The Petition as Event: colonial Bombay, c. 1889-1914

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I

In recent years, petitions – construed as ‘demands for a favour or for the redressing of an injustice, directed to some established authority’ – have been the focus of sustained and systematic historical analysis.¹ A growing body of scholarly writing has explored how the ‘common human experience’ of petitioning has been shaped by the specificities of historical context.² In the process, historians have underscored how petitions are valuable ‘sources of social history’, which can be used to understand both structural transformations within the domains of state and society and the ways in which ordinary people sought to make themselves heard in their quest for justice.

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These themes and perspectives also inform an emergent historiography on petitioning culture in colonial India. Here, the ubiquity and diversity of petitioning activity under British rule is regarded as irrefutable evidence of ‘the importance that both ruler and subject accorded it’. But if the significance of colonial petitioning is uncontested, historians have nonetheless viewed it through contrasting lenses.

From one perspective, petitioning is seen as mirroring the structural changes in state-society relations that flowed from the consolidation of the English East India Company’s authority in the subcontinent during the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries. Thus, Bhavani Raman’s account of the ‘documentary raj’ in the Tamil-speaking districts of early colonial South India highlights how petitioning ‘was remade, and made central in Madras, by a government seeking to fashion a new way of communicating with its subject’. Raman argues that the Company state’s efforts in early colonial South India to ‘discipline petitions into expressions of sincerity, while managing information flow, generated the peculiar form of the colonial petition’. Integral to this process, Raman suggests, was a new normative emphasis that the Company placed on ‘proper dissent’. This rendered illegitimate forms of resistance that were ‘disorderly’, even as it transformed written petitions into the ‘only acceptable and civic political behaviour’. Petitioning under Company rule thus ‘became a primary mode of effecting and negotiating sedentarization and pacification, even as it sometimes opened up new discursive possibilities for petitioners to fight social hegemonies’.

From another standpoint, however, petitioning in the colonial context has been seen as a conduit into ‘the workings of Indian society at both levels of mentality and ideology’. Focusing, for the most part, on the second half of the nineteenth century, Majid Siddiqi argues that even as they adhered to the protocols of ‘politeness’ laid down by the colonial government, petitioners ‘revealed, directly, or by hiding these, their deepest fears, loyalties and anxieties, their emotions in the widest

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possible range of inflexion and nuance, even entire cultural systems, of concord and discord, unities and fissures, legitimation and dissent’. Siddiqi’s analysis leads him to conclude that petitioning in colonial India ‘reflected a groundswell of subcontinental attitudes that by the end of the nineteenth century were being converted to becoming an ideological statement, finally of Indian nationalism in its many heterogeneous manifestations within that particular collectivity’.5

Notwithstanding significant differences, the approaches outlined above share some common ground. Both accounts broadly view petitioning as a ritual that was designed to affirm and reproduce the structural relations of domination and subordination within the colonial context. The petition is thus seen as an enforced expression of deference that circumscribed the agency of the colonized, even if it did not preclude their questioning of colonial authority and sovereignty. Furthermore, both frameworks posit a disjuncture between state and society in colonial India, with the petition as ‘document’ mediating between these discrete, bounded and unitary realms. Finally, both perspectives regard petitioning as constitutive of the colonial project of fashioning a new civil society defined by the norms of politeness and shorn of the ‘disorder’ and violence associated with pre-colonial forms of collective protest.

In what follows, I shift the emphasis and develop an alternative set of perspectives. In particular, this essay builds on the intuition that petitions had a dual quality: they simultaneously affirmed structures of power and gestured to their aporias and antagonisms.6 Thus viewed, petitioning was both a routine reinscription of power relations and a potential ‘event’ that could unsettle them.7 Existing historical work has largely tended to stress the role of colonial petitioning as an authorized ritual of supplication. By contrast, this essay seeks to restore to the analysis of the petition its status as an event that could exceed its documentary confines and generate new communities of action. Focusing on a singular historical conjuncture in colonial Bombay, c. 1889-1914, it highlights three ways in which petitioning marked

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a rupture in the relations between rulers and ruled and heralded significant shifts in the local constructions of state and society.

Firstly, the essay shows how Bombay’s Indian residents deployed the petitioning process to contest the unprecedented degree of state intervention in their lives following an extraordinary civic crisis that engulfed the city in the last decade of the Victorian era. In particular, it focus on levels below the sphere of ‘high politics’ to explore the ways in which ordinary men and women engaged with the ‘everyday state’ in the colonial city. In the process, the essay draws out the significance of the urban context in shaping the changing culture of petitioning in colonial Bombay: the diverse communities that inhabited this space, the juxtaposition of multiple discursive registers within it, and the emergence of new ideas of citizenship and collective identity.

Secondly, the essay contends that the petitions that ordinary Indians in Bombay submitted to the different agencies of urban government point to a more complex set of orientations to the colonial state than has been acknowledged in the existing historiography. If, on the one hand, petitioners appealed to the state for justice and the restitution of their grievances, they simultaneously sought, on the other hand, to assert claims to urban amenities and resources. For the most part, too, the petitions of Indian city-dwellers suggest that they did not always regard the state as a distant, transcendent and impersonal entity. On the contrary, petitions were submitted to diverse agencies of the colonial government and reveal, at times, a sharp awareness of the ways in which the representatives of the state were embedded in local structures and networks of power. In turn, this renders problematic analytical frameworks that take for granted a clearly demarcated conceptual boundary between state and society.

Thirdly, the essay argues that by the end of the nineteenth century collective petitioning in colonial Bombay became embedded in forms of political action with which it is conventionally regarded as being incompatible. At one level, petitions heralded acts of collective resistance in the form of working-class strikes. Indeed, despite the efforts of the colonial state to designate it as the only proper and legitimate mode of political dissent, petitioning could not be easily or successfully
severed from such proscribed modes of protest. At another level, petitioning activity by a range of subaltern actors became exercises in the public performance of the ‘political’. Petitions were discussed in assemblies that claimed to represent ‘public opinion’. These collective petitions countered the colonial rulers’ insistence on sincerity and deference by deploying forms of public reasoning that constantly tested the limits of permissible speech in an unequal, power-laden context. The discourse of supplication thus came to be infiltrated by attempts to speak truth to power.

The essay begins by offering a longer historical perspective on the developments outlined above. The first section suggests that the duality of the petition-form - simultaneously a routine act of affirmation that legitimized the structures of power as well as an ‘event’ with the potential to disrupt them - was a characteristic feature of supplicatory practice in nineteenth-century Bombay. However, as the following section argues, there was a significant transformation in the culture of petitioning during the period c. 1889-1914. A unique conjuncture in these years saw the petition acquire a new salience in the everyday relations between Bombay’s Indian inhabitants and the heterogeneous agencies of an increasingly intrusive state. The final section highlights how the petition as ‘document’ increasingly became implicated in subaltern repertoires of contention in the city.

II

The practice of petitioning in Bombay was coeval with the evolution of colonial rule over the island. Philip Stern has shown how petitioning emerged as a key instrument in the making of both the state and a circumscribed ‘public’ domain in the decades immediately following the English East India Company’s acquisition of the settlement. Importantly, petitions in late seventeenth-century Bombay were ‘a double-edged sword, reinforcing the existence of a civil society but one that by its

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very nature worked in tandem with the legitimacy of colonial rule’. With the consolidation of British power in the following century, petitioning developed into an abiding feature of Bombay’s civic culture. Individuals and communities petitioned the colonial government in a range of tones - abject, agitated, persuasive and pleading - depending on the specificities of context. The issues raised in their acts of supplication were equally varied and pertained to matters both momentous and mundane. Land acquisition, property rights, taxation, revenue collection, religious practices, judicial decisions, terms and conditions of employment in the Company’s service - all these and more were the stuff of quotidian petitions in British Bombay prior to 1857. Saliently, for our purposes, petitioning was both an authorized ritual and an eventful occurrence.

As a mode of discourse, the petition in Company-era Bombay adhered to a format that will be familiar to scholars of supplication in other historical contexts. The document usually began with an obligatory salutation to the official to whom it was addressed, a narrative of variable length outlining the grievances of the petitioner(s), a claim (or set thereof) for their restitution, and a concluding statement reposing faith in the power of the addressee to rectify the acts of commission or omission. This was not simply a matter of choice for the petitioners: it was dictated by authorized protocols designed to affirm the authority and legitimacy of the ruling power. As historians have noted, colonial authorities in India sought to constrain the content of the form by insisting that petitions go through the ‘proper channels’ and fulfill the requirements of ‘politeness’ and ‘sincere’ submission.

