3. The Ganapati Festival as a Public Festival

The communal riots between Hindu and Muslim communities took place in 1893 and 1894. The Hindu-Muslim riots first took place in 1893 in Mumbai and then in 1894 in Pune. The incidents in Mumbai (Bombay) had their effect in Pune in the same year.

The communal riots between Hindu and Muslims that took place in 1893, were the first of its kind. These riots first took place in Prabaspattan (in Gujarat) and then in Mumbai. Prior to that there had been riots between Muslim and Parsi communities in Mumbai in 1850 and 1874. In 1893 the communal riot between Hindu and Muslim communities took place in Prabaspattan during the festival of Tabut. Prabaspattan is a holy place for the Gujarati community. Hence, the Gujarati people were unhappy due to the riots in Prabaspattan. The Muslim community became aggressive after these riots. A major communal riot broke out in Mumbai on 11th August 1893. Muslim people came out of the Jumma mosque near Crawford market and attacked the temple of Shiva in Hanuman lane. Next day the Hindus retaliated. The riot continued for next two days. It could not be controlled. Hence, the canons had to be used to control rioting mobs. The military personnel in Mumbai turned out to be insufficient to control the situation. About three thousand troops had to be summoned from outside. About 75 people were killed and 350 were wounded. Thousands fled Mumbai due to terror. Neither life nor property was safe for five days. About 1200 people were arrested regarding the riot. The major government offices like the High Court had to be closed. At last the situation came under control when police resorted to firing. The situation in Mumbai calmed after one month. Meanwhile the incidences in Mumbai influenced the happenings in Pune. On the fifth day of the riots in Mumbai, i. e. on 16th August the festival of Nagpanchami (cobra's fifth, when the cobras are worshipped) was celebrated in Pune. It was a tradition to take out the procession of Nagoba (cobra). The musical instruments used to be played. The complaint of the Muslim community, which led to riots in other places, was that these instruments were played in front of mosque. Hence, the (British) officers maintained strict vigil to avoid any riot on the pretext of the instruments being played. But, then the atmosphere was vitiated and it led to uneasiness (in the relationship between Hindu
and Muslim communities) in Pune. These developments manifested in a communal riot in the very next year i.e. 1894. There was a major communal riot between Hindu and Muslim communities in Pune at the end of the Ganapati festival of 1894. (i.e. in the very next year of the beginning of the festival). When a mela (cultural troupe) was passing by a mosque near Daruwala Bridge, some Muslim men came out of the mosque and attacked the troupe. They broke musical instruments, dispersed the group and beat up Tatyasaheb Natu with canes. In retaliation to this incident some people (Hindu) rushed to the mosque, went inside it, beat up the Muslims inside and broke the furniture. This incident led to tension among two communities. Some Muslims broke the Ganapati idol of the Badhai Samaj (community) in broad daylight. One more Ganapati idol was desecrated at Chandubhai’s gymnasium. Subsequently the British government took action, arrested various people regarding the riot and tried them. The riot took place in the month of September. The judgement of the trial against the people arrested regarding the riot was delivered on Monday, 29th October in the same year. All the accused were acquitted. Subsequently during one felicitation programme, people of Pune showered flowers on the Judge Jacob. The judge was invited to the programme as a chief guest. He had acquitted all the accused of the riot. (Most of the accused were Hindus.) After 1894, no major communal riot, between Hindu and Muslim communities, broke out in Pune for a long time. (Kelkar, 1988 (1923): 332-339)

These riots in Mumbai and Pune were the first communal riots between Hindu and Muslim communities. There was a strong reaction among the Hindu community about the riots and subsequent tension between two communities. After the communal riots in Mumbai in 1893 and subsequent tension in Pune the Hindu community got united and the Ganapati festival was started. Thus, the riots became the reason for start of the festival. In the subsequent year the communal riot took place in Pune, as noted above and the reason was the opposition of the Muslim community to the playing of musical instruments in front of the mosque. These instruments were played by a cultural troupe.

