

*The Quest for Urban Citizenship:
Civic Rights, Public Opinion, and
Colonial Resistance in Early Twentieth-Century
Bombay*

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Although the issue of citizenship has attracted the interest of some political scientists in relation to the problems of contemporary Indian democracy, historians have generally tended to shy away from exploring the concrete demands for civic rights that accompanied, but were by no means identical with, the struggle for national self-determination. Indeed, the dominance of nationalist and nation-oriented frameworks in Indian historical writing has tended to thwart interest in the materialities of local issues directly affecting the livelihoods of people. The astoundingly low profile accorded to what Manuel Castells described more than a quarter of a century ago as ‘the urban question’,¹ is a revealing manifestation of the relative neglect of local and social histories.

Yet, historically, cities and civic rights have been indissociably linked, the dynamic arena of the city providing an amenable social space for the original experiments and practices of modern citizenship. This paper explores the struggle for local rights in the urban colonial setting of early twentieth-century Bombay (1905–25). It focuses on the limited colonial model of citizenship rights, the challenges and civic agitations for their expansion, the ideas and aspirations that fuelled these contestations, and the defensive and contradictory colonial responses to the emergence of a critical urban public sphere. Citizenship will be discussed in the light of the Marshallian framework of civil, political, and social rights, recently revised by Janoski.² In essence, civil citizenship is seen as comprising both prop-

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¹ Manuel Castells, *La question urbaine* (Paris, 1972).

² Thomas Janoski, *Citizenship and Civil Society. A Framework of Rights and Obligations in Liberal, Traditional, and Social Democratic Regimes* (Cambridge, 1998), 28–33; T. H. Marshall, *Citizenship and Social Class* (Cambridge, 1950).

erty rights and expressive and legal rights such as freedom of speech, freedom from assault, and equal treatment under the law; political citizenship is defined as the right to participate in the exercise of political power through the franchise, while social citizenship includes workplace rights as well as entitlements to a modicum of material and social welfare guaranteed by the State.

I. Civic Constraints: Colonial Hegemony and the Exclusive Nature of Urban Citizenship

The colonial state represented a particular form of political authoritarianism. The central state (the 'Government of India') gradually emerged as the primary location of political power which needed to be exercised as much against, as on behalf of, its 'feuding' subjects.³ It was not, however, the sole location. The political transactions involved in the process of delegation of powers to provincial governments meant that they enjoyed a considerable measure of autonomy from the central Government of India. As local states with substantial financial and law-enforcement powers, provincial governments were usually able to choose their own ways and means of achieving common colonial objectives, according to the complex diversities of local conditions.⁴

During the course of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, the combined political impact of the East India Company and of the central and local colonial states led to the emergence of Bombay as a limited urban civil society which was essentially a 'Hegelian' arena of particular needs and self-interest dominated by the exigencies of the *laissez-faire* market economy. The legal rights which the Company progressively granted to particular Gujarati communities to encourage the settlement of the island of Bombay were consistent with colonial commercial objectives: they centred on enabling civil property rights which included the freedoms to trade, to own land and to

³ Sunil Khilnani, *The Idea of India* (London, 1997), 21.

⁴ The Government of Bombay, for instance, also enjoyed direct access to the Secretary of State on all except financial matters. It could thus appeal against virtually any order of the Government of India. Moreover, it possessed a special cadre of the Indian Civil Service and enjoyed full autonomy in making provincial appointments. Ramona C. Lobo, 'The Working of Dyarchy in the Bombay Presidency 1921–1937' (Unpublished Ph.D. thesis, University of Bombay, 1983), 35–6.

build homes within the fort walls guaranteed by military protection, as well as the right to religious practice.⁵

The gradual strengthening of capitalist land rights consolidated the market sphere of urban civil society, which largely prevailed over the political and civil rights of the population. It provided the basis for indigenous class formation in Bombay, resulting in the emergence of the class factions of merchants, landlords, and industrialists by the end of the nineteenth century. Wealth brought a desire to participate in the city's public life, initially as Justices of the Peace alongside non-official European merchants and entrepreneurs.⁶ Indeed, when the colonial state launched local government reforms with the objective of transferring a greater share of the financial burden of providing local civic amenities on to Indian taxpayers, landlords and industrialists secured a dominant presence in the Bombay Municipal Corporation.

The Municipal Acts of 1865, 1872 and 1888 anchored a somewhat restive alliance between the elitist and selective urban development ambitions of the local colonial state (the Government of Bombay) and landlord-millowner class interests. This dualism was expressed in the person of the Municipal Commissioner in whom complete executive power was vested, appointed by the Government of Bombay but theoretically responsible to a Municipal Corporation predominantly made up of Indians. The high property qualification for both membership of the Corporation and for the exercise of the municipal franchise⁷ checked the democratizing potential of the simultaneous introduction of the elective principle. In the municipal chamber, representatives of the dominant class factions strove to ensure that their respective sources of wealth-generation were not adversely affected by municipal taxes and regulations. At the same time, they were continually attempting to shift the burden of raising the revenue required for urban amenities on to small traders and professionals, groups considerably less influential in urban affairs.⁸

⁵ Sharada Dwivedi and Rahul Mehrotra, *Bombay: The Cities Within* (Bombay, 1995), 18; Christine Dobbin, *Urban Leadership in Western India* (Cambridge, 1972), 2.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 24–5.

⁷ This was fixed at Rs 50 per annum paid in house rates or Rs 30 in wheel or general taxes. 'The City of Bombay Municipal Act 1888', 7–8. British Library, India Office Collections.

⁸ A. D. Gordon, *Businessmen and Politics: Rising Nationalism and a Modernising Economy in Bombay 1918–1933* (Delhi, 1978), 119.

Landlords strove to keep property taxes, particularly house rates, to a minimum, while opposing all attempts to regulate building in the city; millowners combined to ensure the lowest possible taxes on industrial property, while merchants were always keen to secure the transfer of as many articles of local consumption as possible from the non-refundable to the refundable town duty. Representatives of the propertied classes, whether Indian or European, would generally unite to oppose the raising of any taxes that affected their interests.⁹ In large measure, they were simply following the lead provided by the Bombay government which had secured a one-fifth rebate on the rateable value of its properties in the Municipal Act of 1888, apparently in appreciation 'for making Bombay the capital of the Presidency'.¹⁰

Urban political rights were thus limited to the dominant class factions and inextricably interwoven with substantial land and property ownership. Moreover, boundaries between the factions of big landlords, large merchants, and textile industrialists were extremely permeable. Dinshaw Petit, who led the large landlord group within the Corporation, also had substantial millowning interests; Manmohandas Ramji, another leading Municipal Councillor, was a major landlord as well as a millowner and cotton merchant; perhaps the most influential elite figure during this period was Ibrahim Rahimtoola, a substantial landlord, industrialist, and member of the Improvement Trust, before being nominated to the Governor's Council and placed in charge of the Bombay government's General Department.¹¹

It was estimated that around 1910, almost half of the land of Bombay was owned by about five hundred landlords, while the greater proportion of the remainder belonged to the Bombay government and its various agencies, to the Municipal Corporation, and to a small number of commercial and industrial enterprises.¹² These interests thus made up the pre-eminent sphere of an urban civil

⁹ For instance, in January 1915, a proposition to raise the water tax on mills from eight to nine annas and on the railways and the Port Trust from six-and-a-half to eight annas was overwhelmingly defeated. *Bombay Chronicle* [hereafter, *BC*], 29 Jan. 1915.

¹⁰ The annual amount to be paid by the Government of Bombay was fixed at four-fifths the amount of property taxes payable by an owner of property of similar rateable value. N. S. Kowshik, 'How the City Gets its Money', in Clifford Manshardt (ed.), *The Bombay Municipality at Work* (Bombay, 1934), 46.

¹¹ Gordon, 77-9, 133-7.

¹² R. P. Masani, *Evolution of Local Self-Government in Bombay* (Bombay, 1929), 364.

society¹³ characterized by the dominance of property entitlements over other civil rights. Indians suffered, for instance, a wide range of racial restrictions in employment and discrimination in the dispensation of justice: assaults by Europeans in public places and particularly on the railways were rarely punished by the courts.¹⁴ The Bombay press indeed often referred to ‘the scandal of European juries’ regularly acquitting ‘white-skinned offenders’ in the city.¹⁵

Indeed, the colonial state faced its strongest early challenge over the civil issue of freedom of the press, largely as a result of the growth of Indian newspapers in the second half of the nineteenth century. This was particularly significant in Bombay city which by 1885 already counted forty-three Indian newspapers.¹⁶ The press essentially served as the organ of the English-educated professional intelligentsia largely excluded from the restrictive political citizenship established by the ‘colonial-indigenous men of property’ municipal alliance. From very early on, many newspapers adopted a bilingual strategy to address their different audiences—the local and central colonial states and the linguistically diverse Indian publics. Bilingual writing endowed the press with a powerful tool. Such expanded linguistic competence provided papers with alternative, culturally evocative ways of expressing the same message to different readership groups while also allowing them to make choices about what to convey in each language.