Within these constraints, however, supplicants had some room for manouevre in presenting their case to the ruling authorities. As Douglas Haynes has noted in the context of colonial Surat, Indian petitioners strategically deployed deference in

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9 Ibid., p. 204.
10 On this point, see also Siddiqi, British Historical Context, p. 22.
11 The form, it would appear, was not very different in Tsarist Russia in the same period. See Palat, ‘Regulating Conflict’, p. 86.
12 Siddiqi, British Historical Context, pp. 20-29; Raman, Document Raj, pp. 167-182.
making claims on the government and its official representatives.\textsuperscript{13} Indeed, he argues, ‘deferential relationships generally have a transactional character’ in that even as ‘an underling offers supplication to an overlord, he or she may also be establishing claims to patronage or protection’.\textsuperscript{14} Equally, petitioners drew on the putatively impersonal colonial discourse of justice while simultaneously inflecting this language with ideas of morality and ethical conduct drawn from an indigenous normative vocabulary.\textsuperscript{15}

Moreover, as in other contexts, Indian petitioners in colonial Bombay regularly invoked the past in pressing their claims on the state. To this end, they sought to draw a ‘contrast between an ideal past when the law was upheld and social relations were just, and the present when both had degenerated’.\textsuperscript{16} On more than one occasion, too, petitioners recalled past services to the government in seeking justice in the present. For instance, in 1830 ‘Jooram Bawa Patell and other Portuguese fishermen of Bombay’ petitioned the Company to withdraw a ‘personal tax’ on their occupation, which they were required to pay in addition to the other revenue assessment levied on them. In pleading for the removal of this ‘obnoxious fee’, which had been first introduced during the period of Portuguese rule over the island, the petitioners reminded the Company that they had ‘rendered very essential service in former times’. They pointed out that ‘when labourers were not to be had, your petitioners assisted in the construction of Battareis, and also in several occasion of war your petitioners were exceedingly useful, they provided Vessels for the public service, and whenever any assistance was required of them they were apt and ready, and as such their services have been advantages and available to the public’.\textsuperscript{17}

Supplicants also appealed to ‘custom’ in seeking to blunt the force of the state’s claims on their material resources.\textsuperscript{18} Mariam Dossal has shown how petitioners in late-eighteenth and early nineteenth-century Bombay frequently invoked customary

\textsuperscript{13} Haynes, \textit{Rhetoric and Ritual}, pp. 81-94.
\textsuperscript{14} Ibid., p. 82.
\textsuperscript{15} Ibid., pp. 81-94, 108-144.
\textsuperscript{16} Palat, ‘Regulating Conflict’, p. 86. In this context, see also, Siddiqi, \textit{British Historical Context}, pp. 24-29; Aparna Balachandran, ‘Petition Town: Law, Custom and Urban Space in Colonial South India’ in Balachandran, Raman and Pant (eds), \textit{Iterations of Law}, pp. 147-167.
\textsuperscript{17} ‘Petition from Jooram Bawa Patell and other Portuguese fishermen of Bombay’, BRC, 1 July 1840, No. 4228, IOR/P/372/20, Asia, Pacific and Africa Collections (hereafter APAC), BL.
\textsuperscript{18} On this point, see also Balachandran, ‘Petition Town’, pp. 147-167.
rights in order ‘to shield themselves from the increasing revenue demands of the State’. For instance in November 1799, the damage inflicted by a storm triggered a flood of petitions to the Collector of Land Revenue from revenue farmers whose leaseholds had been affected by the calamity. In entreating the Collector to consider their request for remission of the revenue demand, the petitioners drew upon the ‘Rule and Custom of the place’. Petitioners also cited custom in seeking a favourable judgment from the government in property disputes. Thus, it was ‘common for aggrieved neighbours to refer to customary rights when property was transferred to persons not residing in the immediate vicinity’. In such instances, petitioners argued that ‘custom demanded that a house for sale be first offered to the neighbours’.19

The Company government, for its part, responded to such invocations of custom in multiple, and contradictory, ways. On the one hand, its officials accorded importance to claims that cited past precedents and ‘tradition’, especially in matters pertaining to the cultural practices of Bombay’s diverse ethnic communities. Significantly, even though the Company had originally attracted many of these communities to the island by promising them privileges and immunities in their internal affairs, on more than one occasion its officials were ‘prepared to intervene primarily to solidify caste panchayats as sources of stability and modes of inexpensive social control for the preservation of order’.20 Such interventions were usually cloaked in the rhetoric of ‘custom’. For instance, in the early nineteenth century some Company officials sought to exclude caste disputes from the jurisdiction of the Mayor’s Court in order that the ‘authority of caste elders might not be diminished’.21

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19 Mariam Dossal, *Theatre of Conflict, City of Hope: Mumbai, 1660 to Present Times* (Delhi, 2010), p. 58.
20 Ibid., p. 51. At times, the need to work through such traditional leaders in the interests of order even overrode the imperative of maximizing revenue collection. For instance, in July 1830 one Lowjee Ameechund petitioned the Bombay government for the right to farm the revenues collected by issuing travel passes to passengers embarking on sea voyages at Masjid Bunder. He was turned down because the Collector of Land Revenue in Bombay advised his superiors that it was ‘better to continue to the Heads of the various castes the privilege of granting the Passnote, for by that measure they become responsible for the persons who quit the island – the present practice seems the best that could be adopted for that purpose, and a monopoly could not produce better effect’. Letter from B. Doveton, Collector of Land Revenue, Bombay, 7 July 1830, Bombay Revenue Consultations (hereafter BRC), No. 1936, 14 July 1830, India Office Records (hereafter IOR), P/373/20, APAC, British Library (hereafter BL), London.
21 Conlon, ‘Functions of Ethnicity’, p. 52.
On the other hand, in matters pertaining to property rights the Company state increasingly tended to privilege revenue extraction over the ‘rule of custom’. Indeed, by the early nineteenth century the Company usually tended to disregard petitions from Bombay’s Indian landowners who sought to resist its revenue claims by citing the customary rights bestowed during pre-British times or the early years of British rule over the island. For instance, the leading fazendars (freeholders) of Bombay were unable to persuade the government to withdraw an additional ten per cent tax, which was levied on them for residing within the fortified town, despite submitting numerous petitions that harked back to the rights bestowed by the ‘original agreement’ that their ancestors had entered into with the Company in 1672. Likewise, the appeals to custom in the numerous collective petitions submitted by ‘tile-makers, brick-makers, tobacco-revenue receivers and many other inhabitants of Bombay’ failed to persuade Company officials to forego their tax demands. Nor did individual defaulters fare any better when they sought to invoke the past. For instance, when Rustamji Kavasji Patel, whose family had been invested with the hereditary right of collecting taxes from the Koli fishermen of the island, failed to meet his revenue obligations in the early 1830s the Company dismissed him from his post. Although Rustamji reminded the Company of his family’s long service, the colonial authorities refused to yield and restore his status as the ‘Patel’ of the Kolis.

While the protocols of colonial petitioning sought to constrain the content of the form, the act of supplication nonetheless opened up a space in which new communities of action could take shape. Petitions submitted to the Company government reveal two countervailing tendencies in this regard. On the one hand, collective supplications generally emanated from groups that identified themselves in terms of

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22 Dossal, Theatre of Conflict, p. 59.
23 Ibid., p. 103.
24 Ibid.
26 On this point, see also Siddiqui, British Historical Context, p. 22.
caste or religious community, as these categories progressively acquired fixity over the course of Company rule in Bombay. These petitions were usually submitted by the 'headmen' designated as ‘natural leaders’ of these communities. As historians have noted, colonial authorities sought to fashion and buttress structures of corporate authority that had a tenuous presence on the ground. In most cases, then, petitions were constitutive of the putatively ‘traditional’ communities whose interests they claimed to represent.

On the other hand, the petitioning process also brought together Bombay's increasingly diverse communities on numerous occasions and shaped its emergent cosmopolitanism. Notably, leading Indian merchants forged inter-community alliances to resist colonial economic policies that affected their interests. As early as 1778 the town's Gujarati Hindu, Muslim and Parsi shetias, 'realising the advantages of joint petitions to government, protested against the Export Duty on silver'. Collective petitioning of this kind became a frequent occurrence over the next half century. For instance, in 1839 when the British government ordered Indian opium traders in China to surrender their stocks to the authorities in the Far East, prominent Bombay shetias from different communities promptly submitted a petition protesting against the decision. This evolving tradition of cross-communal alliances anticipated the petitioning culture forged by the incipient nationalist political associations of mid-nineteenth century Bombay.

By the mid-nineteenth century, Bombay's Indian merchant princes had become the leading spokesmen of urban society. In this capacity, they deployed the petitioning process to draw attention to grievances that transcended their own class interests. For instance, in September 1844, prominent shetias forwarded a petition to the governor signed by more than '270 respectable Natives of all classes' to protest

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28 J.C. Masselos, Towards Nationalism: Group affiliations and the politics of public associations in nineteenth century Western India (Bombay, 1974), p. 16. Occasionally, Bombay's European merchants also affixed their signatures to such inter-community petitions. Ibid.
against the Government of India’s decision to increase the excise and import duty on salt produced in the Bombay Presidency. Their petition called on the government to repeal a decision, ‘which suddenly raising the price of Salt without notice, warning, or apparent cause, has caused great distress amongst the poor, as well as alarm and anxiety among all classes of the community of this Presidency’.