After the riot in Mumbai broke out the Hindu leadership in Pune got united and there were attempts to call public meetings to air the concern of the Hindu community regarding riots. During such discussions about the riots, the concept of Ganapati festival to be celebrated in a public manner was put forward and finalized. In 1893 the Ganapati festival came after one and half a month after the communal riots in
Mumbai. In the Ganapati festival this time a deliberate attempt was made to unite Hindu community. This was the beginning of the 'new Ganapati festival' (i. e. Public Ganapati festival). It was commented in Kesari that this year the immersion of Ganapati idols was done differently from every year and it became a public one. People belonging to all communities within Hindu religion worship Ganapati. Hence, if immersion of Ganapati idols became public event then it will help in developing the feeling of unity besides some entertainment. (Kesari, 26-9-1893). (as quoted in Kelkar, 1988 (1923): 344)

There are various versions, which note the start of Ganapati festival as a public event. According to Wolpert, on the background of riots, Tilak and his followers sponsored a mass meeting in Pune to discuss the riots and memorialize government. The meeting was attended by seven thousand people. According to Kesari, it was the largest municipal gathering since the age-of-consent agitation. Before this meeting Poona's Hindu population had been urged by its orthodox leaders to boycott the Muslim Mohurrum Festival, which until 1893 had been celebrated jointly by adherents of both religions. In 1893 a separate Hindu festival was begun, designed to wean the Hindu lower classes away from the ritual in honor of a foreign deity, by providing them with an equally attractive alternative. Strengthening communal consciousness in this way served to bolster Hindu nationalist aspirations. (Wolpert, 1962: 66)

Here Wolpert has commented that the introduction of Ganpati festival as a public event was to wean the lower Hindu classes from the Mohurrum. Although it is difficult to speculate about the intentions of propagators of the Ganapati festival, it has become clear from the information that the festival had its multiple effects and thus could not be termed as an attempt against the Muslims only. This aspect will become clear in subsequent writings.

The first of the modern public Ganapati festival begun in Poona a week after the September meeting called to protest the Bombay riots. (Wolpert, 1962: 66). It has been noted by Wolpert that, Annasahib (Patwardhan) provided the inspiration, Tilak the perspiration and publicity, which catapulted the Ganapati celebration from a purely private religious function to the most important and best-attended public festival of western India within a few years. Held in September shortly after the Mohurrum, Hindus now marched with their communal cohorts behind giant images of their own god, instead of joining the procession of the Muslims who carried the tabuts
As it has been noted earlier, the start of Ganapati festival as a public event had many effects. It led to bridging (increasing) gap between Brahmin and non-Brahmin communities. The start of Ganapati festival is considered to be a well thought plan to organize the Hindu community and develop grass-roots level support by Tilak. As Courtright says, “The levels of energy released so destructively during the riots over cow protection did not go unnoticed by Tilak. For some time he had been searching for a way to bridge the gap between the Brahmins and non-Brahmins and find an appropriate context in which to build a new grassroots unity between them. Tilak believed that such a display of unity should be dramatic and take place under the guidance of Brahmins as the traditional and natural leaders of society.” (Courtright, 2001: 233)

Although Tilak has been widely credited for starting the public Ganapati festival, there are some conflicting pieces of information about his part in the start of the Ganapati festival. Such, information is available in a book commemorating 60 years of Ganapati festival, edited by J. S. Karandikar and in a biography of Tilak by N. C. Kelkar. Importantly both Karandikar and Kelkar were devoted to Tilak. This aspect will be clear in the following part.

The beginning of Ganapati festival as a public event has a significant background of the first Hindu-Muslim communal riots in the region. It has also been said that the Ganapati festival as a public event was started to counter the Muslims in riots. In the month of Shrawan (this month in Indian calendar precedes the month of Bhadrapada, in which the Ganapati festival is celebrated) in 1893 a meeting of leading personalities in Pune was arranged in the house of Bhau Rangari. Those present in the meeting were Annasaheb Patwardhan, Balasaheb Natu, Ganapatrao Ghotawdekar, Bhau Rangari, Lakhusheth Dantale, Balwant Narayan Satav, Nana Narayan Bhor Vakil, Khandoba Tarawade, Nanasaheb Khasagiwale, Balawant Narayan Kokate, Mama Hasabnis, Dagadusheth Halawai, Gangadhar Raoji Khair, Rambhau Bodhane etc. It was decided in the discussions that the Ganapati festival be celebrated as a public event. Accordingly, Bhau Rangari, Ganapatrao Ghotawdekar and Nanasaheb Khasagiwale installed Ganpati idols and started the public Ganapati festival. An immersion procession was taken out on the day of Anantchaturdashi. A mela (cultural troupe) of Kashinath Thakuji Jadhav was a part of the procession. Lokmanya Bal
Ganagadhar Tilak appreciated this idea and he wrote an article in support of this public Ganapati festival and the procession. (Karandikar, 1953:3 (part 1)) Here the name of Lokmanya Tilak is not mentioned among those present in the meeting.

Saradar Krishanajit Kashinath alias Nanasaheb Khasagiwale took initiative in celebrating this festival as a public festival. He had gone to Gwalior in 1892, where he saw that the Ganapati festival (Ganapati Utsav, as it is known) was celebrated as a public festival, with royal grandeur. He took cue from his observations in Gwalior and proposed the idea of Ganapati festival at public level. The idea was proposed in 1893 and the festival was celebrated at three places as a public festival. Thus the tradition of Public Ganesh Festival was begun in Pune. (Karandikar, 1953:preface 8).