Newspapers campaigned for an extension of the municipal franchise as well as for greater and more direct Indian representation on both Provincial and Imperial Legislative Councils; they also focused on exposing corruption amongst the dominant *shetia* class, while keeping up attacks on the colonial state on a range of civil rights’ issues.¹⁷ It was the press’s role not merely in interpreting, but in actually constituting the predominant element of an oppositional public discourse, that was perceived as a threat to the narrow class basis of the colonial regime, particularly in cities where educated opinion was concentrated. Even with the limited expansion of educa-

¹³ I accept Thomas Janoski’s definition of civil society as an arena of ‘dynamic public discourse’ between its four ‘interactive components’: the state sphere, the private sphere, the market sphere, and the public sphere. Janoski, *Citizenship*, p. 12.

¹⁴ *Young India*, 23 April 1919.

¹⁵ *New Times*, 2 July 1920; Bombay Native Newspaper Report no. 28, 1920. British Library, India Office Collections.

¹⁶ Dobbin, 196.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 196–9.

tional opportunity, the press was invariably promoting a more critical public opinion and it drew the clampdown of the Press Act of 1910. The Act was a powerful piece of intimidatory legislation in the hands of the colonial state, effectively designed to secure state control over the production and circulation of printed matter within India as well as over the dissemination of literature from abroad. It authorized provincial governments to ban any printed document for a wholly interpretive offence of 'sedition'.¹⁸

In its diversity, the Bombay press was also increasingly highlighting the material consequences, for the urban habitat, of the limited nature of colonial citizenship. While the city's population was rising steadily, housing, particularly for the working classes, remained both inadequate and insanitary; access to water-supply and public transportation was spatially uneven; drainage and sanitation facilities were non-existent in the north of the city. Both the virulence of the plague outbreak of 1896 and the failure of the hastily set up Bombay Improvement Trust to sustainably ameliorate urban conditions by the time of the First World War, revealed the heavy social and environmental costs of the peculiar combination of extreme economic liberalism and political authoritarianism that lay at the heart of the urban colonial order;¹⁹ its hegemony presided over a minimalist conception of local government in which the restricted class location of political citizenship went hand-in-hand with municipal neglect of collective urban amenities.

For a period of 35 years, from 1888 to 1923, there was no democratic advance in terms of the widening of the municipal franchise, in striking contrast to the evolution of local government in Britain, increasingly based on elective public involvement. By 1914, one percent of the urban population only—11,500 citizens—had the right to vote.²⁰ At this time, seventeen landlords, fifteen millowners, seven large merchants, and twelve European businessmen, made up 51 out of the 72 members of the Corporation.²¹ The lack of official initiatives in relation to the development of political participation rights in India was, of course, predicated on the dominant colonial view of

¹⁸ N. G. Barrier, *Banned: Controversial Literature and Political Control in British India 1907–1947* (Missouri 1974), 46–7.

¹⁹ The 'formula' of urban colonial hegemony can be described as the increasing encouragement of commercial and industrial enterprise in return for financial contributions to prestige colonial projects and political (ac)quiescence.

²⁰ *BC*, 25 Jan. 1916.

²¹ Gordon, 132.

the subcontinent as a static and ‘undeveloped’ society characterized by fixed and mutually antagonistic social groupings. This rendered Indians suitable, not for a progressively participatory system of government, but merely for one based on ‘interest’ representation.²² The colonial state, moreover, maintained this perception long after the British state, under pressure from a successive wave of domestic popular movements, had been compelled to concede increasing democratic rights to its citizens.

The colonial model of urban citizenship thus entailed the conferring of certain civil rights while downplaying others, and of political representation and participation rights closely tied to class privilege. Indeed, the emphasis on property and trading rights, supported by the freedoms of movement, residence, and religion, ensured that the individualist economic motives promoted by unregulated market forces would overwhelmingly prevail over the development of public civic consciousness. Ironically, the internal caste and community bases of these economic aspirations objectively supported the limitations of colonial citizenship. While the rules of the market-place ensured inter-community rivalries, the values of caste emphasized communitarian obligations to promote particular group interests, largely impervious to any wider notion of collective urban solidarity.

II. Winds of Change: Geddes, the *Chronicle*, and the Emergence of a New Discourse of Inclusive Citizenship

The impact of the First World War was to rudely shake the existing basis of colonial urban hegemony. In early 1915, Patrick Geddes, the foremost figure of an emerging international town-planning movement, arrived in Bombay with a portable exhibition on ‘Cities and Town Planning’. His attempts to publicize his innovative approach to urban development by touring various European cities with this visual display had been interrupted by the outbreak of war.

Geddes stated that the aim of the Bombay Exhibition was to give prominence to ‘local, regional, and civic contemporary endeavour’ which would in turn be ‘stimulated and encouraged by comparison

²² ‘Being representative . . . was pre-eminently a question of *being typical* of the represented, rather than *acting politically* for or on their behalf’. Farzana Shaikh, *Community and Consensus in Islam. Muslim Representation in Colonial India* (Cambridge 1989), 69.

with the contributions we bring from elsewhere'.²³ He made 'citizenship' the primary theme of the lectures and demonstrations that accompanied the Exhibition held at the Town Hall in the second fortnight of March 1915.

A growing city like Bombay, Geddes stated, required 'the broadest civics' to achieve its great potential. Citizenship was primarily about engagement and participation in the local arena. Water-supply and health were not optional issues, but were at the heart of the well-being of the entire urban population and had to be conceived as universal civic entitlements. Geddes challenged what he defined as the prevailing orthodoxy 'that a city like Bombay must depend upon its millionaires'. The wealth of a city could not be reduced to the money-making pursuits of a small affluent group, but lay 'in its whole body of citizens', whose diverse aspirations, hopes, and capacities provided the vital energies for urban renewal. The harmonious development of a city was the logical outcome of the active endeavours of its citizens. Some ancient Indian temple-cities, such as Conjivaram in south India, 'extraordinary in its beauty, spaciousness, and sanitation', had achieved such a high level of collective civic endeavour. In the contemporary world, he cited the advanced German municipal sense 'which had achieved for Frankfurt and Hamburg such remarkable results'.

Geddes also pointed out that material poverty was an immense obstacle to active citizenship. Not only were the urban working classes excluded from any public civic voice, but their condition also impeded the development of a sense of their own rights and entitlements. In particular, the basic material structure of housing required 'the most urgent consideration'. Like other citizens, workers needed, not 'warehouses'—a reference to existing chawls—but 'decent homes with playgrounds'. Citizenship grew in amenable social spaces, and homes for the city's industrial population needed to be designed as bright and airy cottage-like buildings not exceeding two storeys. Access to cheap public transport was also essential, and he criticized the fact that the majority of mill hands could not afford a ride on the tramway.

Geddes identified a primary cluster of material entitlements which, for the first time, were presented as falling within the scope of the rights of citizenship: decent homes, affordable public transport,

²³ Govt of Bombay, Local Self-Government Proceedings [Progs] 1914, 876. British Library, India Office Collections.

universal access to water-supply, and a comprehensive system of urban sanitation. Such a planned civic infrastructure would give citizens a stake in their immediate local environment which they would, in consequence, be motivated to protect and nurture. The absence of these facilities thus imperilled the entire fabric of urban life. Although Geddes did not directly raise the issue of colonial and municipal responsibilities, the overall sense of his remarks was clear. Urban 'development' could not be the unilateral prerogative of government or of a minority of elite citizens; to be sustainable it required the broader enabling base of mass participation by active citizens.²⁴

Significantly, all the city's major dailies, from the loyalist *Times of India* and the nationalist *Sanj Vartaman*, to Parsi papers such as *Jam-e-Jamshed* and *Bombay Samachar*, extensively reported and commented on the Exhibition and lectures; as did the social reform oriented weeklies, the *Indian Social Reformer* and the *Servant of India*. The press was already criticizing the elitist and authoritarian premises of the Bombay government's proposed Town Planning Act, pointing out that in its existing form it was not 'understandable by the ordinary man' and that no provision had been made for public discussion of envisaged schemes and for suggestions and objections to be taken on board.

As the primary mediating institution of civil society, the newspaper press now diffused a new language for understanding and acting upon the environment of the city, precisely at a time of unprecedented urban blight partially caused by wartime deprivations. The *Bombay Chronicle* accorded Geddes particular attention. The paper assumed the role of an active citizen seeking knowledge about, and answers to, the grave problems of urban life. It did so by drawing on the broad canvas of hitherto marginalized and unrepresented urban aspirations; moreover, like the discursive interventions of social reformers, the public discourse of the *Chronicle* was intentional: it was designed, not only to awaken civil society into a more critical disposition vis-à-vis colonial authority, but to directly engage with the Bombay government itself.