Notwithstanding the prominent public role of the shetias, collective petitioning in mid-nineteenth century Bombay came to present itself as the expression of a wide range of interests within urban society. For instance, in February 1848 over seven hundred ‘Hindoo, Parsee, and Mahomedan Inhabitants of Bombay’ petitioned the Government of India to jettison proposed changes to the juridical powers of the Small Causes Court. The petitioners were especially perturbed by the move to prevent litigants from employing ‘either professional or other agents to conduct their cases’. They argued that it was iniquitous that ‘native suitors should not have professional aid when their opponents may be Europeans, as the latter, besides being generally better acquainted with the principles of European law, could address the court in English, their vernacular tongue, and the greater part of what would pass being in English, which would never be effectually interpreted to natives, these would thus remain in ignorance of what was going on’. The petitioners also objected to legislative provisions that empowered judges with new discretionary powers, including the right to fine defendants whom they believed to have ‘no reasonable ground of defence’ and punish any parties or witnesses in a suit who were deemed to have ‘wilfully made a false statement’ or ‘committed perjury’. In presenting their objections, the petitioners made clear that the changes they sought in the draft legislation would be ‘a blessing to the community of Bombay’. More famously, when the Reverend John Wilson, representing the General Assembly of the Church of Scotland, baptized two Parsi youths in May 1839, their outraged co-religionists sought to forge a broad coalition with other communities in the city in protesting against the activities of Christian missionaries. An ‘Anti-

32 See also Siddiqi, British Historical Context, p. 23.
33 The Bombay Times and Journal of Commerce, 1 March 1848, p. 178.
Conversion Memorial’ signed by over two thousand ‘Hindoo, Parsee, and Mahomedan inhabitants of Bombay’ implored the local government to prevail on the highest levels of the imperial state to proscribe missionary activities in India. But the Government of Bombay turned down their appeal on the grounds that any interference in community affairs was contrary to their principles of rule. The rejection of their memorial by the government served to ‘activate intercommunity cooperation in Bombay’, prompting the Friend of India to take note of the alliance of ‘Parsees, Hindoos, and Mahommedans uniting for mutual defense against the proselytism of Christians’.

In the instances cited above, petitioning generated new communities of action. But the government tended to be deeply suspicious of attempts to use petitions to generate horizontal solidarities. Frequently, official disquiet and disapproval was aroused by the mere suspicion that a petition was a conduit for collective political action that threatened the status quo. Conversely, the collective petitions submitted to the Bombay government generally adhered to the norms and protocols of ‘disciplined dissent’ and moved within the ‘proper channels’ established by the Company state.

By the 1890s, however, the social turbulence generated by Bombay’s rapid transformation from a relatively sedate port town into a raucous industrial city, increasingly began to find resonances in, and reshape, petitioning activity. It is to this historically significant shift in the context, content and consequences of petitioning in Bombay that we now turn.


36 Siddiqi, British Historical Context, p. 29.
III

Three key factors were responsible for the historical transformation of petitioning in colonial Bombay during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. First, the city was convulsed by a fearsome epidemic of bubonic plague in the late 1890s, which triggered a fundamental reappraisal in the political rationalities of colonial governance and resulted in an unprecedented degree of official intervention in the everyday lives and spaces of its Indian inhabitants. Accordingly, petitions came to reflect the fissures and conflicts generated within urban society by the state’s attempt to tackle the epidemic and reshape the city’s built environment through the creation of a new civic agency called the Bombay Improvement Trust. Second, the Bombay Municipal Corporation was restructured in 1888 through new legislation that widened the ambit of its regulatory powers while simultaneously increasing Indian representation within the institution. In the following two decades, the Bombay Municipality emerged as a major locus of petitioning activity by the city’s residents, who began to press the civic administration to address their demands and grievances. Third, these historical contingencies dovetailed with a rapidly changing urban context marked by newly emergent forms of political culture. This section explores the impact of the first two factors on petitioning protocols and practices. The third development is addressed in the final section of the essay.

At the outset, it is worth briefly noting that when its time of troubles began in the 1890s Bombay had begun to challenge Calcutta’s status as urbs prima in Indis. It had risen to such dizzy heights in little more than two generations, largely on account of its spectacular development as a hub of trade, industry and finance. Its status as a leading commercial and industrial city was further buttressed by its significance as the administrative and political capital of the Bombay Presidency; it was from here that the small British colonial elite governed a vast hinterland and presided over the
destiny of millions of Indians.\textsuperscript{37} A growing number of those millions in western India had begun to make their way to this ‘city of gold’ in order to make a living in its factories, docks and bazaars. Others came in search of fame and fortune from further afield in the Indian subcontinent and from regions overseas. Reflecting on the city’s extraordinary growth over the preceding half century, one British observer in Bombay proudly declared in a public lecture in April 1896 that his audience had ‘every right to rejoice that our lives have fallen in a place so pleasant – that we live in Bombay the beautiful, bonnie Bombay’.\textsuperscript{38}

The discovery of bubonic plague in the city less than six months later abruptly called into question such sanguine visions of urban prosperity and progress. The upheaval that followed triggered a social and political crisis the likes of which had not been since in colonial India since 1857. The frenzied response of colonial authorities to the spread of the epidemic in colonial India has been well documented by scholars.\textsuperscript{39} They have shown how ancient fears associated with the dreaded disease spurred colonial authorities into implementing a series of unprecedented sanitary and medical policies. Panic, rather than a precise understanding of plague causation, drove these measures. Indeed, even though a microbe was identified at the outset, medical officials in Bombay remained unsure whether it was a cause or consequence of the disease. Nor was its specific mode of transmission clearly understood. In these circumstances, colonial officials in Bombay braided together contagionist theories, which were predicated on the belief that the disease was transmitted either directly or indirectly through human carriers, with longstanding localist, ‘pythogenic’ theories


\textsuperscript{38} George Waters, Bombay the Beautiful: A lecture delivered at the Sassoon Mechanics’ Institute, Bombay (Bombay, 1896), p. 18.

that saw the plague germ as being generated by, and proliferating in, urban filth and miasma.\textsuperscript{40}

Given the ferocity of the colonial state’s response to the epidemic, it is not entirely surprising that sections of the native population sometimes resorted to violence against the symbols of the plague administration. But such instances of collective violence only posed a serious threat to public order on two occasions during the initial years of the epidemic.\textsuperscript{41} For the most part, Bombay’s Indian population continued to seek recourse to the long-standing practice of petitioning the government to register their grievances. The files in the Maharashtra State Archives pertaining to the plague administration in Bombay bulge with the supplications submitted by the city’s residents in response to the state’s measures to combat the disease. The sheer volume of petitions that deluged the plague administration in Bombay testifies to the extraordinary conjuncture that the early years of the epidemic represented in the relations between rulers and ruled in the city.

Crucially, it was through the petitioning process that urban civil society cohered as a collectivity in response to the actions of the colonial state. During the early years of the epidemic, Bombay’s residents submitted numerous collective petitions both to the provincial government and the plague administration. These collective representations highlight the extent to which all sections of the city’s Indian population felt the effects of the new official interventionism.

At one level, from the very outset of the epidemic Bombay’s cosmopolitan elite public culture came to the fore through the petitioning process. Thus, ‘respectable society’ in Bombay was quick to voice its collective protest against the draconian plague policies initiated by the ruling authorities. On 14 October 1896, ‘a number of influential citizens’ from different Indian communities petitioned Bombay’s Municipal Commissioner to register their opposition to the new plague regulations that he had announced a week earlier. The petitioners declared that ‘hospital life

\textsuperscript{40} For a detailed discussion of the colonial state’s measures to combat the plague epidemic in Bombay, see Arnold, ‘Touching the Body’; Klein, ‘Plague, Policy and Popular Unrest’; Chandavarkar, ‘Plague Panic and Epidemic Politics’; and Kidambi, ‘Plague, Pythogenesis and the Poor’.

