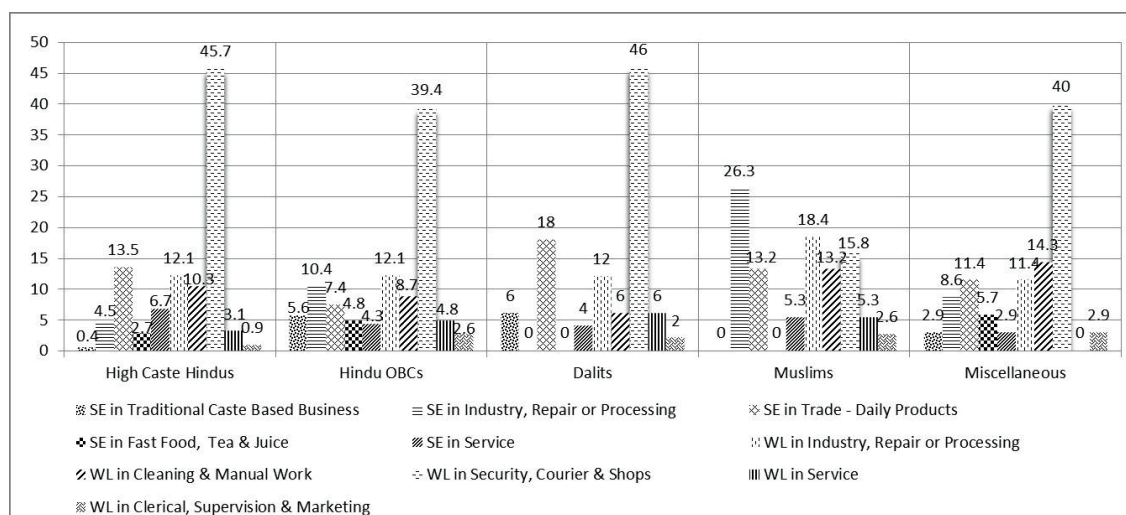
Note: SE = Self-Employed and WL = Wage Labour. While the total survey sample is 924 ex-millworkers, this table includes only those ex-millworkers who were engaged in some economic activity. *Source*: Mumbai Ex- millworkers Survey, Mhaskar 2009.

<sup>19</sup> In the table, 40 ex-millworkers are engaged in two occupations. I have included both the responses, as my sample size gets too small if I remove either of their responses.

### 5.1. Trends in Employment

The survey covered 924 ex-millworkers who lost their jobs and have remained in the city. Of these, 577 (approximately 60 per cent) took up some kind of work after the closure of the mills. About 40 per cent of the ex-millworkers engaged in some economic activity were incorporated in the security, courier and shops occupational category.<sup>20</sup> While non-Muslims are represented in substantial numbers in this particular occupational group, this is not the case with Muslim ex-millworkers. For instance, 45 per cent of the high caste Hindus, 39 per cent of the Other Backward Caste (OBC) Hindus, 46 per cent of Dalits, but merely 15 per cent of Muslims are engaged in this occupational group (See Chart 1). In contrast, approximately 45 per cent of Muslims

**Chart 1: Distribution of Ex-Millworkers by Caste, Religion and Post Textile Mill Closure Occupation, Row Percentages**



Note: SE = Self-Employed and WL = Wage Labour. While the total survey sample is 924 ex-millworkers, this graph is based on the table above, which includes only those ex-millworkers who were engaged in some economic activity. *Source:* Mumbai Ex-millworkers Survey, Mhaskar 2009.