Geddes had emphasized the right to good housing as a basic entitlement. The *Chronicle* now amplified the damaging effects of bad

²⁴ This account of Geddes's lectures at the Bombay Town Hall is taken from the *BC*, 17–31 March and 2–5 April 1915; and from the *Times of India*, 17–31 March and 2–5 April 1915.

housing on civic life. To be a home, the fundamental unit for the creation of any genuine civic disposition, a building had at the very least to be designed to be compatible with parenthood and family life; but the very existence of children appears to have been ‘completely overlooked in the construction of chawls and other forms of housing for the poor’.²⁵ This situation was the ‘inevitable result’ of leaving the provision of public housing ‘almost entirely in the hands of private enterprise’. Rack-renting landlords and speculative builders exacted high rents ‘for the privilege of occupying squalid buildings’. Their greed made them ‘willing to sacrifice the health and welfare’ of their fellow-citizens.²⁶ The unregulated building rights which adhered to land ownership, combined with the political clout of landowners, were playing havoc with the urban environment while inhibiting the growth of civic consciousness.

But this small landlord class was able to ride roughshod over the aspirations of the people of Bombay only because they were permitted to do so by a ‘. . . soulless municipal administration carried on by a civilian nominated by Government and guided by a Corporation which though proud of being a “model institution” of its kind in the country, ironically enough represents only the Government, the landlords, and a handful of plutocrats.’²⁷

It was on this issue, significantly, that the paper received the greatest volume of supportive correspondence, weighing in against a local administration dominated by ‘representatives’ guarding ‘the rights and privileges of those who create . . . slums against those who inhabit them’.²⁸ Indeed, the manifold other problems of everyday urban life—water-supply, public health, the availability and quality of milk, the state of roads, public transport, drainage, and lighting, the lack of civic amenities—conditions that would not be tolerated ‘even in a third-rate city of Europe’, always seemed to lead to the doors of the Municipal Corporation.

The Municipality was thus constantly kept in the spotlight and the *Chronicle* led the nationalist press in repeatedly demanding ‘a radical overhaul of the BMC’s Constitution’ so as to transform it into ‘the thoroughly democratic body that it should be’. Only then could essential services be municipalized. The paper highlighted, as example, the Municipality-run Glasgow tramway which had maintained the

²⁵ *BC*, 6 June 1917; also 10 and 25 May 1923.

²⁶ *BC*, 22 July 1916.

²⁷ *BC*, 23 Oct. 1918.

²⁸ *BC*, 7 Dec. 1914.

universally affordable local tram fare at a half-penny throughout the war years, in contrast to the privately operated Bombay Electric Supply and Tramways Company's constant attempts to raise fares on a much more limited public transit network.²⁹ A February 1919 editorial on the forthcoming municipal elections lambasted the unchanged franchise as 'an absurd anachronism'. 'The people', it went on, 'understand what their rights are. They want to exercise them . . . The fundamental principle of all administration—no taxation without representation—appeals to them and they take their stand upon it'.³⁰ The required expansion of municipal enterprise could be funded by the introduction of local direct taxation based on 'the sound principle of obtaining the largest amount from those most able to pay', a progressive and equitable approach to municipal finance already in operation in some European countries.³¹

The continued primacy of a nominated Municipal Commissioner, 'in sole charge of executive functions' tended 'to produce the apathy that is born of domination on the one side and dependence and deprivation of self-respect on the other'.³² A genuinely representative Municipal Corporation would be able to choose its own executive staff and set its own objectives. It would provide the indispensable institutional framework for 'civic reconstruction' and the emergence of a 'new city', guided by participating citizens amongst whom there was now a 'growing regard for the amenities of life'. Indeed, what were 'politics . . . but civics in their extended application to the country?'³³

Echoing Geddes, the *Chronicle* also called for 'the urgent necessity of a civic survey that would analyse and give intelligent expression to all the influences' necessary for a renovated urbanism. In addition to the satisfaction of everyday needs and the expansion of public rights, it was now also time for a recognition of 'art' and 'everything that beautifies' in the making of a new Bombay. It was particularly important to rediscover the 'infinite potentialities' of Indian arts and crafts and develop an architectural style that would express 'the life and ideals of the city community'. There was an urgent need to break away from 'the superstitions of the various government departments' which, disregarding local architectural sources, and immune to pop-

²⁹ *BC*, 17 June and 2 July 1919.

³⁰ *BC*, 17 Feb. 1919.

³¹ *BC*, 6 Sept. 1917.

³² *BC*, 6 Dec. 1918.

³³ *BC*, 24 Jan. 1922.

ular sentiments, had carried out elitist experiments in 'style' which had produced an 'inarticulate and gloomy' city.³⁴

The *Chronicle's* reading of the new public mood seemed to be confirmed by the unprecedented scale of the general strike of textile workers in January 1919; the culmination of wartime protests against their deteriorating economic condition, this event marked the effective arrival of the urban working class into the public arena. Crowds of workers estimated at around 150,000 controlled the streets in the north of the city for a full twelve days, waving banners, and attempting to influence both employers and public opinion, a situation which the Bombay government described as 'unprecedented in the city'.³⁵ The *Chronicle* interpreted the general strike as an innovative attempt to secure the recognition of entitlements to a living wage and to decent homes, both of which implied the curtailment of the unregulated domination of capital. It looked forward to labour asserting its voice through the formation of trade unions. 'The city', it proclaimed, 'is one; the poor have as much right to it as the rich'.³⁶

Further evidence of the change in public consciousness was furnished by some of the city's women's associations: led by Sarojini Naidu, they now launched a campaign for the right of women to exercise both the municipal and legislative council franchise. Initially, they endeavoured to secure the immediate repeal of section 16 of the 1888 Municipal Act which barred women from serving as Councillors. This right was demanded on the basis that the vital life-giving, nurturing, and 'civilising' responsibilities of Indian society were 'largely in the hands of women'.³⁷ The vote, they insisted, had 'nothing to do with religious and social prescriptions'. It was simply a 'political right' which did not affect 'the laws of Manu or the Koran'.³⁸

The *Chronicle* both led and was an integral part of the growing social awareness of the bilingual urban intelligentsia. This was now marked by the proliferation of voluntary associations and the growth of public interest pressure groups such as the Bombay Tenants Asso-

³⁴ *BC*, 7 and 16 Jan. 1919.

³⁵ Govt of Bombay, Confidential Progs 1919, 32–3. British Library, India Office Collections.

³⁶ *BC*, 6, 11, 16–17 Jan. and 4 Feb. 1919.

³⁷ Letter from the Indian Women's Education Association, *BC*, 25 Feb. 1919.

³⁸ 'Franchise for Indian Women.' Letter from Lady A. Ali Baig, *Young India*, 15 Jan. 1919.

ciation and the Municipal Reform Association. Increasingly, the intelligentsia was becoming drawn to various forms of social work on behalf of the urban poor; significantly, a substantial proportion of these activities was oriented towards labour issues. This was the era that witnessed the birth of organizations such as the Society for the Amelioration of the Working Classes in the Presidency, the Workers' Welfare League, and the Proletariat Welfare Association.³⁹

Perhaps the most active and influential among the new associations was the Social Service League, founded in 1911 to promote educational and welfare activities in the interests of industrial workers, and to act as a forum for 'the discussion of social theories and social problems'. During the latter years of the War, the League began working on an innovative scheme for 'Workmen's Educational Institutes':⁴⁰ A report on the project in July 1918 stated that as a result of wartime changes in the relationship between labour and capital in the West, the 'labour question' had now assumed a new public importance in the city.⁴¹ The Railway strike in late 1917 appeared to confirm this view: while primarily motivated by the deteriorating economic climate, some new ideas 'such as equality with the European employees in the Workshops' now emerged amongst strikers' demands.⁴²

The League asserted that while discourse on labour had hitherto been dominated by public health concerns, the key issues for public consideration were now 'a minimum living wage and the number of working hours'. The 72-hour working week authorized by the Factory Act ensured 'almost universal illiteracy', keeping workers away from education and giving them little opportunity for leisure and recreation. The League also joined the chorus of voices now urging 'the State' to give a strong lead on the issue of working-class housing provision. In January 1917, a paper on 'State Aid for Housing' was presented at a meeting of the Bombay Co-operative Housing Association. The speaker asserted that

... there is now growing agreement on the point that unless Government afforded the necessary aid and facilities, any increase in the supply of

³⁹ Govt of Bombay, Home Dept (Special) File no. 355 (74) 1920: Maharashtra State Archives; Weekly Reports of the Director, Criminal Investigation Department, June–July 1920: National Archives of India [NAI].

⁴⁰ The first of these was opened in Parel in February 1922; Royal (Whitley) Commission on Labour in India 1929–1931, vol. I part I (Evidence), 40–1: British Library, India Office Collections.