\textsuperscript{41} On the popular violence directed against the plague administration in Bombay, see the works by Arnold, Klein, Chandavarkar and Kidambi cited above.
being unknown amongst the people, the patient himself was most averse to being removed and deprived of the care and comforts he could count on in his family, and his removal was looked on both by himself and his attendants, as certain death. They also demanded that the plague measures ‘be carried out by all Municipal subordinates with care, judgment and tact’ and that the task of entering homes ‘not be entrusted to young and raw European and Eurasian lads’.42 Two months later, a number of ‘representative gentlemen’ presented a ‘public petition’ to the city’s Municipal Corporation that blamed the outbreak of the epidemic on the ‘inefficient sewerage system’ in the island. The petitioners urged the government to procure the services of a professional sanitary expert from England to resolve this pressing problem.43

At another level, however, the state’s response to the epidemic deepened the segmentation of Bombay’s civil society. Indeed, the petitioning process worked through, and thereby reinforced, structures of local ‘community’, variously defined by religion, caste and neighbourhood. For instance, the Sunni Muslims of Bombay repeatedly petitioned the government to protest against its actions in dealing with the epidemic. In February 1897, the leaders of the community submitted a petition contesting the Bombay Municipal Corporation’s attempt to shift the Muslim burial grounds in the city to a new location. The petitioners declared that there was no evidence ‘to prove that the Mahomedan burial grounds have directly and indirectly either been the cause of, or the aggravating element in, the existing epidemic’.44 The following month fifteen thousand Sunni Muslims - ‘of every caste and sect’ - petitioned the Bombay Plague Committee against the compulsory removal of plague victims to hospital and the examination of women by male doctors.45 The signatories of these petitions invoked the language of ‘tradition’, calculated to appeal to the cultural assumptions of the official mind and to rouse their own fearful compatriots,

42 Snow, Report, p. 74.
43 TOI, 12 January 1897, p. 6; TOI, 15 January 1897, p. 6.
44 TOI, 20 February 1897, p. 3; TOI, 9 March 1897, p. 5.
in opposing what they deemed to be an unwarranted intrusion into their spaces and practices. Similar petitions emanated from ‘Hindu’ communities divided along lines of caste, language and region.

While the dialectic of integration and segmentation within civil society suggests continuities in the way petitioning fostered communities of action, the plague epidemic nonetheless marked a rupture in important ways. For one, the petitioning process itself was transformed as new agencies of executive power were created to deal with the crisis. In the early months of the epidemic, a majority of the petitions were directed to the civic administration, which was vested with the task of stamping out the epidemic. Indeed, the Municipal Commissioner received such a large volume of petitions at this time that he was soon forced to jettison the rule that required him to respond to every individual supplicant. But the creation of a Plague Committee in March 1897, headed by Brigadier-General William Gatacre, brought into play a new body to which the city's residents had to submit their grievances. An even more noteworthy change occurred after the riot of March 1898 when the Government of Bombay appointed a ‘central committee’ headed by a specially designated official ‘to give a patient and sympathetic hearing to all representations’.46 Where the grievances were ‘imaginary or due to misunderstandings’, the government notification announced, the committee was to ‘remove the grievances by a kindly exposure of error’. And where there was ‘some solid basis, even though trifling in itself, for complaint’, the committee would ‘refer the complaint to the local Ward Committees for enquiry and redress’. The newly constituted committee convened at the city’s Town Hall where it received petitions directly from the public. Interestingly, supplicants who approached the committee were allowed to air their grievances either in writing or orally. In the latter cases, their complaints were noted down by an official and then forwarded to the relevant authorities. The epidemic as an event thus had ramifications for the remaking of the petition in fin-de-siècle Bombay.

46 Letter to the Chairman, Bombay Plague Committee, No. 1990P, 18 March 1898, GOB, GD [Plague Branch], 1898, Vol. 407, Compilation No. 367, MSA. Interestingly, some of the members of this committee were Indians associated with the plague administration.
Ominously for the colonial authorities, not all petitioners adhered to the norms of 'disciplined dissent' laid down by the government. The Municipal Commissioner of Bombay recalled how during the first year of the epidemic 'the executive was subjected to a perfect storm of threats, abuse, and protests from individuals who deemed themselves aggrieved by the measures adopted to protect them'. For instance, his initial notification in October 1896 regarding the 'regulations to be observed in the treatment of buildings where cases occurred, and of persons suffering from the disease was received with loud denunciations, and answered by petitions protesting against terms, and many classes of the population announced that they would leave the city and undoubtedly...intended to do so.' One petitioner, who took care to remain anonymous, attributed the plague to 'divine displeasure' at the 'evil deeds' of the British rulers. The conventional protocols of petitioning were thus frequently transgressed during the course of the epidemic.

Forms of correspondence that presumed a more transactional exchange with the state also blurred the boundaries of the petition-form. Thus, some petitioners not only expressed grievances but also offered their services to the panic-stricken authorities. Moreover, as the epidemic tightened its grip over the city, many correspondents also advanced their own theories about the dreaded disease and proffered solutions. 'We had much advice about the treatment and many offers of medicine', noted the city's Health Officer. 'Some were very modest', he added, 'but as they went on they became more confident, and would guarantee that the weekly death-rate of the city would be reduced by more than one-half.' One writer extolled the powers of a certain miracle worker who had the 'means, by virtue of which he can relieve the public of the so fiercely prevalent disease in the City of Bombay in course of sixteen days'. Another anonymous Marwari petitioner claimed that one 'Ali Mahomed, son of Jewaji soap merchant, who lives at Udeypore, knows some specific for the epidemic' and advised the Bombay government to 'at once' seek the services

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47 Snow, Report, pp. 18-19.
48 Snow, Report, p. 73.
49 'Complaints and Memorials', GOB, GD [Plague Branch], 1898, Vol. 582, Compilation No. 202, MSA.
50 'Complaints and Memorials', GOB, GD [Plague Branch], 1898, Vol. 320, Compilation No. 202, MSA.
51 Snow, Report, pp. 120-122.
of this man ‘to check and stop the progress of this disease, which he could so in six months’.\textsuperscript{52}

Another noteworthy feature of plague petitions in colonial Bombay was that in many instances they were not only ‘pleas to the powerful to grant something in their capacity to authorize’, but also demands for the redressal of wrongs ‘committed by a person in power’.\textsuperscript{53} In turn, this suggests that we cannot simply assume as a structural invariant the recent claim that the ‘complaint and petition represent two opposing modes by which subaltern peoples appeal to those in positions of power’.\textsuperscript{54}

The complainants were drawn from every level of the urban social hierarchy. Thus in their petitions to the authorities, the city’s working classes were vocal in their complaints against the plague measures. For instance, in March 1898 labourers and cartmen working in the docks and bazaars in the Cotton Green at Colaba petitioned the government that the practice of ‘making all the inmates of a house in which a plague case may have occurred, to vacate it, and to make them stay in a starving condition, amidst many hardships, should be put a stop to’. They also drew the government’s attention to the ‘great inconvenience in obtaining certificates which are required both in cases of natural as well as plague deaths’.\textsuperscript{55} Interestingly, a number of cases that came up before the ‘central committee’ appointed by the government after the riots of March 1898 were from individuals who belonged to the lowest strata of society. Mahadeo Yessoo, a ‘Maratha’ residing in Babulnath Road Chowpaty, alleged that ‘a plague party came to his house and without any reason the officer kicked over his food and burnt a Dhotee and two sarees’. Bala Luxuman, a sweeper residing in ‘Kalandas Kripam’s Wada near Bhuleshwar’, complained that his room ‘was broken open in his absence and subsequently goods worth Rs. 30 were burnt and the place lime-washed though no case of plague had occurred there’.\textsuperscript{56}

\textsuperscript{52} ‘Complaints and Memorials’, GOB, GD [Plague Branch], 1898, Vol. 582, Compilation No. 202, MSA.
\textsuperscript{54} \textit{Ibid.}
\textsuperscript{55} \textit{TOI}, 18 March 1898, p. 6.
\textsuperscript{56} ‘Complaints and Memorials’, GOB, GD [Plague Branch], 1898, Vol. 407, Compilation No. 367, MSA.
Better-off Indians also inundated the government with petitions demanding action against errant or over-zealous officials. Some of these complaints emanated from the relatives of plague victims whom the authorities moved to hospital. One man complained to the Health Officer that when he was away at work a Parsi plague official had forcibly taken away his daughter and grandson to the hospital. ‘If anything more is done to this girl and child’, the complainant declared, ‘I will hold the Municipality responsible for her life, if not, please give orders at once to give back my daughter and her child.’ In other instances, the complainants were tenants who had been evacuated from their homes in tenements where plague cases were discovered.

The ‘respectable’ classes found the restrictions on travel equally irksome. For instance, in March 1897 hundreds of regular passengers who commuted between Bombay and Kalyan on the Great Indian Peninsular (GIP) Railway petitioned the government about their daily travails on this route. The petitioners complained about the medical examination that they were forced to undergo every evening at Kalyan station, ‘when everyone is tired after the day’s work in the plague-stricken and enervating climate of Bombay and is anxious to be home’. They therefore called on the government ‘to take the necessary steps for the removal of the inconvenience which we have been suffering from since the introduction of the medical examination’.

The blatant racism of European plague officials sharpened the resentment of the Indian middle classes. For instance, Bomanshaw Entee, a resident of Borah Bazaar, complained to the government in March 1898 that the European medical officer at the Prince’s Docks ‘treats all the passengers like dogs and does not care to hear anything’. ‘In my humble opinion’, he submitted, ‘I think a great change should be made in this rude way of examination. I don’t think the English subject would put up with such treatment for a single day.’ A similar sentiment had been expressed a

57 Snow, Report, p. 120.
58 TOI, 16 March 1897, p. 6.
59 Letter from Bomanshaw Entee, 7 March 1898, ‘Complaints and Memorials’, GOB, GD [Plague Branch], 1898, Vol. 320, Compilation No. 202, MSA. Ironically, the petitioner was a Justice of the Peace who had rendered much help to the government in its search for plague cases in his locality. The District Plague Official who received Entee’s petition noted that ‘a complaint of this nature coming from a gentlemen who has done us much good as a visiting Justice demands careful inquiry’. Ibid.
few months earlier by the upcoming lawyer Mohammed Ali Jinnah, who put together a petition to the government from the Indian members of the Bombay Bar, protesting against restrictions on travel. The Indian lawyers could not resist pointing out that ‘our European brethren in the profession enjoy the privilege of non-detention’.  