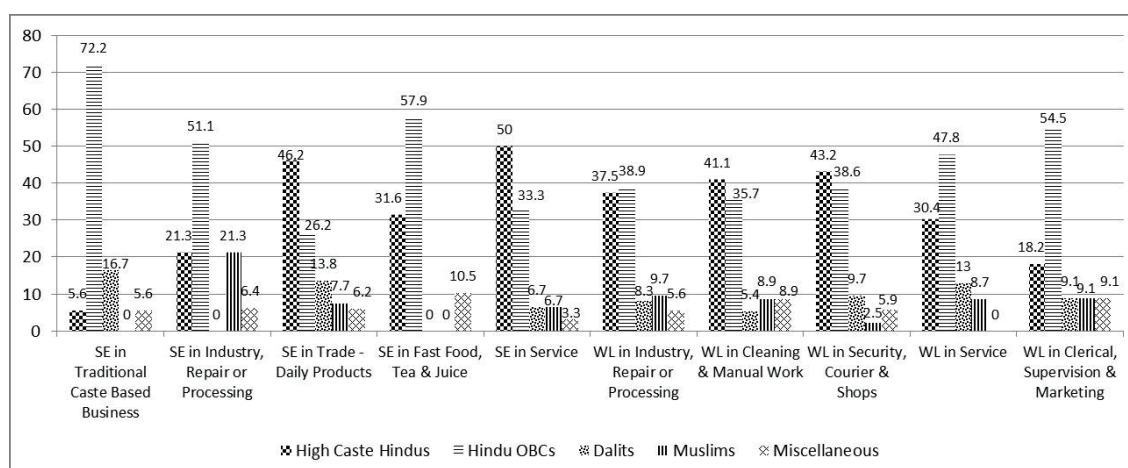
<sup>20</sup> While I have adopted the occupational categorisation according to Patel's (1988) study on Ahmedabad millworkers, which is cited in Breman (2004, 195-200), I have created new occupational groups. I have classified eight occupations as self-employed in traditional caste based businesses. They include leatherwork, carpenter, barber, goldsmith, handloom, washerman, fishing, and religious preachers. Following this I have created a new occupational category: self-employed in fast food, tea and juice, which is included in the trade category in Patel's study. The other two occupational categories that I have created are wage labour in cleaning and manual work, and wage labour in clerical, supervision and marketing.

are located in industry, repair, and processing occupations. This includes wage labour as well as Muslims who are self-employed. The occupations in industry, repair, and processing group includes bicycle, stove and watch repairing, motor mechanics, motor winding, electricians, plumbing, bag frame making, and screen printing. These findings resonate with the macro-level evidence presented in the Sachar Committee report (2006, 99).

A few Muslim ex-millworkers mentioned the possibility of working as security guards. However, the working conditions, especially the 12-hour work shift, deterred them from taking those jobs. Such responses were not uncommon even from non-Muslim ex-millworkers. Muslims are, thus, left with few options but to rely on those employment opportunities in which their community is already dominant or which high caste Hindus would not choose. Tellingly, Muslims did not perceive barriers in occupations which were casual in nature and involved heavy manual work.

These findings resonate with Cholia's (1941) study on the dock labourers in Mumbai. In Cholia's study the majority of Muslim men were employed 'on water or board a vessel', which Hindus did not prefer 'on account of religious susceptibilities'. However, what deterred Hindu respondents most was the 'hard life at sea', where the diet was irregular (ibid., 128). I argue that the feeling of *karahiya* combined with suspicion, in terms of terrorism and mafia activities, towards Muslims places barriers against their employment and self-employment opportunities in India.

**Chart 2: Distribution of Ex-Millworkers by Caste, Religion and Post Textile Mill Closure Occupation, Column Percentages**



Note: SE = Self-Employed and WL = Wage Labour. While the total survey sample is 924 ex-millworkers, this graph is based on the table above, which includes only those ex-millworkers who were engaged in some economic activity. *Source:* Mumbai Ex-millworkers Survey, Mhaskar 2009.