⁴¹ *BC*, 25 July 1918.

⁴² Govt of India, Home Political (A) Progs Nov. 1917, 628–38: NAI.

houses for people of small means would be impossible, and that a satisfactory solution to the housing problem would be increasingly difficult. State aid for encouraging the supply of peoples' homes in European countries has now become an established fact.

Apart from direct provision, there were various enabling fiscal policies that the State could adopt. Financial aid in the form of long-term loans at low rates of interest could be provided to municipalities, co-operative societies, and employers; progressive, public land acquisition policies could be initiated involving government or municipal acquisition of suitable building sites, to be sold or let on favourable terms so as to encourage the construction of sanitary dwellings; and fiscal incentives, particularly the removal of workers' dwellings from the tax structure, would greatly assist in reducing working-class rents.⁴³

The Social Service League also organized fortnightly meetings in the city on social issues which rapidly became a recognized forum for the dissemination of new ideas. These deliberations were subsequently published in its journal, the English-language *Social Service Quarterly*. A primary focus of interest was, once again, the performance of the Bombay Municipal Corporation. There were frequent international comparisons outlining 'the variety of social welfare work' which modern European municipalities were undertaking. Following Geddes, the activities of German municipalities, in particular, tended to be highlighted: The major German cities provided their citizens with an impressive range of social amenities including a healthy supply of milk, cheap housing and public transport, as well as reading rooms and municipal employment bureaux. These were funded not only out of local taxes, but from generous annual grants made available by central government. This was contrasted with the extreme parsimony of the colonial state's financial assistance to Indian municipalities.

Indeed, the *Social Service Quarterly* believed it had pinpointed the essential cause of the regressive outlook of the Bombay Municipality when it quoted the reflections of an English observer of German local government; '... The mental horizon of the average English municipal politician, and therefore of the average Indian municipal politician, is still limited to drains, roads, and building operations, whereas nothing human is alien to the German conception of town

⁴³ S. S. Talmaki, 'State Aid for Housing'. Paper presented at a meeting of the Bombay Co-operative Housing Association, January 1917; *BC*, 10 Jan. 1917.

government.' Like the *Chronicle*, the Social Service League looked to the post-war era for a 'prodigious development in local self-government' so as to 'accelerate the widespread growth in India of the civic idea'. This, it emphasized, was now a major responsibility of government and would help promote amongst Indians 'a keener sense of social equity'.⁴⁴

Such invitations to the colonial state to reform *governmental* institutions and expand their welfare activities represented a new departure for social reformers; previously, much of their focus had, with colonial encouragement and approval, been one-sidedly concerned with 'self-improvement' and with securing the reform of indigenous institutions seen as having outlived their usefulness.⁴⁵

Both the propagation of civic ideas and the development of labour-oriented voluntary associations indicated a growth in the public sphere of urban civil society. In the discourse of this critical modernism, labour rights and civic rights were interrelated and constituted the fundamental building blocks of sustainable urban renewal. The new prominence of labour issues also meant an increase in public debates concerning the social class most deprived of rights. In turn, this increased the pressure on the colonial state since these discourses now formulated an unprecedented range of propositions and demands. Essentially, they called for the expansion, but also the recasting, of the framework of rights that lay at the heart of the colonial urban order. For the first time, the issue of social rights was being placed before the colonial state; moreover, this also had implications for the existing balance of political and civil rights. The achievement of social rights in the city (housing, living wages, water-supply) was now premised on the expansion of political rights through the democratization of the Bombay Municipal Corporation on the one hand, but also on the curtailment of civil property rights on the other. An enterprising municipality with progressive trading schemes would protect the public from the glaring inequalities of the market, while planned urban renewal carried out by a democratically-elected Corporation would place limitations on the freedom of private owners and users of land; at the same time, the growth of trade unions would check the absolute rights of industrial capital vis-à-vis labour. Overall, this would, for the first time, add up to

⁴⁴ *Social Service Quarterly*, May 1918; *BC*, 15 May 1918.

⁴⁵ Ellen E. McDonald, 'English Education and Social Reform in Late Nineteenth Century Bombay: A Case Study in the Transmission of a Cultural Ideal', in *Journal of Asian Studies* 25, 3 (May 1966), 466–9.

a substantial challenge to the systematic class bias in the existing framework of colonial citizenship rights.

Thus, by 1919, Bombay had emerged as the centrepiece of public pressure on both the local and central colonial states on the issue of rights. If the colonial administration often seemed to be out of its depth during this period, it was largely because, unlike the historical experience of Western Europe, the clamour for civil, political, and social rights did not occur gradually over the course of three centuries,⁴⁶ but was arriving on its doorstep virtually simultaneously. Now, an expanded public sphere of press, political, and voluntary groups was questioning the hitherto untroubled hegemony of the market sphere of urban civil society, guaranteed by the limited colonial framework of legal rights. In so doing, it was posing a qualitatively novel challenge to the local colonial state: to intervene against the private interests which effectively constituted the social basis of its own hegemony.

III. The Spectre of Civic Democracy: Colonial Ambivalence, Municipal Reform, and Local Politics

Meanwhile, the ending of the war led to a massive extension in the franchise accompanied by a veritable explosion of democratic and social aspirations in Britain itself.⁴⁷ 'Home Rule' pressure from India fed into a wider world of complementary forces, goading the India Office into action.⁴⁸ The achievement of 'responsible' government within the Empire based on 'the gradual development of self-

⁴⁶ One of Marshall's main contentions. T. H. Marshall and Tom Bottomore, *Citizenship and Social Class* (London, 1992), 17.

⁴⁷ The 1918 Representation of the People Act increased the national electorate from 8 to 21.4 million and enfranchised all adult males; the achievement of franchise equality by women, and hence universal adult suffrage, would occur ten years later; similarly, local electorates virtually doubled in 1918. There were also new expectations of government in terms of popular housing provision and social welfare legislation. S. Constantine, M. W. Kirby, and M. B. Rose, *The First World War in British History* (London, 1995), 22, 49, 140.

⁴⁸ Besides its currency in Irish and Indian nationalisms, the slogan of 'Home Rule' was also appropriated by the new London Labour Party, founded in 1915. The LLP's manifesto for the first post-war London County Council elections called for 'Home Rule for London'. James Gillespie, 'Municipalism, Monopoly, and Management: The Demise of "Socialism in One County" 1918-1933' in Andrew Saint (ed.), *Politics and the People of London. The London County Council, 1889-1965* (London 1989), 104.

governing institutions' became the new stated official colonial policy. The Bombay press noted, however, that the Reforms Bill did not embody a Declaration of Rights which effectively meant that the 'fundamentals of citizenship' would continue to be absent 'in the status of Indians'.⁴⁹

Two Government of India wartime Resolutions on local self-government conceded a general growth in Indian civic aspirations, and an increasing urban demand for administrative decentralization as a means of achieving greater municipal efficiency. The GOI acknowledged that the time had come for an expansion in the numbers of elected representatives and an extension of the franchise. However, it refused to concede the principle of wholly elective local bodies while announcing its intention to maintain the institution of a non-elected, government-appointed Municipal Commissioner for large cities—even though local self-government was meant to be a 'transferred' subject under the Reforms scheme.⁵⁰ This was entirely in line with the political contradictions of the Reforms which provided for a limited extension of voting rights *together with* the consolidation of sectional interest representation.⁵¹ Both the strength of local public opinion and the implementation of the Reforms now finally made changes in the Constitution of the Bombay Municipal Corporation inevitable. Workers too were beginning to intervene in the debate over municipal reform. A meeting of mill hands in lower Parel in July 1922 urged the Bombay government to extend the franchise to those paying a monthly rent of five rupees.⁵² Some local nationalists, such as L. R. Tairsee, chairman of the Bombay Provincial Congress Committee, were now advocating universal adult suffrage, as were the *Bombay Chronicle* and the labour-oriented *Hindusthan*.⁵³

Women activists scored a notable victory when, in September 1920, a majority 17–12 vote of the Municipal Standing Committee secured the removal of the bar against women serving as Councillors. The (male) proposers argued that '... in certain aspects of local

⁴⁹ Fortnightly Report, Bombay, first fortnight Dec. 1919: NAI. *BC*, 30 Dec. 1918.

⁵⁰ Govt of Bombay, Local Self-Government Progs 1915, 835–7.

⁵¹ S. Bhattacharya, 'The Colonial State, Capital and Labour: Bombay 1919–1931', in S. Bhattacharya and R. Thapar (eds), *Situating Indian History* (Delhi, 1986), 174.

⁵² *BC*, 20 July 1922.