The idea of celebrating the Ganapati festival as a public one caught on immediately. In 1894, the number of public Ganapatis installed increased substantially and this led to a dispute about whose idol should be there in leading position in the immersion procession. Hence, Lokmanya Bal Ganagadhar Tilak and Annasaheb Patwardhan were invited to solve the dispute. Tilak opined that the procession should be led by the village deity of Pune i.e. Kasba Ganapati, followed by Shree Jogeshwari and then the Ganapati of Khasagiwale. Since then till now the procession is led by the Kasaba Ganapati followed by Shree Jogeshwari. It has also been followed that at the end of the procession there should be the Ganapati (idol) of Mandai, preceded by those of Dagadu Halwai and Bhau Rangari. Thus for arbitration in the dispute about the order of the procession Tilak got involved in 1894 in this movement for Public Ganesha Festival. In the same year Tilak himself had installed an idol of Ganapati for the public festival in Winchurkar Wada. (Karandikar, 1953: preface p 9) The information of association of Tilak in Ganapati festival (at least overtly) has been provided here. Thus, it is very much clear that Tilak was not one of the founding fathers of the festival but he supported it and later joined it. Of course, considering the contribution Tilak made in institutionalizing the festival and providing the necessary intellectual sponsorship to the festival, there is nothing wrong in crediting Tilak for the festival. Yet, the question whether Tilak had himself started the festival or whether it was started by his followers and he joined the movement of celebrating the festival, later, needs to be noted.

Kelkar has provided different information about the start of the festival in the biography of Tilak. This biography is considered to be one of the most reliable ones. According to him, one day, when the movement to organize the special public
meetings of Hindus to express the opinion about the riots was on, notable personalities like Tilak and Namjoshi had gathered in the mansion of Babamaharaj. The concept of giving new twist to the festival was put forward and finalized in this meeting. Out of the notable people gathered for the meeting, persons like Ganapatrao Ghotawadekar were staunch Ganapatya (belonging to a cult whose revered god is Ganapati) and they had been celebrating this festival for a long time. Conservatives like Balasaheb Natu were obviously favorable to this idea. Tilak did not indulge much in rituals, but he used to worship Ganapati idol by bringing it home. These Brahmins were joined enthusiastically by the non-Brahmins like Dagadusheth Halawai, Bhorkar Vakil, Bandoba (or Khandoba) Tarwade, Gawade Patil, Bhausaheb Rangari etc. In the very first year the festival was celebrated as a good model. Next year, the festival was celebrated with more fanfare as the number of public Ganapati idols and the cultural troupes increased. A Ganapati idol was installed in every lane in 1894. Meanwhile, the movement of boycotting the Tabuts gained momentum. Thus, the Ganapati festival had the advantage of the ‘spared festive spirit’. (Kelkar, 1988 (1923): 420) Thus, Kelkar has clearly mentioned that Tilak was among the notable personalities who decided to start the Ganapati festival. Here Kelkar has mentioned ‘spared festive spirit’, by which he means that the Hindu masses had almost withdrawn from the Muslim festival of Tabuts and had no other public festival and thus their enthusiasm and efforts were spared and it helped the Ganapati festival.

The relationship between the Hindu and Muslim communities with respect to the Ganapati festival as well as the question whether the Ganapati festival was an attempt to retaliate against ‘Muslim aggression’ are worth considering. The comments by Kelkar as noted below throw some light on this issue.

He says, the Ganapati festival is an old one and it was celebrated with grandeur even in earlier days. There is no doubt about it. But, the essence of the attempt by Tilak is that the festival was started in a different manner i.e. as a public event and it was started after the communal riot between Hindu and Muslim communities. It can not be said that Tilak added to the grandeur of the festival in older days. In older days, the royal people used to celebrate this festival with enthusiasm and grandeur, various events, lighting and fireworks. It can not be matched by the festival celebrated by few commoners. But, the royal grandeur in older days was concentrated at some persons and the festival has been now spread among the masses. Hence, making people take part collectively in the festival is the revival of the festival. Masses were not
participating in this festival (Ganapati festival) and even if they participated, the participation was not in a public spirit. Tilak made these masses to celebrate this festival in a public spirit and this demonstrates his wisdom and cleverness. When the government was not doing anything (regarding the ‘aggression’ by Muslims) it was necessary for people to do something themselves. The Hindu leaders in Pune appealed to people that they should not participate in the festivals of Muslims as they used to be. In those times, about ninety percent Tabuts in Pune were of Hindu people. The Hindu leaders raised a question, why should Hindus install these Tabuts? If people are so much interested in celebration, then they should stop installing Tabuts and celebrate Ganapati festival. This is a way of retaliation. Due to this guidance, at many places old tradition of installing Tabuts was stopped. In 1894 in Pune, the number of Tabuts by Muslims increased from forty to sixty and Tabuts of Hindus were only 25 instead of one hundred. The (Ganapati) festival was not going to stop whether the moderates participate in it. Although the festival was not started to tease the Muslims, the intention was to unite the Hindu community with respect to the Hindu versus Muslim conflict and to teach the Hindu community, how to establish their rights without getting afraid of the Muslims. (Kelkar, 1988 (1923), p 348-351)