## 5.2. *Trends in Self-Employment*

In the case of self-employment, approximately 31 per cent of the ex-millworkers engaged in some economic activity reported to have been ‘self-employed’ after the closure of textile mills. As previously mentioned, Muslims are mainly engaged in the industry, repair, and processing occupational category. With the decline of textile mill jobs since the 1970s, Muslims diversified to various occupations such as taxi driving or selling daily needs products and plastics items. As the survey data indicates, none of the Muslims (and none of the Dalits) reported to have engaged in fast food businesses. This occupation is dominated by OBC Hindus followed by high caste Hindus. There are at least two explanations for this: the first is the patronising of the business by non-Muslims; the second is access to local political patronage. I argue that Muslims do not engage in the fast food business because of the feeling of *karahiya*t among non-Muslims, which might result in them not frequenting businesses run by Muslims.

*Karahiyat* also prevents Muslims from accessing political patronage, which is necessary for carrying out small business in Mumbai. Most of the fast food businesses (and other hawking businesses) that take place in Mumbai are done without any license from the Municipal Corporation: Since 1978, no new licenses have been issued by the Municipal Corporation (Anjaria 2006, 2140). Consequently, of the total number of street vendors in Mumbai, which amounts to around 200,000, only 14,000 have a proper license to carry out their business (Bhowmik 2001, 9). Having a license was not an issue until 1998 as the Municipal Corporation, under the *pauti* (receipt) system, charged INR 5 to 10 to the non-licensed hawker – a charge for the ‘unauthorised occupation cum refusal removal charges’ (Anjaria 2006, 2140). By paying this daily charge, the hawkers could carry out their business. In 1998, however, the *pauti* system was discontinued due to interventions by the judiciary (*ibid.*, 2141).<sup>21</sup> Since then, non-licensed street vendors, in order to carry out their business, have had to pay rents to one or various authorities (police, municipal officials, local political units, and in some cases, the mafia).

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21 In the mid-1980s the Supreme Court in its judgment on the Delhi hawkers’ case suggested to regulate hawking by creating hawking and non-hawking zones. Until the mid-1990s, however, few efforts were made by the BMC as it continued with the *pauti* system. Later, in 1998, a petition was filed by the Citizens’ Forum for the Protection of Public Spaces (CFPPS) (which later changed its name to CitiSpace) in the Bombay High Court, claiming that the BMC was taking no action on the 1985 Supreme Court ruling. The petitioners cited the *pauti* system as an illegal practise carried out by the BMC, which the High Court ordered to be discontinued (Anjaria 2006, 2141).

Since the Shiv Sena and the BJP have been ruling the civic bodies for the last few decades, it explains why OBC and high caste Hindus are dominant in small businesses. Two of my respondents (Maratha and OBC Hindu) had to face municipal raids while selling fast food items, which resulted in the confiscation of their products. Both of them went to their respective local municipal councillors and explained their situation. In both cases, the local municipal councillor intervened, and afterwards they ceased to have problems when carrying out their business.

Since political patronage is extended to individuals and groups with electoral calculations in mind, it is likely that non-Shiv Sena supporters would find it difficult to carry out such business in a Shiv Sena dominated neighbourhood. Shiv Sena would generally ensure that Muslims are not allowed to carry out any such business undisturbed. But in areas dominated by Muslims the Shiv Sena may extend patronage to its Muslim supporters. This helps explain why, despite Shiv Sena's anti-Muslim image, Muslim vendors in the area of Nehru Nagar in Kurla had little choice but to actively campaign for the Shiv Sena candidates and also participated in their victory processions.

Muslim ex-millworkers, who were engaged in businesses such as waste paper or scrap metal collection, did not face discrimination. A crucial factor here is that these occupations have a lower social status and earnings are meagre. Those engaged in selling vegetables and fruits either carried out the business where they resided or in the areas where they have historically been doing business. In the case of taxi driving, Muslims have been associated with this occupation for a long time and therefore did not perceive discrimination. This is also the case with bicycle repairing, stove repairing and motor mechanic work.

Thus, the picture that emerges from the survey data informs us that, by and large, Muslims are concentrated in the industry, repair, and processing occupations, and are represented in lesser numbers in occupations such as a security guards, courier roles, and shopkeepers. The feeling of *karahiya*t and suspicion towards Muslims reduces their chances of employment by non-Muslims. Lack of political patronage also deters Muslims from engaging in certain kinds of businesses.