It was Bombay’s landlords who were perhaps most vocal in their complaints about the government’s anti-plague measures. ‘Your department people’, one property owner admonished the city’s Municipal Commissioner, ‘have begun to clean and whitewash rooms in which deaths had occurred. But not satisfied with this, they want the other rooms, which are kept locked up by the tenants who have gone somewhere to be given over in their charge by breaking open the locks and removing all the contents of the rooms for the purpose of their being also cleaned.’ 60 Another landlord was ‘surprised to know that, even though I have strong proof of the whitewashing of the property, your men, assisted by the Police, forcibly entered the houses and commenced to whitewash, which was unnecessary and a zoolum’. And yet another petitioner complained to the Commissioner that ‘owing to your men having cut off the water connection and also commenced disinfecting operations, all the tenants were naturally frightened, and nearly seven-eighths of them have vacated’. 61

On occasion, landlords banded together to complain collectively to the ruling authorities about the hardships they were forced to endure on account of the Epidemic Diseases Act (EDA). For instance, in May 1898 property-owners in Kamathipura petitioned the government to complain about the notices they had been served under the EDA by the Municipal Commissioner, ‘requiring them peremptorily by a certain time to make alterations to their houses, and informing them that in case of default of compliance with the requisitions contained in the said notices, their houses would be closed up and branded as unfit for human habitation’. The

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60 Petition to Private Secretary to Governor from Members of the Bombay Bar, 7 December 1897, GOB, GD [Plague Branch], Vol. 109, MSA, quoted in Catanach, ‘Who are your leaders?’, p. 212. Likewise, leading native merchants complained in March 1898 that official attempts ‘to prevent the population from moving freely at will from place to place’ had ‘disastrously affected all trade and commerce in Bombay’ and thereby ‘occasioned very great inconvenience and hardship to all those who have to travel’. Petition from Motilal Kanji and others to Andrew Wingate, Plague Commissioner, Bombay, 26 March 1898, GOB, GD [Plague Branch], 1898, Vol. 388, Compilation No. 297, MSA.


62 Snow, Report, pp. 122-123.
alterations they were called upon to make, they pointed out, ‘are of such a nature as to put it entirely out of the power of the house owners to carry them out on account of their costliness’. As a result of the notices, they went on to add, some of the ‘more poor inhabitants’ of the locality, ‘who could not by any possibility effect the required alterations to their houses have become altogether disappointed’, while others ‘have been actually turned out of their houses, their house doors have been nailed up by Municipal authority, and to complete the sum total of all these grievances their houses are marked as unfit for human habitation’. If the government could not address their grievance, the petitioners submitted, ‘their houses should be taken over by the authorities on payment to them of reasonable compensation’. 63

It was not only the workings of the EDA that fuelled the grievances of the city’s propertied classes. In November 1898 a new civic agency was established to redress the problem of ‘sanitary disorder’. The City of Bombay Improvement Trust was entrusted with the work of ‘making new streets’, ‘opening out crowded localities’, and carrying out land reclamations to ‘provide room for the expansion of the city’. 64 As it set about carrying out this ambitious programme of constructing new civic infrastructure, the Trust became an increasingly intrusive presence in the life of the city. It bulldozed old streets and razed ‘slums’ as part of its agenda of ‘improvement’, displacing thousands in the process. It also embarked on massive street construction schemes that sought to transform Bombay into a healthy and orderly city, characterized by the free circulation of air, goods, and labour. 65

The establishment of the Improvement Trust thus marked the entry of a novel and extraordinary bureaucratic institution in Bombay’s civic life. In order to carry out its ambitious schemes, the Trust acquired large swathes of land in the city. Some of this land belonged either to the government or the Bombay Municipal Corporation. In many cases, the Trust’s activities entailed the exercise of eminent domain vis-à-vis

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63 _TOI_, 13 May 1898, p. 3. The house owners of Nowroji Hill submitted a similar petition a few months later. See GOB, GD [Plague Branch], 1898, Vol. 320, Compilation No. 202, MSA.
64 _Annual Administration Report of the City of Bombay Improvement Trust_ (hereafter _AARBIT_), for the year 1899 (Bombay, 1900), p. 3.
65 For a detailed analysis of the Trust’s schemes, see Kidambi, _Making_, pp. 71-113.
private property-owners. Prior to embarking on a scheme, the Trust notified the public as well as each individual owner whose property was likely to be affected by it. After the notification was issued, the government had to consider any representations that were put up against it, either by the Municipal Corporation or individual house-owners, before granting its approval. All private properties required for its schemes by the Trust, and publicly notified for the purpose, were acquired by a designated special officer acting under the provisions of the Land Acquisition Act of 1894. Furthermore, a three-member Tribunal of Appeal, comprising a president and two assessors, was also constituted in order to ‘ensure the correct apportionment of compensation among the various parties in intricate and contested cases’. Any property owner dissatisfied with the valuation of their property by the Special Officer could appeal to the Tribunal.

From the outset, the Trust’s schemes triggered vocal opposition from owners whose properties it sought to acquire. Unsurprisingly, landlords formed the backbone of the new ratepayers’ associations that mushroomed in Bombay during the first decade of the new century. These associations submitted numerous petitions and memorials to the Government of Bombay contesting the Trust’s policies. Their collective supplications illuminate the increasingly antagonistic relationship between the Trust and the landowners of the city. They also show how property-owners invoked different kinds of arguments in contesting the Trust’s policies.

A recurrent grievance in the collective petitions presented to the Bombay government by the city’s landowning classes was that the Trust was seeking to contravene longstanding agreements that had guaranteed their property rights in perpetuity. For instance, the landowners of the outlying northern districts of Dadar, Matunga and Sion submitted that the Trust’s acquisition of their land was a breach of the ‘promises and covenants given to and entered into with them by Government, to leave their original homes to come and reside on the various islets which now form

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67 *Gazetteer*, III, p. 83.
the City, dispossessing themselves of all ancestral belongings in distant lands’. Implicit in such claims was the notion of an original social contract between local communities and the state that was the bedrock of Bombay’s growth as a prosperous urban settlement. As the petitioners saw it, the government was ‘morally bound to sacredly observe all these promises and covenants in maintaining with integrity the possessions of the people whose ancestors were the back-bone in the great work of the development both physical and commercial of the city’.

In opposing the Trust’s schemes, supplicants adhered to a longstanding tradition whereby a fraught present was contrasted unfavourably with an idyllic past. Thus, petitioning the government against the takeover of their lands, the Koli fishermen residing in the Koliwada at Mandvi, pointed out that they had lived in this part of the island ‘from time immemorial’ and had ‘carried on their harmless vocation unmolested and in peace’. Now their way of life was threatened by the Bombay Improvement Trust’s proposed Mandvi-Koliwada scheme. Giving up their ancient lands to the Trust, the Kolis argued, would lead to their dispersal as a community with the attendant collapse of their industry. As a result, ‘a population numbering over a thousand souls’ would ‘go to ruin’.

The invocation of customary rights and the narratives of loss in such collective petitions were calculated to appeal to the paternal instincts of the rulers and arouse their sympathy. In some cases, the petitioners’ appeals did produce the desired effect. Thus, on receipt of the Koli fishermen’s petitions expressing their opposition to the Mandvi-Koliwada scheme, the Governor of Bombay noted on the file that ‘I hope these poor people will be dealt with as liberally as possible.’ ‘When it [the scheme] has been sanctioned I think we should try and deal with the matter in a way that will cause the

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68 The Humble Memorial of the Land-Owners, Residents and Ratepayers of the F and G Wards of Bombay to His Excellency the Right Honourable Henry Stafford Northcote, Governor of Bombay, May 1900 (hereafter Humble Memorial), p. 6, GOB, GD, 1909, Vol. 28, Compilation No. 218, Part I, MSA.
69 Ibid.
70 The Humble Petition of the Undersigned Fishermen, residing in Koliwada, Mandvi, Bombay to His Excellency the Right Honourable Henry Stafford Baron Northcote, G.C.I.E, Governor of Bombay’, 10 March 1902, GOB, GD, 1905, Vol. 29, Compilation No. 194, Part I, 1905, MSA.
71 ‘Petition from Koli fishermen, Koliwada, Mandvi, Bombay, to Samuel Rebsch, Chairman, Bombay Improvement Trust’, 19 February 1902, GOB, GD, 1905, Vol. 29, Compilation No. 194, Part I, MSA.
least inconvenience to this trade,’ agreed Samuel Rebsch, the Chairman of the Improvement Trust.72