⁵³ *BC*, 17 Feb. 1922. *Hindusthan*, 15 July 1922; Bombay Native Newspaper Report no. 29, 1922.

self-government they could well draw on the experience of women with advantage.⁵⁴ However, in spite of protests and public meetings, women continued to be denied the franchise for elections to the reformed Legislative Councils.⁵⁵ In other respects, moreover, the process of securing municipal reform proved to be painfully slow. Disregarding the press's warning that his predecessor had 'insidiously undermined the fabric of local self-government',⁵⁶ the new Governor George Lloyd created in 1920 yet another unaccountable official body, the Development Department.

Set up to act both as 'a department of Government and an executive authority', the new body was entrusted with the construction of 'at least 50,000 1-room tenements' which was finally intended to solve the acute problem of working-class accommodation;⁵⁷ but its establishment also signified the removal of housing, the 'very basis of civic progress'⁵⁸ from the sphere of municipal government. Indeed, the Development Department was yet another authoritarian colonial 'quango' characterized by secretive deliberations and the complete absence of any public consultation procedures.⁵⁹ The press had warned Lloyd that if the housing scheme was intended to be 'for the benefit of the people', provision for potential users' input into the planning process was indispensable.⁶⁰ As it turned out, bad design and poor amenities meant that once again, sick buildings were produced, this time by a colonial agency 'out of touch with the life of the people for whom the buildings were intended'.⁶¹ On the Worli estate, where the largest number of chawls were constructed, rooms had no water connections, *nahanis* (washing places), or lighting, and only very inadequate *chulha* (fireplace for cooking) provision; the tenements had also been designed without the customary verandah

⁵⁴ *BC*, 28 Sept. 1920.

⁵⁵ *BC*, 14 July 1919. Women held a large number of protest meetings in the city throughout 1919–20.

⁵⁶ Annual Report on Newspapers published in the Bombay Presidency for the year 1918; Government of Bombay, Confidential Progs 1919, 195.

⁵⁷ Government of Bombay, Development Progs 1920, 65; 1921, 49. British Library, India Office Collections.

⁵⁸ R. P. Masani, 'The Social Function of Municipal Government', in C. Manshardt (ed.), *Bombay Looks Ahead* (Bombay, 1934), 11.

⁵⁹ The *Bombay Samachar* commented that 'during the regime of Sir George Lloyd many autocratic acts have been done, but the most autocratic and unjust of all of them is the Bombay Development Department'. *Bombay Samachar*, 17 May 1923; Bombay Native Newspaper Report no. 20, 1923.

⁶⁰ *Hindusthan*, 21 Aug. 1920; Bombay Native Newspaper Report no. 35, 1920.

⁶¹ *BC*, 2 June 1925.

which poor tenants had come to regard as their essential breathing space. Rooms had thus no view of the sky and no perspective on the outside world.⁶²

From the moment they appeared on the northern Bombay skyline, the new chawls were greeted with unanimous condemnation. The monotonous desolation of block after block of dark ferro-concrete tenements shocked even government officials. Professor Stanley Jevons, himself a government housing expert, condemned the 'unhealthy mechanical buildings' as a 'travesty of housing reform' which reflected the greatest discredit on the Bombay government.⁶³ The Archbishop of Bombay told the eminent architect Claude Batley that he feared the DD chawls would turn into 'centres of vice and crime' because 'there was no evidence of the milk of human kindness in their design'. The designer, who could hardly call himself an 'architect', had utterly failed to visualize the needs and aspirations of prospective residents.⁶⁴ Indeed, 80% of the Worli tenements still remained vacant at the beginning of 1926, a full three years after their construction.⁶⁵

Meanwhile, reform of the Bombay Municipal Corporation was finally announced in January 1922. The main provisions of the Reform Bill were a new ten-rupee franchise based on monthly rent, the abolition of all other restricted franchises, and an increase in the number of Councillors to 100, four-fifths of whom were to be elected and the remainder nominated. There was to be no change in the method of choosing or in the status of the Municipal Commissioner. The Bill thus maintained ultimate colonial control and had already, long before its enactment, been condemned by the press 'in these days of advancement, reform, progress and self-determination' as being of 'a highly retrograde character'.⁶⁶

The 'renewed' Municipal Corporation, moreover, would not be up and running until early 1923—more than two years after the inauguration of the 'reformed' Bombay Legislative Council, and three years after the setting up of the Development Department—an indication of its relatively low priority in the eyes of the colonial authorities. The extension of the franchise meant a fivefold increase

⁶² *BC*, 25 Oct. 1924.

⁶³ *BC*, 10 May 1924.

⁶⁴ Claude Batley, 'The Importance of City Planning', in Manshardt (ed.), *Bombay Looks Ahead*, 36.

⁶⁵ Govt of Bombay, *Development Progs* 1926, 23.

⁶⁶ *Kaiser-I-Hind*, 21 Sept. 1919; Bombay Native Newspaper Report no. 38, 1919.

in the number of voters, but in a city of one and a quarter million this still only amounted to 75,000 people or 7% of the urban population;⁶⁷ municipal voters in Bombay city comprised less than one-eighth of the numbers now entitled to vote in Glasgow—a city with an identical demography—as a result of the Representation of the People Act of 1918.⁶⁸ In effect, it represented the late enfranchisement of the professional intelligentsia and the commercial middle class; still excluded from political citizenship were industrial and other manual workers as well as the majority of the lower middle class—subordinate clerks, small traders, superior artisans.

As in Britain, the new franchise enabled the emergence, for the first time, of local party politics. The January 1923 election largely crystallized into a contest between the Nationalist Municipal Party led by Vithalbai Patel and the Progressive Party led by Homi Mody. While landlords and millowners were prominent amongst the leadership of the PP, the NMP's leading members were predominantly Gujarati middle merchants: the party was indeed ideologically close to the Gandhian Congress. As the latter had excluded municipalities from the sphere of non-cooperation,⁶⁹ the NMP was able to stand on a relatively autonomous election manifesto. It advocated the municipalization of public services and consistent with 'nationalist'⁷⁰ commitments, pledged itself to promoting the rights of tenants as against landlords, as well as to a campaign for a further lowering of the rental franchise and for a fully elected municipality with the right to select the Commissioner.⁷¹

The NMP gained the support of the *Bombay Chronicle*, largely on the basis of its manifesto promise to work towards the municipalization of public services. This, the paper emphasized, was a vital issue in the city in view of 'the growing burdens' which the private utilities

⁶⁷ *BC*, 2 Feb. 1923.

⁶⁸ *BC*, 30 Jan. 1923.

⁶⁹ The Report of the Civil Disobedience Enquiry Committee in 1922 had come out against extending Non-Cooperation to municipal and local bodies. These, it pointed out, entered 'more deeply into the daily life of the people' than Legislative Councils. It therefore advocated the desirability 'for Non-Cooperators to seek election to Municipal and District or Local Boards with a view to facilitate the working of the constructive programme'. *Report of the Civil Disobedience Enquiry Committee appointed by the All India Congress Committee, 1922*, 133–4.

⁷⁰ Nationalists, though, were hardly a united or coherent force during this election. It was reported that in several sections, notably Girgaum and Mahim, there was 'complete disunity amongst "nationalists"', with each candidate working for himself'. *BC*, 30 Jan. 1923.

⁷¹ *BC*, 18 Jan. 1923.

‘seek to throw on the shoulders of the public’. The old Corporation, ‘under the inspiration of successive Municipal Commissioners’, had been ‘very indulgent . . . towards these bodies at the expense of the public’. It was now up to the newly enfranchised intelligentsia to ‘turn the scales’ against the overwhelming domination of private interests.⁷² The *Chronicle* advised the NMP that ‘the programme of civic development as tackled by the Government of Bombay in their Development Directorate is a direct invasion of the sphere of municipal activity which it is not even now too late to challenge. For with the main issue of civic housing are involved the side issues of transport development and improvements in such matters as water supply, sanitary appliances, open spaces, public parks and playgrounds, street alignment and lighting . . . civic education’.⁷³

It was particularly important for the municipal nationalists to seek a ‘cheaper, healthier and more effective solution’ to the problem of popular housing than that offered by either private enterprise or the local colonial state. As Professor Jevons pointed out, the DD chawls’ intolerable living conditions militated against all ‘dispositions of good citizenship’.⁷⁴ The NMP, which was opposed to ‘the forces of capitalism cum landlordism which dominated the old Corporation’ should now attempt to secure decent low-cost accommodation ‘either by promoting co-operative enterprise . . . or by the extension of municipal trading’ to the building of a stock of social housing.⁷⁵

In the 1923 election, the Municipal Nationalists emerged as the largest party, capturing 35 seats; with the support of sympathizers, the combined nationalist strength in the new Corporation increased from 15 to 47. In practice, however, the Progressives, with the support of government nominees, still held a narrow majority. The new class of 1923 also included, for the first time in India, 4 women: Sarojini Naidu, Avantikabhai Gokhale (Nationalist), Perin Captain (Progressive), and Anne Hodgkinson (Independent).⁷⁶

Initially, the Municipal Nationalists enjoyed some successes in the Corporation and introduced a few new ideas in the realm of local government. The right to make speeches in the vernacular, the opening of the Corporation hall to the public, and the successful campaign against the increase in tram fares—greatly assisted by popular

⁷² *Ibid.*

⁷³ *BC*, 2 Feb. 1923.

