

Through the help of UW-Madison Global Studies and the Scott Kloeck-Jenson Pre-Dissertation Travel Fellowship, I was able to conduct extensive archival and exploratory field research in three Indian cities during the late summer and early autumn of 2012. I divided my time between Delhi, Nagpur, and Mumbai, with each location offering critical perspectives towards both my own dissertation in Anthropology and Ethnomusicology as well as the greater social justice mission of the fellowship.

The most compelling aspect of my research involved my attendance at a festival called Marbat in the city of Nagpur, located in the Vidarbha region of Maharashtra. Having consulted scholars at the Nagpur University, it appears that no substantial academic work on the Marbat festival exists in English, Hindi, or Marathi language publications. The nominally Hindu festival arose from political circumstances in the mid-nineteenth century in which administrative control over Nagpur formally shifted from the Bhonsle dynasty to the British East India Company, and then to the British Crown shortly thereafter. With tensions already strained between the Company and some Nagpur residents, the maharani Baka Bai, remaining representative of the Bhonsle dynasty, decided to support the British during the Revolt of 1857 rather than use her diminished power to attempt to restore independence to Nagpur. The decision was met with disapproval from many in Nagpur, who responded with the annual celebration of a politically-charged festival expressing the divergence of public opinion from government policy.

Since the festival's original celebration, Nagpur residents erect three large effigies for Marbat. The first of these effigies, the *pili marbat*, adorned in an elegant thirty-meter-long *sari* and (according to those I spoke to) further marked as a high-status regal figure by her yellow skin and stately pose, represents the princess Baka Bai. The second effigy, the *badgyah*, appears as a light-skinned male outsider in a role of governmental power, recalling a non-specific British official. The third effigy, the *kali marbat*, has more obscure origins, though she is said to have some relationship to an episode in the *Mahabharata* epic or perhaps even to pre-colonial and non-Hindu tribal practices. These three effigies (sometimes 30 feet high), often along with some smaller ones more explicitly depicting contemporary public figures (for example corrupt politicians) are paraded through the city on the day of Marbat, before being consumed by funeral pyres. The festival occurs at the height of monsoon, when infection and other sanitation concerns often reach crisis levels, especially for the more impoverished residents of Nagpur. It is these non-elite populations of the city that celebrate the festival most vigorously, with tens of thousands of people accompanying the effigies as they proceed through the streets. For those celebrating, the annual festival removes social and physical ills from the city. Though the festival lacks the immediate celebration of a deity, such as festivals to Krishna or Ganesh (e.g. Janmashtami and Ganapati), the festival is sacralized through the offering of *puja* at local temples (which typically remain filled with occupants on that day) as well as through the ritualized funerary fires that mark the end of Marbat.

Marbat demonstrates something very important about the political participation of the poor and disenfranchised in urban India. The relationship between politicians in India and residents of urban slums has often been criticized for its anti-democratic character, with many politicians viewing slums as “vote banks” and remaining opposed to policy decisions that would reduce the size of slums, accommodate the interests of urban poor, and increase access to education. Large-scale public festivals, *especially* one as politically motivated as Marbat, provide the opportunity for non-elites to express their political views with a greater chance of being heard by those in government due to the massive scale of

that expression. A festival such as Marbat literally shuts down the normal operations and usage of city infrastructure, thereby representing a seizure of control and assertion of agency. The music performed at the festival, relying largely on Vidarbhan folk styles, gives a local voice to this expression, highlighting the tension between marginalized Vidarbhan regional interests and the positions and policies of the state of Maharashtra or the Indian national government.

While in Nagpur, I was able to establish relationships with local journalists, university professors, Marbat festival organizers, government-appointed culture officials, and local leaders from both the Hindu and Muslim communities. These contacts will be important in my future research in the area. This major advancement in my work would not have been possible without the Scott-Kloeck-Jenson fellowship.

My time in Delhi and Mumbai was equally productive. In Delhi, my primary goal was to utilize the resources available to me through the National Archives of India. I collected extensive data on religio-political contestation and conflict over public festival processions. I expect this data to contribute directly to articles I am currently preparing for publication, as well as ultimately to my dissertation. Worth noting in particular is information I uncovered regarding the use of festival celebration as a means of articulating relations of power between princely states and British colonial officials throughout the 19th century. Expectations of British military participation in Hindu festivals taking place within the princely states (most significantly, in my research, Baroda) represented a strategy for Indian rulers to display the relative sovereignty and independence from British administration.

When I arrived in Delhi, large demonstrations were occurring, centered on exposing large-scale practices of government corruption and the flow of “black money” out of India through corrupt government channels. The demonstrations involved a fast by the spiritual leader Baba Ramdev. Despite charts displaying the amount of “black money” being lost to the West, especially the United States of America, my presence at the demonstrations was received very warmly. Many of the demonstrators I met at the fast were farmers from the state of Haryana, who feel that they have been particularly affected by the actions of corrupt government officials. They made it clear to me that their purpose in Delhi was to raise awareness of the hardships faced by the rural poor who often remain invisible to urban Indians.

I traveled to Mumbai for the Ganapati festival, which plays a key role in much of my archival research. While I was able to attend some days of festival celebration, my work was hindered by personal illness which prevented me from accomplishing many of my objectives in Mumbai. Through the connections I was able to make during my limited time there, however, I developed a better sense of why many urban poor individuals celebrate public festivals like Ganapati with such vigor, echoing many of the sentiments expressed to me about Marbat in Nagpur.

The Scott-Kloeck Jenson Fellowship provided me with the unique opportunity to further my research goals in a way that has been crucial to the progress of my project. I am in a significantly better position now to begin working on my dissertation. Because of the focus of the fellowship, I feel I have become more attuned to social justice issues which are now a primary focus of my project. Without this recent trip to India, these developments would not have emerged. I have also successfully established connections in India on a personal and institutional level, which will undoubtedly benefit future research on the relationship between public religious festivals and political activism in India.