At the same time, many petitioners deployed arguments based on law, justice and public reason in opposing the Trust’s actions. Bombay’s ratepayers, for instance, challenged the Trust’s interpretation of the statutory provisions that allowed it to acquire properties. They criticized the Trust for repeatedly contravening the legal stipulation that it should only compulsorily acquire land that was ‘required on sanitary grounds for Improvement schemes or absolutely necessary for street schemes’.73 The ratepayers’ petitions to the government also questioned the Trust’s approach to urban development. They argued that the Trust had failed to tackle the sanitary problems that had caused the plague. In particular, they assailed its failure in addressing the pressing issue of poor housing and overcrowding in the city’s congested core, and for not according the highest priority to the question of rehousing those who had been displaced by its schemes.74 Furthermore, the ratepayers contended that the Trust’s propensity to undertake costly schemes, which called for large amounts of borrowed capital, was placing an unbearable burden on the city’s finances. They pointed out that the Trust’s schemes ‘as proposed, propagated and formulated’ were ‘based on wrong calculations’ that were likely to result in failures that would ‘leave to the citizens of Bombay, as heirlooms, the incalculable burdens of loans contracted with annually accruing amounts of interest’. This would affect the borrowing powers of the city and disrupt urban finances. As a consequence, Bombay’s ratepayers would be ‘crushed under the burden of Taxes’.75

72 ‘Note by Samuel Rebsch, Chairman, Bombay Improvement Trust’, dated 22 February 1902, GOB, GD, 1905, Vol. 29, Compilation No. 194, Part I, MSA. But two years later, officials claimed that the Kolis of Mandvi had ‘no claim to any special consideration’ as far as their relocation was concerned. Proceedings of the Bombay Improvement Trust, 11 October 1904, GOB, Judicial, 1904, Vol. 38, Compilation No. 129, Part II, pp. 372-3, para. 2, MSA. Still, this did not deter the Kolis, led by their Patel – Mahadev Dharma Nakhawa – from presenting yet another petition to the Trust in April 1905 asking for ‘a small piece of ground where they can in future continue to land and fish near their colony and the markets, where they can, as they do now, stack materials and mend and dry their nets’. TOI, 13 April 1905, p. 5.

73 Petition of the Bombay Ratepayers’ Association to His Excellency the Governor of Bombay in Council (hereafter Bombay Ratepayers’ Petition), Adopted at the Public Meeting of the Citizens of Bombay, held on the 5th of May, 1903, in GOB, GD, Vol. 29, Compilation No. 522, 1905, MSA.

74 Ibid.

75 Humble Memorial, pp. 16-17.
The ratepayers’ petitions and memorials also assailed the Trust for its lack of public accountability and transparency. In particular, they criticized the ‘undue reticence of the board’ in parting with information about its acquisition procedures and argued that this made it difficult for the Municipal Corporation to make an informed decision about its proposals. The memorialists called for the ‘fullest details of a complete scheme’ to be placed before the Municipal Corporation, ‘including confidential data concerning the valuation of properties’. They went on to demand greater representation for the Municipal Corporation on the Trust’s board. The Corporation, they pointed out, was the biggest contributor to the Trust’s coffers and was also responsible for its debts. Hence, ‘representation’ ought to be ‘commensurate with the burden’ placed on the municipality. Increasing the representation of the municipality in the Trust, the ratepayers argued, would also enable them to ‘control the financial operations of the Board, reject extravagant and wild projects and secure the maximum benefit at the minimum cost’. Not surprisingly, colonial authorities were prone to respond tetchily to such memorials, whose rhetoric and tone had more in common with the criticism directed at them in the Indian press than they did with the protocols of supplication.

Bombay’s citizenry did not only deploy the petitioning process to register their opposition to the unprecedented intervention in their spaces and practices by the plague administration and the Bombay Improvement Trust. They also actively used petitions to make demands on the city’s municipal administration for civic amenities and resources. A significant catalyst here was the reconstitution of the Bombay Municipal Corporation in 1888. Already by that date, the Municipal Corporation had emerged as the most important institutional agency in the everyday life of Bombay’s inhabitants. The Corporation collected a range of taxes, maintained and regulated public markets, streets and drains, and licensed a variety of trades and occupations. Act III of 1888 further consolidated and extended the executive powers of the Corporation. In particular, it augmented the discretionary powers vested in the

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76 *Bombay Ratepayers’ Petition*, pp. 2-4.
Municipal Commissioner, who was responsible for ‘carrying out the provisions of the law governing the entire municipal administration of the city’. At the same time, as a sign of the imperial commitment to greater Indian representation in the sphere of ‘local self-government’, the Act also increased the directly elected element within the Corporation. Ratepayers paying an annual minimum of thirty rupees in taxes now directly elected half the seventy-two-member body. A further twenty corporators were elected by the Justices of Peace (16 members), the Fellows of Bombay University and the Chamber of Commerce (2 members each). Saliently, the Corporation too had its own formal rules regarding the submission of petitions addressed to it. These were usually considered by a twelve-member Standing Committee that reported back to the Corporation ‘with such remarks or recommendations as they shall deem fit’. Petitions had to be submitted in an ‘intelligible language’ and ‘duly stamped’ under the Court Fees Act.

The enhanced regulatory and punitive powers of the municipal administration worked in tandem with the simultaneous increase in the number of directly elected corporators to render the Bombay Municipal Corporation a focal point of petitioning by the city’s Indian residents. Interestingly, as Bombay continued its relentless march northwards, the demand for urban amenities increasingly came from the residents of the rural districts that were swallowed up by the swiftly expanding industrial metropolis. In July 1890, the Standing Committee of the Corporation considered a petition from the ratepayers of Mahim, who pointed out that ‘several improvements in the matter of drainage, water-supply, lighting, roads, streets, etc. which had benefitted other wards had not been extended to that ward’. Matters were no different two decades later. Thus, the residents of Matunga, Dadar, and Vadala submitted a petition to the municipality in November 1910, ‘praying that in view of

79 *TOI*, 17 July 1890, p. 5.
the rapid development of the suburbs in point of buildings and population adequate facilities in respect of road lighting and water and drainage arrangements might be afforded’ to them. They requested road-widening works, a ‘proper system of drainage throughout the distinct’, and improvements to the existing water supply.\textsuperscript{80}

Other individuals and groups in the city also petitioned the municipality seeking urban amenities in their localities. For example, the residents of Haines Road, Delisle Road and Parel Road, submitted a petition to the municipality in April 1890 ‘for the establishment of a dispensary in their neighbourhood’.\textsuperscript{81} In August 1899, the house owners in Chandanwadi Cross Lane petitioned the Corporation ‘to undertake to cleanse and light the bye-lanes at Municipal expense’.\textsuperscript{82} Dadabhai Dhunjibhai approached the municipality in January 1907, ‘stating that for years past there had been a crying need of a market at the junction of Purbhadevi and Delisle Roads, which form the centre of a large commercial industry on account of the existence of no less than a dozen mills within a small radius, and several large chawls for labourers’.\textsuperscript{83}

Equally, the archival record abounds in examples of ordinary Indian residents using petitions to prompt the city’s municipal authorities to rectify sanitary defects in their localities. For instance, the residents of Khetwadi complained to the Corporation in December 1890 about the poor conditions of drains in their locality.\textsuperscript{84} In August 1892, one Bechardas Moorlidhur petitioned the Corporation about the ‘want of roads, lighting, police protection, and provision of drainage in Agripada’.\textsuperscript{85} In October 1903, Mrs. C. D’Souza, a resident of Cavel, ‘represented the inconvenience and nuisance caused by the dust-bin cart placed in front of her premises’.\textsuperscript{86} The

\textsuperscript{80} TOI, 8 November 1910, p. 8.
\textsuperscript{81} TOI, 18 April 1890, p. 5. The municipality turned down this request on the grounds that the petition did not emanate from ‘bona fide residents’ and that it ‘had never made grants for the establishment of dispensaries’. \textit{Ibid.}
\textsuperscript{83} TOI, 31 January 1907, p. 8. The petitioner also pointed out that this was not the first time that the residents of the area had put forward this demand. Five years earlier, mill workers in the neighbourhood had petitioned the Municipal Commissioner, ‘urging the establishment of a market’. But that request had not been ‘considered favourably’. On this occasion, however, the Municipal Commissioner agreed to sanction the erection of a temporary market. \textit{Ibid.}
\textsuperscript{84} TOI, 24 December 1890, p. 5.
\textsuperscript{85} TOI, 1 September 1892, p. 3.
\textsuperscript{86} TOI, 24 October 1903, p. 7. The Divisional Health Office reported to the Standing Committee that the petition ‘was not an isolated instance of complaints regarding the matter; hardly a week passed
following month, twenty-six residents of Bomanjee Lane, Fort, complained of ‘the
danger arising from houses declared unfit for human habitation in the lane, which
having been left bitterly neglected in their insanitary condition by the owners, had
become habitations for a large number of rats, who were likely to spread infection in
other houses in the lane’. Similarily, A.G. Minto and other petitioners residing in
Sitaram Buildings near Crawford Market petitioned the Corporation in December
1908 about the ‘dust nuisance caused by the imperfect and irregular watering of
Paltan Road’ and requested that the road be ‘properly watered twice a day to its full
width’. Furthermore, the petitioners asked for the removal of municipal carts in the
area ‘as they were not only an eye-sore, but a standing menace to the health of the
neighbourhood’. The negligence of the Corporation was also the subject of a petition
in November 1912 from S.L. Lopez, a resident of Mahim, who complained that ‘the
filth and squalor which surrounded the Fort Market at Mint Road was a disgrace to
the city’. Importantly, in all these instances the petition-form did not entail the explicit recitation of negative consequences for the petitioners in the event of non-
compliance on the part of the addressee. On the contrary, these petition called on the representatives of the civic administration to discharge their duties. Expectation,
rather than self-abasement, was the overriding tone in such petitions.