That the Ganapati festival was an attempt of Hindu mobilization against Muslims is alleged even in modern days. Cashman has opined that, the 1894 Ganapati festival was promoted as a counterpart to the Muharram procession. By copying certain aspects of the Muharram and by urging Hindus to boycott the Muslim festival, the organizers hoped to wean away those Hindu artisans, musicians, and dancers who had freely participated in the Muharram in previous years. (Cashman, 1975, 78) Even in a book regarding the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh it is said, “It is well known, for instance that the myth of medieval ‘Muslim Tyranny’ and Hindu (particularly Rajput, Maratha and Sikh) ‘national’ resistance was developed or endorsed in the late nineteenth century by many of the acknowledged founding fathers of Indian nationalism. Tilak’s Ganapati and Shivaji Utsavs worsened communal relations in Maharashtra” (Basu et al, 1993, 4)

The relationship between Hindu and Muslim communities is only one aspect regarding which the Ganapati festival had its effect. The Ganapati festival made its effect on the political, social and cultural influence of the British rule and attempts of Hindu social reformers to change the social system. These points are also worth considering.
By the time the Ganapati festival was started in 1893, the British rule in India was very well established. The Indian people were facing identity crisis due to influence of British system and their culture. There was a great impact on Hindu community. The social conditions in those days and the responses to it have been well narrated in the following paragraph. It says, “Lifestyle of Hindus was getting corrupted, due to the education received from the British, their thoughts were getting corrupted, people were getting uninterested towards religion. These developments were not good, hence what solution to this problem should be found, was the prime concern of many contemporary thinkers. In these circumstances, Lokmanya (Tilak) thought that if this festival (of Ganapati) was converted into a public festival, it would have a favorable effect. He agreed to the suggestion that this festival should be celebrated for ten days, so that awareness can be developed among Hindus, by way of lectures, programs and religious events. Thus Lokmanya (Tilak) gave this modern outlook to Ganeshotsava (Ganapati festival) and himself installed an idol for public Ganapati festival in Winchurkar Wada in 1894. The intention of Lokmanya Tilak for making this festival a public festival was that the Hindu community, which was getting disunited, will get together due to this festival and it will help in taking next step in politics. The concept of festival was instantly received as it was sponsored by Lokmanya Tilak and it became an important weapon of (political) movement.” (Karandikar, 1953, preface 9)

Then the Hindu community was under attack from various quarters, for various reasons. The rulers were British and obviously their administration and culture was influencing the Hindu community. There had been communal riots between Hindu and Muslim communities and the tension between two communities was there. There was one more challenge to the established Hindu way of life. This challenge was from the reformers. The reformers or the moderates were insisting on reforms in the Hindu community. But the reforms they were suggesting were mainly inspired by the British education they had. Whatever noble intention the reformers may have about the Hindu community, their attempts were leading to rejection of the whole system and thus, this was leading to the identity crisis among people. In such a situation it was necessary to project the Hindu community as a united one and also to assert its way of life. In this regard the Ganapati festival turned out to be useful one. As it will become clear in next part of this chapter the moderates or the reformists were equally on the forefront as the Muslims and non-Brahmins to oppose the Ganapati festival.
In case of the reformists, Tilak objected that those who did not know the old were preparing to construct the radically new. Tilak had different view about the reforms. In his opinion, no civilization could withstand such as all-encompassing attack on all its beliefs and way of life. If the reformists were successful in bringing about such reforms, Tilak feared that all the classical values would be lost, that the moral stamina of the people would be undermined and that the national will would be broken. Tilak knew the reforms were necessary, but not in such a way to destroy the civilization, which would be reformed. (Shay, 1956: 65) Hence, he began his battle with the westernized reformers. (Shay, 1956: 71)