⁷⁴ *BC*, 10 May 1923.

⁷⁵ *BC*, 2 Feb. 1923.

⁷⁶ *Ibid.*

mobilization outside the Corporation—all seemed promising achievements in the first year of the life of the reformed municipality.⁷⁷ Driven by its energetic deputy-leader, K. F. Nariman, the NMP also pressed for a further lowering of the rental franchise, a fully elected Corporation, and for the right to have the Municipal Commissioner chosen by Councillors. Introducing a Resolution in July 1925, Nariman argued that the maintenance of a government-appointed Commissioner who was virtually independent of the Corporation was entirely opposed to the spirit of the Reforms, and continued to make local self-government in the city ‘a sham’.⁷⁸

It was perhaps inevitable that the NMP’s minority position in the Corporation Hall should ensure the defeat of most of its Resolutions. It is equally true, however, that the party’s narrow class base rendered it an increasingly less than reliable champion of democratic rights. The Resolution on the status of the Municipal Commissioner, for instance, was lost by the surprisingly large margin of 64–31. In effect, fifteen nationalists led by Joseph (Kaka) Baptista had joined forces with the Progressives to defeat the motion. Baptista attempted to justify his crossing of the floor on the tenuous grounds that what he in fact wanted was ‘a complete overhauling of the Municipal Act’ so as to ‘guarantee the independence of the Commissioner from political parties’;⁷⁹ not entirely coincidentally, perhaps, Baptista had recently been nominated by the Bombay government on to the Development Department’s Advisory Committee for Bombay city.

Such opportunism was symptomatic of sharpening divisions within the NMP which reflected its gradual immersion into the increasingly factionalized politics of the Bombay City Congress Committee in general, and the Bombay Swaraj Party in particular. The NMP was theoretically committed to promoting the rights of tenants as against landlords, and therefore to an extension of the wartime Rent Act, due to expire at the end of 1925. It could only do so, however, with the support of the Bombay Swaraj Party which operated in the Legislative Council where any Bill for such an extension would have to be introduced. Many leading municipal nationalists, including Patel, Nariman, Baptista, and Velkar, were also members of the BSP.

The BSP, however, refused to endorse Nariman’s Bill to extend the Rent Act for a further three years. Its leader in the Bombay Legislat-

⁷⁷ *BC*, 20 Feb. and 25 April 1923; 27 Feb. 1924.

⁷⁸ *BC*, 22 July 1925.

⁷⁹ *Ibid.*

ive Council, M. K. Jayakar, issued a statement to the effect that the BSP 'refuses to look upon the class of landlords as the enemy of national progress as much as it considers the class of tenants as the ardent supporters of national aspirations'.⁸⁰ Nariman's Rent Act Amendment Bill was heavily defeated. As a result, landlords immediately hiked up their rents, imposing, according to the Tenants' Association, rises on their tenants of between 129 and 833 per cent.⁸¹ In response, over seventy protest meetings against the liberalization of rents were held in the city during the summer months of 1925, while the press warned of serious and continuous social unrest.⁸²

This episode considerably weakened the NMP in the Corporation, a prelude to its formal split in 1926. Policy goals such as the 'municipalization of services' were abandoned, or left to individual members to pursue. The Rent Amendment debacle also demonstrated the powerful impact of the long dominance of civil market rights on the urban social structure. The new enfranchised intelligentsia now discovered its contradictory class locations: socially aware of the plight of the urban poor and willing to act to improve the condition of labour, but economically aspiring and therefore liable to having its reforming drives blunted by a powerful urban landowning class whose profiteering orientations it could not fully contest.

IV. Expressive Rights and the Challenge of Social Citizenship: The Press, Strikes, and Colonial Legislation

The ambivalent and ultimately reactionary response of the colonial state to the demand for municipal democratization was just one aspect of the simultaneous pressures it was now facing for an expansion of public rights. There were now unanimous demands from all shades of opinion in the city for the inauguration of a new era of press freedoms which initially required the repeal of the infamous Press Act.

An increasingly critical public opinion combined with the impending introduction of the constitutional reforms now led the India Office to pressurize the Government of India to send out conciliatory signals over the ultimate fate of the Press Act. However, when the

⁸⁰ Reported in *BC*, 21 Aug. 1924.

⁸¹ Reported in *BC*, 29 Jan. 1925.

⁸² *BC*, 17 Aug. 1925.

colonial state circulated the new policy framework devised by the India Office, i.e. the ‘possibility of adopting in future a policy of counter-propaganda in preference to an increasing use of the Press Act’, the Lloyd Administration adopted an initially hawkish stance. It pointed out that unlike the generally factual and balanced press in England, the Indian press engaged in ‘publishing irresponsible, distorted, or palpably false versions of current events’. While more could certainly be done in the form of propaganda, this could ‘never in itself be an adequate remedy’, and it would be ‘a dereliction of duty’ to abandon or weaken the controls established by the Press Act.⁸³

The local colonial state was indirectly admitting that it was losing the battle over the shaping of the growing public sphere of civil society, and that the only means of curtailing ‘the preponderant influence of the Press on public opinion’ was to continue to circumscribe press freedoms by severe executive controls. The agitation against the Act, however, continued unabated in Bombay city: with the likelihood that it would always figure prominently in any resumption of civil disobedience, the Bombay government soon reluctantly came round to the Government of India’s proposition of repeal, accepting the view that a new climate needed to be created for the successful working of the reforms. It strongly urged, however, that ‘the hands of courts’ should be correspondingly strengthened so as to clearly fix ‘responsibility on printers, publishers, and editors’ for the good conduct of the press.⁸⁴

The Press Act was indeed repealed in September 1922 (together with the Rowlatt Acts), but this did not mean the restoration of journalistic freedom. The offence of press ‘sedition’ remained on the statute book under section 124-A of the Indian Penal Code, together with the colonial state’s monopoly over its interpretation. The power to confiscate seditious newspapers, pamphlets, and books—including the ‘auxiliary power’ to prevent the importation and postal dissemination of such material—was simply transferred to the courts.⁸⁵

The city’s press was not inclined to view repeal as a progressive measure in view of their firm belief in the local colonial state’s inher-

⁸³ Secretary, Govt of Bombay Home Dept to Secretary, Govt of India Home Dept, 4 Nov. 1919. Govt of Bombay, Judicial Progs 1919, 2133–4.

⁸⁴ Secretary, Govt of Bombay Judicial Dept to Secretary, Govt of India Home Political Dept, 25 Aug. 1920. Govt of Bombay, Confidential Progs 1920, 385–6; Govt of India, Home Political Progs 1921, no. 4 part 1, 1–33: NAI.

⁸⁵ Govt of India, Home Political Progs 1922; NAI. *Indian Social Reformer*, 24 July 1921; Bombay Native Newspaper Report no. 30, 1921.

ent predisposition to 'smell sedition in every assertion of right'.⁸⁶ The Bombay government secretly admitted that the dividing line between sedition and forthright criticism was 'practically illusory'.⁸⁷ In practice, however, its propensity to treat protest 'as a form of crime' indicated its continued adherence to a very limited conception of political rights. In particular, the colonial administration's reluctance to accept the notion of a right to political opposition, displayed the traditionalism of a repressive local state confronted by a rapidly evolving urban civil society. In this context, freedom of the press was feared precisely because it represented the most fundamentally enabling civil right: the right to *voice*, with its crucial powers to publicly define and assert new political and social claims. Moreover, the varied transmission routes from the written to the oral meant that bureaucratic control over printed forms at source remained the favoured means of preventing 'subversive' messages from reaching the 'lower' classes.

Indeed, the colonial authorities were increasingly articulating the new 'danger' emanating from urban social aspirations. In May 1920, Lloyd confessed to the Viceroy that his haste in wanting to get his industrial housing scheme off the ground was to pre-empt 'danger not only [from] among the ranks of labour but [from] among other classes whose humanitarian instincts have been aroused'.⁸⁸ Bombay, the Viceroy in turn reported to the Secretary of State in November, constituted 'the chief danger-point' of social unrest in India and was currently experiencing 'a sort of epidemic strike fever'. While this was primarily caused by local economic factors—high prices, low wages, poor housing conditions—'certain newspapers . . . notably the *Chronicle*', together with 'political agitators' were openly encouraging strikes and giving workers ideas 'by the frequent reports of labour trouble in England and Europe'.⁸⁹

Between 1921 and 1924, there were 406 industrial strikes in Bombay city compared to just 48 in 1914–17;⁹⁰ from 1920 onwards, the escalation of industrial unrest in the city was accompanied by the growth of unofficial trade unions. Labour activists organized a

⁸⁶ *New Times*, 16 Oct. 1923; Bombay Native Newspaper Report no. 42, 1923.