Everyday petitioning at the municipal level also suggests that supplicants frequently invoked ‘religious’ traditions in seeking either to defend or shape their urban environment. Thus, in October 1891 the Hindu ‘merchants and workpeople’ of Cotton Green, Colaba, objected on religious grounds to the erection of a fish and meat market in this area. On another occasion, petitioners associated with a Hindu temple

without some complaint being made about the position of some one or other dust-bin carts in Bombay’. Ibid.

87 TOI, 12 November 1903, p. 3.
88 TOI, 10 December 1908, p. 9.
89 TOI, 28 November 1912, p. 5. Lopez, the Municipal Commissioner declared, was an inveterate petitioner ‘who usually confines his petitions to matters connected with that district [Mahim]. It is not likely that he uses the Fort Market to any extent himself and it has not been complained of by any local resident’. Ibid.
90 By way of a contrast, see Palat, ‘Regulating Conflict’, pp. 86-7.
91 TOI, 22 October 1891, p. 3. But the petitioners also adduced another reason for their opposition to the proposed fish and meat market near the Cotton Green. Such a market, they pointed out, would
at Second Bhoiwada complained to the civic authorities in September 1899 that a drinking fountain in the area ‘was converted into a bathing ghat, and into a washing place, which was not quite an edifying sight to those who visited the temple, and which shocked the modesty of the Hindoo ladies, who frequented the shrine’. Similarly, the Jain trustees and devotees of the Shri Adeshwar shrine complained in June 1900 of a ‘nuisance close to the back entrance of the temple’ and implored the Corporation to order the ‘suspension of all work in connection with the nuisance’. Likewise, Vali Mahomed Hasan and his fellow members in the ‘Mahomedan Jamat’ at Mothi Sewri submitted a petition to the Corporation in September 1915, in which they expressed their fervent opposition to the government’s decision to permit the opening of a liquor shop ‘in the immediate vicinity of the only mosque in the locality’. Such supplications showed a canny awareness of the susceptibilities of colonial officialdom, which tended to pay special attention to claims that invoked religious tradition and ‘public morality’.

### IV

Petitions, then, played a constitutive role in the expansion and consolidation of urban civil society in Bombay during the late Victorian and Edwardian era. Equally, petitioning activity in these years came to reflect the city’s changing political culture. At one level, the emergence of new sources of power and influence within the urban neighbourhoods had a pronounced impact on the practice of supplication. At another level, petitions formed an integral element in modes of subaltern protest that undermined colonial attempts to enforce the norms of ‘disciplined dissent’ on its subjects.

Power relations in Bombay’s neighbourhoods entered a new era of flux from the 1890s onwards. The vast influx of migrant workers into the city rendered obsolete...
many older mechanisms of information and control within the localities on which the colonial rulers had hitherto relied. More worryingly for the authorities, the so-called ‘natural leaders’ of the local communities - who usually managed conflicts within the neighbourhood - were increasingly challenged by new plebeian figures that derived their authority and influence from the informal economies of the street. These included jobbers, petty shopkeepers, chawl owners, rent-collectors, bootleggers, pimps, tea-stall vendors and various kinds of dadas (strongmen with a reputation for physical violence). It was increasingly these men who came to control the evolving politics of the neighbourhood in colonial Bombay.\footnote{For a fuller discussion, see Kidambi, \textit{Making of an Indian Metropolis}, pp. 115-156.} In turn, the growing tensions within the localities between more established structures of community leadership and the new wielders of power and influence manifested themselves in the petitioning process. Petitions became a mechanism by which the contending sources of authority within the neighbourhood now sought to draw the state into their disputes. As a consequence, colonial officials increasingly found themselves entangled in local power struggles in ways that made it hard to sustain the myth of the state as a transcendent entity.

The manner in which the city’s police force responded to the conflicts surrounding the Bombay Muharram in the 1900s offers an excellent illustration of how petitions could ensnare the agencies of the state in the politics of the neighbourhood. During this decade, a series of violent confrontations took place between the raucous Sunni tolis that paraded through the Muslim neighbourhoods during the ten days of this collective ritual and the Bohras, who as a ‘respectable’ Shia Ismaili sect commemorated the martyrdom of Imam Hussein at Karbala in a suitably austere manner. The trouble began in March 1904 when a riot broke out over the attempt of some Sunni processions to enter Doctor Street during Muharram. This was a locality dominated by the Bohras, who sought to prevent the tolis of the surrounding Sunni neighbourhoods from passing through their street. The latter retaliated by attacking the Bohras and stoning the police stationed in the area. The riot was only
quelled after the military was called in to restore order on the streets. In the aftermath of the riot, the legal firm of Thakurdas & Co submitted a petition to the colonial authorities on behalf of the Bohras of Doctor Street. This document declared that the Bohras did not ‘take part in the various kinds of unseemly and indecorous processions which through the streets of Bombay’ during Muharram. On the contrary, they pointed out, as ‘true’ believers they commemorated the festival with piety and solemnity. Moreover, they claimed their right over Doctor Street by arguing that it was ‘principally inhabited by Vohras’ and that ‘hardly any Mahomedans of other sects reside or carry on any business there’. The petition therefore implored the authorities not only to grant their locality special police or military protection, but also use the newly created ‘special powers’ bestowed on the Police Commissioner by the City Police Act of 1902 to prevent other communities from passing through Doctor street during Muharram.

The Bohra petition elicited a favourable response from the anxious colonial authorities. A large contingent of policemen was stationed in Doctor Street to maintain order during the following Muharram. However, the move fuelled popular resentment in the Sunni neighbourhoods and formed the context for an even bigger riot in 1908 in which Sunni street gangs once more attacked the Bohras and the police.

It was against this backdrop that S.M. Edwardes, the city’s new Police Commissioner, cracked down hard on the conduct of this annual ritual. In 1910, Edwardes announced that although processions would be allowed to pass through Doctor Street during Muharram they would be prohibited from playing any music in that neighbourhood. This injunction only served to intensify popular perceptions about the official partiality towards the Bohras of Doctor Street. The leading Sunni mohollas petitioned the Bombay government to register their protest against Edwardes, whom they accused of being biased in favour of their Bohra antagonists.

96 H.G. Gell, Commissioner of Police, Bombay, to Acting Chief Secretary, Judicial Department, Bombay, 12, April 1904, GOB, Judicial, Abstract of Proceedings, April 1904, A 25, MSA.
97 Petition from Vohra Mahomedan inhabitants of Doctor Street to S.W. Edgerley, Chief Secretary, Bombay, 27 February 1906, GOB, Judicial, Vol. 160, Compilation no. 555, 1906, MSA.
One petitioner complained to the Governor of Bombay that the Police Commissioner, ‘departing from the policy of Government, is acting in a way calculated to cause a breach of the peace by favouring the Shias against the Sunis [sic]’. Another petition went even further and declared that Edwardes and his deputy had been ‘bribed through a Mahomedan Police officer with three lakes of Rupees [sic] by the Bhoorees [sic] out of which two thousands were paid by the above officers to one Sulleeman C. Mehta who had delivered a dinner (Briyanee) party where members of J.P & Khansaebs were invited along with other Mahomedans at the instance of the officers to compound the dissatisfaction prevailed between two parties [sic]’. These petitions show how residents of the Sunni neighbourhoods perceived the representatives of the state as being closely implicated in the power structures of their localities. Nonetheless, their supplications implicitly appealed to the transcendent self-image of the state by calling upon it to rectify the profane actions of its local agents.