Tilak considered that the social evils should be corrected by people themselves and for this his first task was to reach the people. He knew that lasting change, that a rebirth of values, required change in the hearts of people and not as reformers believed, change in the forms of institutions. Perhaps the most effective way in which he reached the people was through the employment of national festivals. He was instrumental in popularizing two great festivals, one to Ganapati, and a festival to revive the memory and glory of Shivaji, the liberator of Maharashtra, and the restorer of Swaraja through his battle with the Mogul Empire. (Shay, 1956: 73)

The Ganapati and Shivaji festivals served the purpose of bringing people together. In Tilak’s view, people who worship common deity, people who recognize a common historical tradition will, be able to stand together, to overcome the disunity of social form and to work together for the common good. In this way through common united effort, social evils could be corrected by the people themselves. (Shay, 1956: 76)

It were not only the Muslims who were opposed to the Ganapati festival, various sections among Hindu community had also opposed the Ganapati festival. Interestingly various groups that were otherwise opposed to each other were pursuing the same agenda of opposing Ganapati festival. In very next year of starting public Ganapati festival, in 1894 some respected Muslim citizens in Pune City objected to this festival calling it ‘a conspiracy against Muslims’ and petitioned the British government to ban this festival. But the British government did not do anything except assuring the Muslim leaders that the government will take a precaution that the sentiment of Muslims would not be hurt or there would not be any harm to their interests. (Gadgil, 1968, 551) The Muslim leaders considered the Ganapati festival to be an imitation of the Muharram and Tabut. Also, they considered the public Ganapati
festival to be an organized attempt of Hindu community against them. According to Cashman, The 1894 Ganapati festival further embittered relations between the Hindu and Muslim communities of Poona City. In Pune, the first Hindu-Muslim communal riot took place in September 1894. But, before this riot influential Muslims of the city had complained of the “inflammatory” Ganapati pamphlets in which the Muharram was “ridiculed” and the tabuts were described in “such offensive and disparaging language” which would only “incite the more inflammable sections of the two communities to breaches of the peace and bloodshed.” These petitioners appealed for government censorship of the Ganpati songs and the forbiddance of “all mimicry, by the Hindus of Poona, of the rites, usages and observances connected with the Moharram” (as quoted in Cashman, 1975, 93).

Again one more petition was filed to Governor Sandherst in 1897 against the festival. This petition was signed by Abdul Firoz, president of Anjuman Munafij Hukum Deccan, Narayanrao Raghu Nath Navalkar, president of Satyashodhak Prasarak Mandali, Narayan Meghaji Lokhande, president, Satyashodhak Samaj, Mumbai and Daryajirao Thorat, president, Satyashodhak Samaj, Pune. It was a petition on behalf of citizens of non-brahmin and Muslim communities of Pune. These citizens demanded that this festival should be banned all over the state. They had raised following objections against the festival- ‘the movement of Ganapati melas (cultural troupes) started by brahmins of Pune is corrupt imitation of Mohrrum of Muslims and it has led to a situation which will hurt the sentiments of 57.5 million Muslims in the subcontinent. This movement is generated out of communal riots between Hindus and Muslims. This movement is not in line with Hindu shastras and is not according to the traditions in the religion. This movement has created a new sphere of religious disputes and caste conflicts.’ But the British government refused to ban he festival even after this petition. (Gadgil, 1968, 551-552) Thus the Muslim leaders and the prominent leaders of Satyashodhak Samaj (founded by Mahatma Phule, to reject the brahminical dominance and brahminical understanding of the Hindu religion) had joined hands in opposing the Ganapati festival. Interestingly one of the objections raised against the festival was that it was not in line with Hindu shastras and was not according to the traditions in the religion. (But, then why did the members of Satyashodhak Samaj objected to the festival?)

The Ganapati festival was opposed by Muslim leaders, reformists as well as orthodox people for various reasons. The orthodox people feared that such a
celebration of a religious festival on streets, where there were no prohibitions, would corrupt the religious practices and endanger the Hindu religion. Such an objection was raised in one anonymous letter to the British rulers complaining against the festival. This letter was sent to the British government in 1910, demanding that the Ganapati festival be banned. The person who wrote the letter had expressed fear that the Hindu religion was in danger due to propagation of Ganesh (Ganapati) festival. He had complained that the citizens were suffering thanks to behavior of proponents of the festival. The writer had also described the contemporary Ganesh festival in Mumbai. This letter led to a public notice by the government on 17th August 1910, warning that if the objectionable nature of the Ganesh festival and the melas in it was not changed the festival will be banned from the next year. After that the government put on various restrictions. Hailing Chhatrapati Shivaji and display of images of Lokmanya Tilak was also banned. The orthodox among Hindus opposed the festival and boycotted it, calling it 'a corrupt practice.' The educated class tried to make a mockery of it. In spite of all these objections, opposition, bans and obstacles this public Ganapati festival spread out of Pune and Mumbai and got institutionalized. (Gadgil, 1968, p-551-552)