### 5.3. *Encountering 'Inclusion' and Exclusion: Qualitative Evidence*

The survey results presented above tell us the occupations in which ex-millworkers ended up. However, they do not elucidate the barriers against employment and self-employment faced by these workers. I examined these barriers through in-depth



interviews. Ex-millworkers from high caste and OBC Hindu backgrounds did not *perceive* discrimination in the labour market on the basis of caste and religion. In the case of Dalits, while they did not perceive discrimination, they remained on the margins in self-employed occupations (Mhaskar 2012). Only Muslim ex-millworkers commented on their experiences of discrimination.

As an example Ahmed,<sup>22</sup> an *Ashraf* Muslim ex-millworker from Uttar Pradesh, did not manage to obtain any job after the closure of the mills. He therefore, with the help of members of his community, drove a taxi for five years. Ahmed then ventured into the *paan*<sup>23</sup> business. He told me that it was not easy to carry out this business as ‘preparing a *paan* also requires lot of skills.’ Ahmed’s community members helped him with learning the skills he needed so that he eventually managed to run the business. Likewise, Habib, also an *Ashraf* Muslim ex-millworker from Uttar Pradesh, worked in Bhiwandi powerlooms for six months, only to return to Mumbai because of the lack of work. In Mumbai, Habib’s relatives helped him to start bag repairing work, trained him in the skills required for that type of work, and also assisted him in obtaining a license to do business. Neither Ahmed nor Habib perceived discrimination when they drove taxis, worked the powerloom, or started the bag repairing business. As mentioned above, these occupations are dominated by Muslims who generally have a good network to support new entrants from their community.

The case of Razak, a *julaha-ansari* ex-millworker from Uttar Pradesh who worked as a taxi driver after the closure of the mills, is very similar. Razak had begun taxi driving during the 1982-83 strike and continued to work on a supplementary basis. Razak did not perceive discrimination while driving the taxi; but he stopped working after he developed a hearing problem. Like Razak, Abdul, another *julaha-ansari* ex-millworker, worked in the Bhiwandi powerlooms after the mill closure. However, Abdul left due to work pressure and low wages. Abdul came to Mumbai to sell undergarments on the street. In carrying out the latter work, Abdul did not perceive discrimination, given that the work has lower social status and earnings are meagre.

Manzar, an *Ashraf* Muslim ex-millworker from Swan Mills, hails from Uttar Pradesh and his appearance – in terms of his dress, *topi* (cap) and beard – are markers of stereotypical perceptions of a Muslim. Whichever non-Muslim employer Manzar went to, he felt *karahiyat* in their behaviour. Eventually, Manzar decided to collect scrap metal and sell plastic items. Here Manzar did not perceive discrimination as

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22 For the purpose of anonymity I have changed the names of all respondents mentioned in this paper.

23 *Paan* is betel leaf that is wrapped with areca nut, lime, spices or sometimes with tobacco.

this work is dominated by Muslims, and because the occupation is perceived as being of low social status and economic returns are meagre.

Another example is that of Rehan, an *Ashraf* Muslim ex-millworker from Uttar Pradesh. Once Rehan's fellow ex-millworker (a Hindu Maharashtrian) informed him about a vacancy in a shop. When Rehan went to the shop he was told that there was no such vacancy. Later Rehan found out – through the same friend – that his Muslim identity had acted as a barrier. Rehan stated he had faced two or three similar experiences. Eventually, Rehan settled for work that was casual in nature and physically demanding.