At another level, petitioning activity in colonial Bombay began increasingly to transgress the limits set for it by the ‘documentary raj’. In particular, petitioning increasingly became imbricated with evolving repertoires of subaltern protest. For instance, in April 1889 the drivers and owners of public conveyances in the city – ‘Victorias’, labour carts and bullock ‘hackeries’ – launched a protest against the attempts by the civic authorities to enforce a provision in the new Municipal Act of 1888 that required all owners of public conveyances in the city to pay the full licence fee and municipal tax in one advance installment. This abrupt change from the usual practice of collecting the licence fee and municipal tax in two installments bore down hard on the owners and drivers of these public conveyances. Matters came to a head when the police arrested over a hundred drivers for plying their trade without a licence and sought to have them prosecuted. As a result, reported the Times of India,

98 Petition from Mizra A. Lateff Beg Mogul and Mahomed Hussein bin Mahomed Essuf Darji, GOB, Judicial, Vol. 182, Compilation No. 571, 1910, MSA.
99 Petition from Syed Yacub Mahomed and others of Rangari Moholla, Bapu Hajare Moholla, Kasai Moholla and Mazagon, GOB, Judicial, Vol. 182, Compilation No. 571, 1910, MSA.
'The owners of hack victorias, recklas, and labour carts formed themselves into a body and agreed to strike until a satisfactory answer was received to a petition detailing their grievances, which they had addressed to the Municipal Commissioner'.

A few months later, there occurred another instance in which collective petitioning formed part of subaltern protest. In early July 1889, hundreds of municipal scavengers in the city went on strike demanding higher wages. The strikers were persuaded to end their protest by the Municipal Commissioner who promised to look into their grievances. But as the weeks passed and there was no response from the municipal authorities, the scavengers submitted a petition to the Commissioner ‘requesting him to let them know of the result of his inquiries’. The petition, and the implied demand that he keep his word, elicited a strongly worded notice from the Commissioner, who threatened that if ‘any of the men displayed insubordination and refused to work, they would render themselves liable to being fined and being dismissed from service’. In response to his threat, five hundred-odd scavengers – both men and women – ‘resolutely put down their brooms and brushes…and decided not to work until the Municipal Commissioner consented to increase their wages’.

There are a number of other examples in this period that show how the petition was an integral element in the public staging of working-class protest. This occurred in several ways. In some instances, Bombay’s cotton mill workers resorted to strikes after repeatedly petitioning their employers for an increase in their wages or bonus payments (especially in years of high inflation). In other examples, a group of workers in an individual factory would suddenly strike work and then submit a petition to the management specifying their grievances. This was usually because the employers and managers of labour insisted that the workers present their demands or complaints in writing and eschew strike action. There were also occasions when employers (or, more usually, their managers) regarded the tone of a petition as insubordinate and sought to force workers to withdraw it.

100 TOI, 26 April 1889, p. 4.
101 TOI, 30 July 1889, p. 5.
102 Bombay Presidency Police, Secret Abstracts of Intelligence (hereafter BPPSAI), 1890-1914, passim.
Interestingly, in such cases the urban working classes deployed both a rhetoric of supplication, with emphasis on the ‘freedom of the will and action of the recipient and the impotence of the author’, and the language of demand, ‘which negotiated by threatening sanctions against the audience and circumscribing its discretion’.\footnote{Palat, ‘Regulating Conflict through the Petition’, p. 87.} Take, for instance, the way in which postal workers in Bombay used petitions to pursue demands for higher wages and better working conditions in 1906-07. Rising inflation and deteriorating living standards had triggered increasing disaffection within the ranks of these government workers. During the course of 1906 postal and telegraph peons, clerks, and other menial staff petitioned the state in seeking restitution of their grievances. At first, their tone was deferential, appealing to the paternalist instincts of the colonial authorities. But when their initial petition was rejected by their employers, the police reported that the ‘postmen were not wholly happy with the reply which they have received’. In particular, they complained that ‘certain references in it affect their character and they intend presenting as soon as possible another petition’.\footnote{BPPSAI, XIX:26 (1906), p. 243, para. 483(a).}

The petitioning process itself consolidated the political subjectivities of these workers, heightening their sense of class-consciousness vis-à-vis their employers. Thus at a meeting in July 1906 to discuss attempts by their immediate supervisors to force them to withdraw their petition, the postal workers ‘resolved that they would make a vow to the goddess ‘Mombadevi’ to remain loyal to each other throughout this time of their grievances and that they would each subscribe Rs. 2 towards a fund to meet legal expenses in having their grievances righted’. Eventually, when their petitions failed to budge the government, the postmen went on strike in August 1906.\footnote{BPPSAI, XIX:34 (1906), p. 318, para. 646 (a); TOI, 17 August 1906, p. 7.} Nor did the matter end there. Through the winter of 1906-7, postal employees (including clerks) continued to petition the government for an increase in their pay and allowances.\footnote{These petitions were spurred by the support extended to the postmen by ‘swadeshi’ nationalists in Bombay associated with Bal Gangadhar Tilak. BPPSAI, XIX:38 (1906), p. 360, para. 736 (a).}
The collective action of the postal workers also points to the significance of the performative aspects of petitioning. An episode in the postal workers’ movement is particularly revealing. On the night of 11 January 1907, more than two hundred ‘packers, runners and other postal employees’ held a meeting to ratify a document reminding the government about the previous petitions they had submitted regarding their grievances. The police report of the meeting described the proceedings:

The printed reminder copy...was placed in Nana Shankar's Temple, Tardeo, and on top of it a cocoanut. Each as he took his copy made a vow that he would remain staunch to his comrade. The copies were then signed...They also decided that, in the event of no satisfactory reply being received by the 19th instant, they would again meet with the Postal Peons and decide what further action they would take, at the same time indicating that it might be necessary to go out on strike.... The Postal peons have signed a copy of a reminder which they are going to submit...and some of them are also talking about going on strike again. The Postal employees of the classes above noted are freely discussing the possibilities of another strike....

Collective petitions in these years were frequently drafted and ratified in public assemblies and meetings. The sites of these gatherings varied. Bombay’s diverse ‘Hindu’ communities often used wadis and temples for their meetings. Muslim assemblies were usually staged in mosques or in other kinds of community spaces. Cross-communal assemblies, on the other hand, were held in educational institutions, theatres and other kinds of ‘public’ buildings that were not associated with any specific community.

The performative dimension of these urban assemblies and meetings was an important feature of emergent forms of subaltern politics in the years leading up to the First World War. In a number of instances, the organization and submission of a

108 For instance, when the Bombay Municipal Corporation introduced a new measure in 1903 to introduce a meter system with regard to the water supply of the city’s mosques, representatives and members of all the Muslim communities met at the Ismail Habib mosque in Memon Street to draft a petition in protest against the move. *TOI*, 30 March 1903, p. 5. The Parsis, likewise, would gather in their fire temples. Dinyar Patel, personal communication, 7 June 2016.
109 For example, when the Bombay Ratepayers’ Association organized a large public meeting in May 1903 to protest against the policies of the Improvement Trust the city’s Novelty Theatre was chosen as the venue for the event. *TOI*, 6 May 1903, p. 3.
petition involved gatherings numbering in the hundreds. The document that was discussed on such occasions was usually drafted beforehand and read out before the assembly. Speeches would be made explaining to the audience its aims and content. The petition that was eventually submitted to the ruling authorities would underscore the ‘representative’ character of the public assembly in which it was ratified.

Petitioning in early twentieth-century Bombay thus became an activity with incalculable political effects. Increasingly, therefore, the colonial state sought to fine-tune the protocols of the petitioning process to exclude modes of address and activities that were deemed politically suspect or insubordinate. Yet its attempt to enforce norms of ‘disciplined dissent’ only served to hasten the colonial state’s loss of legitimacy as a locus of sovereignty. As mass nationalism gathered pace in the inter-war years, the petition as political event gradually yielded place to overt forms of anti-colonial resistance that altogether jettisoned the language of supplication.

V
Although the practice of petitioning has been pervasive across time and space, its political significance has been irreducibly contingent on the specificities of historical context. Focusing on colonial Bombay in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, this essay has highlighted one such context in which the petition came to be remade as a political instrument by ordinary Indians seeking justice and accountable governance from the representatives of the colonial state. As a consequence, the pedagogical straightjacket imposed on the petition-form by the colonial rulers began to disintegrate in the face of the increasingly vocal aspirations and insistent demands of their Indian subjects.

At the same time, the remaking of petitioning culture in late Victorian and Edwardian Bombay was by no means an ineluctable stage in a teleological process whereby the archaic social practice of supplication evolved into a modern mode of

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110 See, in this regard, the introduction to this special issue by Robert Travers and Rohit De.
political contention and representation. On the contrary, as we have seen, the transformation of petitioning into a vehicle for popular mobilization and protest in this colonial metropolis was underpinned by the singular conjunction of rapid industrial urbanization, unprecedented state interventionism and far-reaching shifts in political culture. The essay has thereby sought to underscore the analytical value of identifying and investigating specific conjunctures in the long history of petitioning in South Asia.

111 Research on the early phase of English East India Company’s rule in the subcontinent has shown how Indians used petitions to express political demands and also pointed to the ways in which the practice of supplication was linked to other forms of collective resistance. See, for instance, Swarnalatha, "Revolt"; Balachandran, "Petition Town".