Thus, the Ganapati festival as a public event was started on the backdrop of the Hindu-Muslim communal riots. The riots took place in 1893 and again in 1894. It may appear that the Ganapati festival was propagated with a sole purpose of creating a deterrent to the Muslims, but in fact the festival has played many roles and it has become a platform for various social, cultural, religious and political developments. These observations will become clear in the succeeding writings. It has been said many times that Lokmanya Tilak started the Ganapati festival as a public event. But, according to the records it was started by some notable personalities in Pune as described earlier. These propagators of the festival appear to be close to Tilak and Tilak seems to have played an important role in the expression and endorsement of the concept. Important point is that there were significant number of non-brahmins among those who were pioneers of the festival. Thus propagation of Ganapati festival as a public event or public Ganapati festival can not be considered as a Brahminical design of propagating their God. Tilak overtly joined the festival in the next year i.e. 1894 when he himself installed a Ganapati idol in the Winchurkar Wada (mansion). Even though Tilak did not start the revolutionary tradition of Public Ganapati Festival, he must be credited for institutionalizing and expanding this festival in view
of participation (from all sections of society) and geographical reach. As it will evolve by the discussion in following chapters, the introduction of Public Ganapati Festival was a rupture in the tradition since Maratha rulers. There was a tradition of Ganapati festival as a private celebration of the Peshawas and their nobles and this tradition was substituted with a religious-cultural-social festival in which anybody can participate and enjoy. Thus, celebrating Ganapati festival and worshipping Ganapati was not now limited to only Brahmins but anybody was socially allowed to participate in the worshipping and the celebration. The Ganapati festival now became a public festival where the participation, religious acts and social interactions were never prohibited on the basis of caste, religion, sex, beliefs and language. Thus it was an important religious-cultural-social effort to start and institutionalize the public Ganapati festival. The great nationalist leader, Lokmanya Tilak should be credited for institutionalizing this revolutionary festival, as his intellectual sponsorship of this concept and his very participation in it, provided the festival ideological strength and social recognition to get established.

It is believed that Tilak started and developed this Ganapati festival to mobilize people against alien British rule. “By encouraging Hindus of all communities to join in a common quasi-political festival, Tilak was challenging the British thesis that Hindu society was divided and that the elite Brahman were out of step with their society.” (Cashman, 1975, 79) As it has been noted earlier that the potential of the Ganapati festival to mobilize people against the British rule. The British had been ruling in an unconventional manner and they had been using the tactics of divide and rule as well as creating inferiority complex among the Indians. In such a situation, the festival had been useful to as a platform to communicate with people and inform them about the dangers of the British rule, directly or indirectly. Cashman says, “measured against the expressed hopes of its publicists, the reorganized Ganapati festival was a mixed success. Although it proved a means of politicizing Brahmans, it is questionable whether it added many non-Brahmins to the Congress ranks. It alienated some sections of Indian society, and at times it hindered rather than helped Tilak’s cause. But measured by the standards of the time it enhanced Tilak’s stature and reputation as a leader. He acquired the support of the orthodox faction together with some of the young college graduates of Poona. He became force not only in Poona but in the Congress as well. It was Tilak, rather than Ganapati, who benefited most from the reorganized festival. The man Tilak used the god Ganesh as a stepping stone to a
bright political career.” (Cashman, 1975, 97) Although Cashman has called the Ganapati festival as ‘mixed success’, in fact the Ganapati festival turned out to be highly successful in gaining support from people and thus developing a great platform for mass mobilization. Considering the social and political conditions prevailing then and the stiff opposition to the festival by the Muslims, reformists, Satyashodhak Samajists and the orthodox Hindus (read Brahmins) the promoters had succeeded in developing a social platform where people belonging to all castes were coming together to perform a common activity at least for some days and thus overcoming the divisions in the society.

It was not only for the political mobilization did Tilak supported this festival but he had some social interests like unifying Hindu community and to repulse the influences of British (western) culture and Muslim festivals in which the Hindu masses were taking interests. Tilak was a Chitpawan Brahmin, he was highly educated and he was publishing a newspaper (Kesari), which was a modern way of mass communication in those times. Many of the readers of Kesari were Brahmins and when Tilak strongly advocated this concept of public Ganapati festival, he was appealing his Brahmin readers to recognize this festival. All these minor details assume significance as celebrating Ganapati festival made it possible to anybody irrespective of his caste or religion to publicly worship this God Ganpati and hence, it was a major social-cultural-religious change. Interestingly it was a great leader like Lokamanya Tilak who belonged to Chitpavan Brahmin caste (members of which were very much instrumental in establishing Ganapati as an important deity and for many of whom Ganapati was a tutelary deity.) was the person who institutionalized public Ganapati festival.