Usman is a Marathi speaking *Ashraf* Muslim ex-millworker from Satara district in Maharashtra. Usman is one of the youngest (42 years old) ex-millworkers I interviewed, and he has acquired a higher level of education compared to other ex-millworkers. He had obtained a Bachelor's Degree in Economics from D. G. Ruparel College, one of the most reputed colleges in Mumbai University. Despite his qualifications, he was unable to obtain a good job and ultimately decided to take up his father's position in the textile mill. For the first year, after he lost the mill job, he worked as a wireman helper and simultaneously completed a computer hardware course. However, his new qualifications as a hardware technician did not help him find any work. Even when he offered to work for free he did not find any work and was only offered an unskilled job at one of the hardware firms.

While working at the hardware firm, Usman used his spare time to learn more about the technicalities involved in hardware work. Once he was deputed to pick up a computer from a customer's house, which was supposed to be fixed at the workshop. Although he was sent to just carry the computer to the workshop, he casually enquired about the problem and fixed it at the customer's place. After this incident, he was employed as a hardware technician. This job helped Usman to move to different companies that paid better salaries. This narrative suggests that lack of skills is not *the only* criteria by which ex-millworkers were excluded from the service sector economy. Usman's Muslim identity acted as a barrier, at least for a certain period of time, in obtaining a job in the service sector economy.

Some Muslim ex-millworkers have managed to escape discrimination by migrating to countries in the Middle East. In the Middle East, economic returns are respectable and working conditions are 'better' compared to the ones in factories or small workshops. However, this option was not available to most Muslim ex-millworkers. Rehmat mentioned that despite obtaining a passport, he did not manage to migrate because of the initial finances required.

The aforementioned narratives show that prejudice against Muslims, due to feelings of *karahiyat* combined with suspicion in terms of terrorism and mafia activities, create barriers in the employment and self-employment opportunities for Muslims in India. The onslaught of Hindu extremist and nativist forces further complicates the situation for Muslims. International events such as the 9/11 attacks on the twin towers and the subsequent propaganda against Muslims have made the Muslim population in India even more vulnerable. This means that most Muslim ex-millworkers, who ventured out to obtain a job or carry out a business where Muslims were not dominant, did perceive discrimination. And because they were discriminated against, they were pushed to those occupations in which Muslims were already dominant, or to occupations that had a low social status and where earnings were low.

The data presented in this paper tells us that the Muslim community in India as a whole is likely to perceive and experience discrimination. However, what the data does not tell us is the situation of *Ajlaf* and *Arzal* Muslims, who tend to face double discrimination: first, because they are Muslims; and secondly because of their lower caste status (Wankhede 2010, 180). This means that the economic preferences for *Ajlaf* and *Arzal* Muslims might be even more limited due to this double discrimination. Of the two, *Arzal* Muslims may face the most severely limited choices because of their concentration in socially stigmatised occupations such as scavenging and butchering.

## 6. Conclusion

In this paper I have examined the relationship between minority religious identity and economic preferences in the city of Mumbai with a particular focus on Muslims. The findings from the survey data as well as the narratives presented here indicate a trend towards the exclusion of Muslims in matters of employment and self-employment. While non-Muslims are concentrated in substantial numbers in security, courier and shop-keeping occupational categories, the proportion of Muslims in these occupations is comparatively low. Muslims tend to be concentrated in industry, processing and repair occupations. The barriers in the labour market force Muslims to take up those occupations in which Muslims already dominate, or which the high caste Hindus will not take up because they have a perceived low social status and economic earnings are meagre. The other option available for Muslims is to take up heavy manual work where wages are low and the nature of work is casual.

On the basis of the evidence presented above, I have argued that the feeling of *karahiyaat* and suspicion create barriers for Muslims' participation in the economy. The rise of Hindu extremist and nativist forces such as the BJP and Shiv Sena have further increased vulnerability among Muslims. Besides, international events such as 9/11 have added fuel to the propaganda carried out by the Hindu extremists. I, therefore, conclude that Muslims in contemporary Mumbai face a combination of unfavourable exclusion and unfavourable inclusion. As the evidence suggests, one can argue that economic liberalisation in India is not contributing to the dissolution of social institutions. If anything, social institutions may have been strengthened.

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