⁸⁷ Secretary, Govt of Bombay Judicial Dept. to Secretary, Govt of India Home Political Dept, 25 Aug. 1920; Govt of Bombay, Confidential Progs 1920, 385–6.

⁸⁸ Govt of Bombay, Development Progs 1920, 73.

⁸⁹ Govt of India, Home Political (B) Progs, Nov. 1920, 281.

⁹⁰ A. R. Burnett-Hurst, *Labour and Housing in Bombay: A Study in the Economic Condition of the Wage-Earning Classes of Bombay* (London 1925), 146.

series of meetings in working-class neighbourhoods to explain the aims of trade unionism; the presence at these gatherings of women workers relating 'pitiful stories of poverty' was noted by the press. Indeed, following one such meeting in lower Parel, a Union of Women Workers was formed for the first time in India in January 1922.⁹¹ Though small in membership and often leading a temporary existence, labour unions were rapidly springing up all over the city and beyond. By this time, the number of unions had increased from a handful in 1919 to forty-eight, with an approximate membership of 80,000.⁹²

This escalation of strike action and the consequent emergence of a trade union movement represented implicit, and sometimes explicit, appeals to government to actively intervene in urban industrial relations and ensure the recognition of new social rights, particularly in relation to wages and to collective bargaining entitlements. While constitutionally, prime responsibility here lay with the Government of India, the positioning of the Bombay government in local industrial relations during this era of unprecedented labour agitation is once again revealing.

In this new context, the local colonial state was rapidly compelled to abandon its traditional policy of social non-intervention in conflicts between industrial capital and labour, which had allowed full rein to the domination of capital. The sheer scale of the 1919 general strike in the textile industry, its spread to government establishments and the resulting colonial fear of a 'general dislocation and paralysis of life in the city',⁹³ compelled Governor Lloyd to prevail upon millowners to grant workers an immediate wage rise through a 20% increase in the war bonus.⁹⁴ Significantly, however, Lloyd did not raise the more fundamental issue of a permanent rise in basic pay: resolution of the conflict was to be secured not through pressure on millowners to devise a new framework for wage entitlements, but as the result of a one-off paternalistic intervention. The focus remained on the temporary expedient of 'bonus' payments which were still dependent on employers' 'goodwill'.⁹⁵

The continuing spiralling of the cost of living, however, ensured that strikes were now here to stay, particularly as neither employers nor the local colonial state were at all keen to confront the issue of

⁹¹ *BC*, 28 Jan. 1922.

⁹² Royal Commission on Labour in India 1929–31, vol. 1, 106.

⁹³ Govt of Bombay, Confidential Progs 1919, 33.

⁹⁴ *Ibid.*, 21–5.

⁹⁵ *Ibid.*

a basic living wage. The wage settlement in the textile industry proved only temporary, and another major strike broke out in January 1920: workers' demands had now escalated to include not only wages, but a reduction in working hours from twelve to nine and the regular payment of wages on the fifteenth of each month.⁹⁶ Nor was the predicament of the textile workers unique; they were joined by railway, postal, tramway, dock, engineering, oil, and gas workers, as well as by municipal employees and even by tailors and cutters. Low pay, but also improved workplace conditions and amenities and trade union recognition, lay at the heart of these industrial disputes.⁹⁷

This deteriorating industrial climate compelled Governor Lloyd to receive a deputation of the newly formed, Bombay-based All-India Trades Union Congress in October 1920. The delegates appealed to Lloyd to reverse the local colonial state's traditional support for capitalist interests and to recognize the legitimacy of strikes. They pointed out that in a city where the vast majority of workers were 'notoriously ill-paid, ill-fed, ill-housed, ill-clothed, and ill-educated', strike action should be recognized as 'a legitimate method of collective bargaining . . . a particular method of doing business' and not 'a declaration of war or a trial of strength'.⁹⁸

Lloyd rejected their ascription of 'capitalistic sympathies to Government' ('an attribution of partiality which I cannot entertain without promptly disavowing it'), stating that he regarded the organization of labour 'on sound economic lines' as being in the interests of labour, the government, and the city in general.⁹⁹ The Governor's candid profession of impartiality might have been taken more seriously had the local state not shown such a ferocious anti-labour bias in dealing with the strikes of 1920. It deployed three battalions of regular troops to intimidate striking workers while providing employers, during the oil workers' strike in Sewri, with military drivers to convey the fuel lorries to the mills.¹⁰⁰ This had prompted a sharp rebuke from the Government of India which defined the use of the military as a 'wide departure' from the principle of police responsibility for dealing with industrial conflicts.¹⁰¹

⁹⁶ Govt of Bombay, Confidential Progs 1924, 23.

⁹⁷ Govt of Bombay, Judicial Progs Jan.–April 1920, 378; *BC*, 9 Oct. 1920.

⁹⁸ Fortnightly Report, first fortnight November 1920.

⁹⁹ *Ibid.*

¹⁰⁰ Govt of Bombay, Confidential Progs 1922, 3; Judicial & Home Progs Jan.–May 1922, 323.

¹⁰¹ Secretary, Govt of India Army Dept to Chief Secretary Govt of Bombay, 21 Dec. 1921; Govt of Bombay, Confidential Progs 1922, 3–4.

Besides its ideological hostility to labour in an era marked by the growing prominence of socialist doctrines, the Bombay government's reactionary stance was also dictated by its interests as a major employer in the city. Government factories¹⁰² as well as local state institutions and associated quangos had been expanding since the war years; within the civil administration and the police, postal, telegraph, and press departments, as well as the Dockyard, Mint, and Port Trust establishments, the Bombay government maintained enormous wage differentials between a higher level of select colonial executives and a lower mass level of poorly paid Indian employees. A 'Secretary to Government', in the various departments, earned about Rs 3000 per month, the 'Oriental Translator' took home Rs 1200, while government printers were paid a mere Rs 50.¹⁰³

Although the local colonial state hastily attempted to revise the wages of its low-paid workers in an attempt to forestall industrial action in early 1920, this often merely had the opposite effect: in July, printers employed in government presses went on strike *following* an announcement of improved pay rates which they clearly regarded as unsatisfactory;¹⁰⁴ similarly, improved offers had to be made to dockers employed at the Royal Indian Marine Dockyard and to Port Trust menials and *halalkores* before they resumed work.¹⁰⁵ In these circumstances, with strikes spreading from the private to the public sector, the Bombay government had a vested interest in endeavouring to restrain wage increases in private establishments for fear of their impact on its own workforce. Thus, while it periodically indulged in an 'anti-millowner' discourse, in practice the local state stood behind management's attempts to maintain the traditional low-wage structure of the cotton-textile industry, regardless of workers' rising living costs and evolving patterns of consumption. In so doing, it revealed itself as an integral part of the dominant class interests hostile to demands for social and participatory entitlements: living wages, the rights to strike and to belong to labour unions.

¹⁰² These included an aeroplane workshop, arms and ammunition factory, gas works, iron works, electrical engineering works, telegraph works, and a stores factory. Govt of Bombay, Development Progs Feb. 1923, 57.

¹⁰³ BC, 14 Nov. 1921; Govt of Bombay, Home & Judicial Progs Jan.-June 1923, 203; Judicial Progs May-Aug. 1919, 1041; Jan.-June 1921, 385-90.

¹⁰⁴ Govt of India, Home Political (B) Progs Nov. 1920, 281.

¹⁰⁵ Govt of Bombay, Judicial Progs Jan.-April 1920, 377; Govt of India, Home Political (B) Progs April 1920, 189.

The industrial unrest in Bombay was, however, being viewed with increasing alarm by the Government of India. The colonial state was indeed under pressure from the Secretary of State in London: membership of the League of Nations now made the protection of workers' rights of association and trade union membership obligatory on the British government under Article 427 of the Peace Treaty.¹⁰⁶ Delhi appeared perturbed that the Bombay government seemed too much of a participant in the city's social conflicts and not to be doing enough to either win over public opinion or educate employers 'with regard to the advantages of fair treatment of labour'.¹⁰⁷ Accordingly, the provincial government was compelled to set up a Labour Bureau in 1921; its function was to provide 'objective' facts and figures on the evolution of urban wages and costs of living which, the colonial authorities hoped, would serve as a 'reliable' basis for public opinion judgements during industrial disputes.¹⁰⁸

The colonial state was particularly concerned by the novel impact of labour strikes on public opinion. It observed that the increase in industrial unrest had 'led to the stimulation of public interest in labour questions'. This had come about largely as a result of the press's increased coverage of strikes which had 'been followed by a steady increase in the influence exerted by public opinion on the course of those disputes'.¹⁰⁹ The Government of India was substantially correct in its assessment of civil society's increasing interest in labour issues. Throughout the strikes of the early 1920s, the press provided a coherent and critical interpretation of events, including their implications both for employers and the state. The claims of labour were now championed not only by the *Chronicle*, but by the bilingual *Hindusthan*¹¹⁰ while the new Marathi weekly *Lokashahi* was specifically devoted to articulating the interests of the labour movement.¹¹¹ They warned employers that as a result of the upheavals of war, workers had come to realize their own power and it was now

¹⁰⁶ Govt of Bombay, Judicial Progs Jan.–May 1922, 314.