Although the concept of public Ganapati festival was very well received by the masses and the number of Ganapati idols to be installed publicly increased substantially within a short period of time there was a consistent opposition to this concept from various quarters. The conservatives were angry because their God was taken to streets. The reformists among Hindu community were opposed to it because the festival was a continuation of sorts of the tradition. There was some opposition not because of the religious reasons but because of the contemporary social and political equations regarding Lokmanya Tilak. There was no dearth of hurdles in celebrating this festival, propagated by Lokmanya. Moderates and Reformists campaigned against this festival from very beginning of it. The Moderates were unhappy because of the
popularity Tilak gained due to this festival. The Reformists objected to the celebration as they were against any religious awakening. Lokmanya Tilak responded to all these objections (to celebrating Ganapati festival publicly) by his articles in ‘Kesari’ and his lectures and silenced the opponents. Yet, the opposition to Ganapati festival continued in Tilak’s lifetime. After his death the opponents stopped objecting and many leaders in erstwhile opposition camp participated in the festival. (Karandikar, 1953, preface p 27-28)

Although the Ganapati festival was started for social mobilization, it was not like a typical organized and controlled movement. Worshipping god Ganapati in the annual festival was not new. This tradition was there for centuries. But, celebrating the festival collectively was a departure from the tradition. Cashman informs, in order to reshape the festival; Tilak popularized a number of innovations in 1894 festival. Large public images of the god were installed in mandaps (decorated pavilions). Each street, each peth (sector) or market, collected subscriptions for a Sarvajanik (public) Ganapati which became the object of collective worship for the unit involved. Another change was the consolidation of the group aspect of the festival. Whereas families or small groups had proceeded on the second, third, fifth, seventh, or tenth days to various sections of the river, all the sarvajanik Ganapatis were now conveyed together on the tenth and final day to immerse the images in a united ceremony. (Cashman, 1975, 77) But, the festival was a decentralized one and it had a loose structure. The decentralized character of the festival was one of the important reasons of the popularity of the festival as well as it had gained some advantages due to its loose structure. (Cashman, 1975, 81 and 91) Due, to the decentralized character and loose structure there was scope for anybody who participates in the festival to interpret it in his own way. Once the Ganapati festival started getting popularity, various people utilized it to pursue their own agenda. The reasons for this Ganapati festival getting popularity and getting celebrated on such a large scale were not only the natural festive spirit of the masses and the religious nature of the festival but also it was a handy tool for campaigning for the causes of one’s interests. Some people used it to campaign for Hindu organization, some people campaigned for swadeshi, some utilized it to start gymnasiums, some people taught for military discipline or some people used it to further the cause of secret movement. (Karandikar, 1953, preface p25)
Although, the public Ganapati festival was started on the backdrop of the Hindu-Muslim communal riots, some participation of Muslims in the Ganapati festival was there. There was participation of people belonging to lower castes. Thus, the Ganapati festival as a public event did not remain as an exclusive celebration of Brahmins and other upper castes. In this period around 1916 Congress- Muslim league pact was signed and Muslims started taking part in the movements. At many places Muslims delivered lectures in (Ganapati) festival. There was no dispute about touchables and untouchables and even if it was anywhere it diminished and the untouchables also started participating in the Ganapati festival. In some places the Ganapti (idol) of the untouchables was on the forefront. (Karandikar, 1953, preface p 30)

Lokmanya Tilak seemed to be very well aware of the social, cultural and religious significance of the Ganapati festival he had propagated with so much interest. He led started many movements. His position in the history of modern India as one of the most important nationalist leaders is indisputable. Yet, he had instructed in his will that the Ganapati festival be celebrated continuously. It is evident how much he was interested in this festival of masses. (Karandikar, 1953, preface 38) It will become evident in succeeding chapter that in modern times the festival has provided space for social and political reconciliation, it has mediated between oppositional forces and has become an expression of autonomy of masses. The festival has its relevance even after a century and is growing in terms of participation and the social and cultural space it provides to the participant. This makes clear the foresight of the great leader and why he insisted on the continuance of the celebration of the festival.