¹⁰⁷ Govt of India, Home Political (B) Progs Nov. 1920, 281.

¹⁰⁸ Secretary, Govt of India (Industry) to all Local Govts, May 1921; Govt of Bombay, Judicial Progs Jan.–June 1921, 746.

¹⁰⁹ Secretary, Govt of India (Industry/Labour) to all Local Govts, 30 Aug. 1924. Govt. of Bombay, Home & Judicial Progs Jan.–June 1925, 161.

¹¹⁰ An English–Gujarati daily described by the Bombay government's 'Oriental Translator' as 'promoting the dissemination of European socialistic literature'. Annual Report on Indian and Anglo-Vernacular Papers published in the Bombay Presidency for the year 1922; Govt of Bombay, Confidential progs 1923, 236.

¹¹¹ Govt of India, Home Political (B) Progs 1924, 284.

very much in capital's own interest to devise measures to improve the condition of labour. The increasing prominence of labour issues in the public sphere both reflected and contributed to the growth of information on working-class conditions in Bombay, and on labour movements elsewhere.

Moreover, workers' appropriation of public space during the frequent waves of strikes during this era enabled them to have a direct impact on public opinion. Strikes were evolving their own public rituals which manifested the new impulses of active citizenship: workers wanted something changed in their lives and they were prepared to take their protests to the public, often in an eye-catching manner. Marching through the city from north to south, workers could appeal, both orally and through the wording of their banners, to the 'humanitarian instincts' of gathered crowds. During the strike of tramway workers in 1922, for instance, strikers marched from Parel to Colaba with banners in Marathi and English proclaiming 'Down with the Tramway Bosses', 'United we stand Divided we fall', 'We want Justice nothing more nothing less'.¹¹² These slogans were skilfully devised to appeal to public opinion which already regarded the Tramway Company (BEST) as the most objectionable private utility in the city.

The colonial state was now faced with some new, and unheralded, threats to its hegemony. The explosion of industrial militancy, particularly in the public services directly run by government, served to highlight the unequal and unfair nature of the colonial wage structure; mediated by the press, it also reinforced nationalist public opinion by exposing another area of colonial malpractice; finally, labour militancy might also reach out towards the welcoming arms of the new communist ideology which both London and Delhi viewed as a real threat to the foundations of Empire.

Already under pressure from London, the colonial state now resolved upon legislative intervention. The Factory Act of 1922 established a ten-hour working day and a maximum sixty-hour week in the textile industry.¹¹³ Two years later, the Indian Workmen's Compensation Act made employers liable for industrial accidents suffered by their workers.¹¹⁴ At the same time, the Government of India proposed the introduction of legislation for the registration,

¹¹² *BC*, 19 Sept. 1922.

¹¹³ Royal Commission on Labour in India, vol. 1, 59.

¹¹⁴ *BC*, 1 July 1924.

and hence legalization, of trade unions. Workers' combinations 'outside the civil law of the country', its consultative document observed, were conducive neither to the long-term interests of the workers, nor to good industrial relations and national prosperity. The legalization of unions would encourage 'the steady betterment of the condition of labour by efforts from within while conferring upon it 'a recognized status and position in the eyes of industrialists and the public'.¹¹⁵

The Government of India's initiative was not well received in industrial and official circles in Bombay city which was, after all, a bastion of old-fashioned free enterprise culture. Particularly after the strikes of 1919–20, employers, with the active connivance of the local colonial state, made vigorous attempts to repress the formation of trade unions at the workplace and generally refused to recognize those that came into existence. Workers who joined and participated in the new organizations soon found themselves victimized and blacklisted.¹¹⁶ At the same time, employers set up a combination of their own, the Bombay Engineering Employers' Federation 'to combat the growing industrial unrest' in the city. Its membership, limited to European personnel, significantly included representatives not only of the major private companies—BEST, the Bombay Gas Company, the Standard and Burma Oil Companies—but of state-run utilities: the Government Dockyard, the Telegraphs, and the GIP, BB & CI, and Port Trust Railways.¹¹⁷ The Federation thus constituted the organizational form of a reactionary colonial capitalism's resistance to labour modernism in the city. It enabled employers and the local colonial state to exchange intelligence about workers and unions, to plan and co-ordinate their responses to strikes, and to anticipate and subvert industrial action before it threatened their interests.

Opposition from capitalist interests in the city to the proposed legislation took the familiar discursive form of emphasizing Indian 'difference'. The 'problem' of the industrial working class, the Bombay Chamber of Commerce asserted, could not be solved 'by

¹¹⁵ Secretary, Govt of India Home Dept to all Provincial Govts, 12 Sept. 1921; Govt of Bombay, Home & Judicial Progs Jan.–May 1922, 253–4.

¹¹⁶ The Bombay Electric Supply and Tramways Company, for instance, steadfastly denied recognition to the Tramway Union and subsequently dismissed most of the workers—about 1300—who had participated in the 1922 strike. Burnett-Hurst, *Labour and Housing*, 103–4.

¹¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 102.

merely copying the latest legislation from England'. Indian workers, with their essentially 'agrarian and migratory nature', had little in common with their English counterparts. Colonial officials such as the Collector of Bombay and the Commissioner of Police were even more fervently anti-union, the former describing labour leaders as 'unscrupulous rogues', and the latter observing that it was legislation to protect workers 'from the machinations of professional agitators' that was in fact necessary.¹¹⁸

The Bombay government, while not openly coming out against the proposed legislation, generally echoed the objections put forward by powerful Anglo-Indian interests such as the Bombay Chamber of Commerce and the Engineering Employers Federation and once more reminded the Government of India about the 'fundamental differences' between India and England. It insisted, moreover, that the 'privilege' of trade union recognition by the State should not encompass any political entitlement: unions and the Social Service League had urged the Government of India to 'recognise political activities confined to labour interests as among the legitimate objects of trade unions'. The local state warned that union funds 'which might easily reach a considerable figure' could be diverted to politically revolutionary purposes. 'The danger is so real that it justifies a curtailment of the powers of Trade Unions which would be otherwise unjustifiable'.¹¹⁹

The Trades Union Act of 1926 authorized peaceful picketing and conferred immunity on trade unions and their members from civil suits and criminal prosecutions; however, it proscribed political activities and compelled unions to give advance warning of strike action, making it easier for both the state and employers to counteract their moves. This recognition of trade union activity within the workplace represented a carefully circumscribed social right extracted from a colonial state now subject to pressures on multiple fronts. Moreover, in the urban-industrial world of 1920s Bombay, it remained an exceptional and defensive measure. It was not accompanied by a burst of complementary legislation indicative of a transformed perception of new social obligations on the part of the state, even though, by 1925, labour activists were calling for legislation on minimum wages, hours of labour, leave rules, unemployment benefits and old age pension schemes.¹²⁰

¹¹⁸ Govt of Bombay, Home & Judicial Progs Jan.–May 1922, 279–340.

¹¹⁹ Govt of Bombay, Home & Judicial Progs Jan.–June 1925, 105–36.

¹²⁰ *Ibid.*, 194; *BC*, 17 Aug. 1925.

Indeed, the potential role of unions as a democratizing force in urban society was seriously undermined when the Bombay government accorded them official representation as an 'interest group' within the far from representative Municipal Corporation in 1928. Thus, while franchise restrictions continued to deny workers the right, as citizens, to choose political representatives, and unions could not engage in 'political' activities, registered trade union leaders were granted a fast track access to political influence within an unchanged authoritarian structure of local government. This represented a classic example of colonial co-option: separated from the rank-and-file, the four nominated trade unionists became subject to the rules of colonial patronage; they were encouraged to see themselves as 'natural' (as opposed to democratically elected) leaders of yet another 'section' of urban society chosen to collaborate with the colonial regime.

More fundamentally, the local state's authoritarianism and general unwillingness to support the validation of expanded citizenship rights, was a function of its own class location in urban society. Traditionally, it had made use of its unique resources of power, wealth, and prestige to structure the dominance of capital over civil society. Integral to this hegemony was a system of unscrutinized accommodations between the colonial regime and the dominant class factions, largely at the expense of the majority of urban citizens. This process had shaped a characteristically archaic and regressive capitalism, hostile to the development of civic rights, and thus posing a formidable obstacle to sustainable urban renewal. In this era, however, the escalating demands for a range of democratizing rights began to articulate challenges that could not ultimately be met within the limitations of the colonial model of citizenship.