Various groups in the society opposed this festival for various reasons. The orthodox Hindu people (to be precise the Brahmins, who strongly believed in brahminical understanding of Hindu religion and insisted on concepts of purity and pollution) opposed this festival as it made it possible for anybody from any caste (lower or higher) to worship Ganapati at any place of his or her convenience and in a manner suitable to him or her. The people who belonged to Satyashodhak Samaj (founded by Mahatma Phule) opposed the festival as it paved the way to revival of Hindu traditions and beliefs to which they were opposed. The reformists among Hindus (many of whom were Brahmins and educated in British system) opposed the festival as they were against Hindu rituals and were so much impressed by British education that they considered such a mass festival as below dignity. The Muslims
opposed to it for two reasons i.e. the public Ganapati festival posed a competitor to their festival of Mohurrum (which is celebrated about the same time) and as it was started on the background of communal riots, it mobilized Hindu people and provided them the organized power (to fight?). But, this opposition from various quarters shows that the public Ganapati festival, propagated by Tilak was rupture in the tradition rather than continuation of orthodox tradition.

That the public Ganapati or Ganesh festival was a rupture in the brahminical tradition is also evident from the comments Lokmanya Tilak made in his newspaper, Kesari, in the editorial on 18th September 1894. Tilak writes, “It is true that until now the Ganapati deity is only among white collared class and in every home the festival was celebrated with grandeur with (religious rituals like) mantrapushpa, keertane. But, this year, people belonging to the mercantile class, which is important pillar of our society, Marathas or the working class comprising of castes like Sali, Mali, Rangari, Sutar, Kumbhar, Sonar, Wani etc, which earns money by toiling and makes our faces bright, with remarkable enthusiasm took initiative to celebrate this festival. Their enterprise is unprecedented. It is not something common that these people, changed their attitude and spent their spare time in worshipping Ganapati at least for some days. These are the people who after working for the whole day, wasted time in gossiping or having booze and subsequently harassing wife and children or to listening vulgar songs in folk theatre. Brahmins gave contribution (to celebrate the festival) as per their capacity, but the point to be noted is that the efforts for every public Ganapati festival and religious rituals in it are done by Maratha brothers.” (As quoted in Ghorpade, 1992, p -6) Here Tilak has made mention of Maratha brothers, by which he means non-Brahmins and not those belonging to Maratha caste only.

Tilak’s efforts for roping in non-brahmins in the festival and developing it into a social unifier are well explained in these comments. The festival, thanks to its accommodative, flexible and liberal nature, immediately became popular and the participation of masses in it grew considerably.

When the festival was started, there were three mandals (A mandal is a local social group, which celebrates Ganapati festival in the locality as a public festival.) which installed Ganapati idols publicly in Pune City. In the very next year, in 1894 the number of public Ganapatis became 100 (including one installed by Tilak). In 1895 it was 150. In the city the number of public Ganapatis in the following years was as follows- 1893-3, 1894-100, 1895-150, 1947-272, 1949-293, 1952- 350, 1960-400,
1967-450. In the city of Mumbai, the festival was started in 1895. In the succeeding years, the festival was started all over Maharashtra state and also outside it. (Gadgil, 1968, p-552-553)

After India got independence in 1947, the enthusiasm in celebrating the festival was overflowing. In Pune city there was a spurt in the number of public Ganapatis (installed by mandals) since independence in 1948, 1949 and 1950. There were complaints of hooliganism in collecting contribution and organizing functions. (Karandikar, 1953, preface p32) With the expansion of the Ganapati festival in terms of participation, the concepts of purity and pollution as well as propriety and formality were thrown to the wind. The masses celebrated the festival in according to their understanding.

The historical tradition of celebrating Ganapati festival is discussed in earlier chapter. The tradition of celebrating the festival by the Peshwas and their nobles was well established by the time the British defeated Peshwas and established their rule in the city of Pune. After the Peshwas were defeated, the tradition was carried on by the families of their nobles. The characteristic of this tradition was that the celebration was restricted to domestic level. By and large it were the Chitpawan Brahmin nobles of the Peshwas who took initiative in celebrating this festival as a family festival. The concepts of purity and pollution prohibited wider participation in the festival from all sections of society. The historical rupture in this tradition took place when in 1893 the Ganapati festival was celebrated as a public festival, for the first time in Pune City.

The concept of celebrating Ganapati festival publicly caught on with wider and larger participation and it did evolve as a social unifier and a potent mass mobilizer against the British rule, thus making Tilak’s attempts successful. The Ganapati festival expanded along the length and breadth of the state, with great participation from all sections of society, becoming it to be the most important festival in the state. The festival no more remained the glorification of Ganapati by Brahmins (as Ghurye has explained) but the non-Brahmins became the promoters and controllers of the festival and it became an effective medium for non-Brahmins usurping the brahminical ways of religiosity. This argument will be evolved in succeeding chapters.