

# Identity, Marginality, and Parallel Power: Urban Slum Structures and Organised Crime Through the Lens of the Varadarajan Mudaliar Syndicate

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**Abstract**—The Indian urban slum in the post-independent period has been frequently envisioned as a space of chaos, but closer inspection shows it is an intricate space of identity, culture, and power that creates its own governing structures. This paper examines the history of the Varadarajan Mudaliar syndicate in Bombay, a case of the 1960s to 1980s, not as a historical event in the history of crime but as a case study of how the state partially failed to reestablish political power in the Indian city, with marginality and migration playing a leading role in reshaping political power. Using sources such as literature on the Mumbai underworld, and legal documents, the study places the Mudaliar gang in the context of a demographic shift of Dharavi and Matunga, which are filled by Tamil migrants who are left out of formal housing, employment, and welfare systems. Vardhabhai, a bootlegging, gambling, real estate, and community patronage-based parallel order constructed by Varadarajan Mudaliar, commonly known as Vardhabhai, established alliances with politicians, police officers, and local people. This study contends that his syndicate was a de facto sovereign, offering housing arbitration, festival patronage and dispute resolution, thus transforming a criminal business into a moral economy of survival. It also interacts with the Indian legislative reaction, such as the Maharashtra Control of Organised Crime Act, 1999, the Unlawful Activities (Prevention) Act, 1967 and the provisions of the Bharatiya Nyaya Sanhita, 2023, to determine whether modern law responds sufficiently to the structural circumstances that generate such syndicates. The research concludes that organised crime in Indian cities is not an aberration, but a symptom of greater inequalities in citizenship, and that future syndicates cannot be eliminated without a concerted effort that includes both legal reform, urban policy and social inclusion.

**Index Terms**—Urban Marginality, Organised Crime, Parallel Sovereignty, Dharavi, Vote-Bank Politics, Varadarajan Mudaliar, Legal Frameworks.

## I. INTRODUCTION

The problem of the government of the Indian city of Mumbai has seldom lent itself to an easy solution. In the Dharavi lanes in 1970s, a resident who wanted a place to live, water or shelter was more likely to go to a local strongman than a municipal officer. In most instances such a strongman had not been able to ascend to power by statute or by ballot but by a less noisy arithmetic of migration, labour, caste, and illegal enterprise. The most powerful of these leaders in post-independence Bombay was Varadarajan Muniswami Mudaliar, whom the residents of the areas that he ruled referred to as Vardhabhai. During almost thirty years he sat in a syndicate which purified bootleg, adjudicated quarrels, funded temple fetes, and gave votes to the political group which would accept them. It is a mistake to discuss his gang purely in terms of a criminality problem, and to overlook a bigger claim on scholars of identity, culture, and power that his career makes.

This study interprets the Varadarajan Mudaliar syndicate as a place where there is an overlap of three long-standing themes of the social sciences. The first is marginality which does not mean the denial of access to the city but a specific way of conditional inclusion where the city poor are there in economic terms but not in legal terms [1]. The second one is migration, the southward movement of Tamil labour to the industrial periphery of Bombay, which restructured the demographic nature of Dharavi and created new circuits of kinship and livelihood that would come to be colonised by crime [2]. The third one is power or rather what Hansen and Stepputat have termed sovereignty beyond the state, the ability of the non-state actors to carry out the functions of the state in people that the state has ignored [3].

The line of reasoning that has been established throughout the study is not complex, yet, hopefully, not naive. The type of organised crime that Mudaliar represented was not a deviation of state capacity as well as a breakdown of moral policing. It was the natural consequence of a constitutional order which held out social and economic equality and put the practical work of urban inclusion in the hands of market forces whose interest in providing it was non-existent. Any legal or policy response that aims to avert the recurrence of gang needs to first recognize the gang on these terms, as opposed to folk villainy.

## II. HISTORICAL BACKGROUND: ORGANISED CRIME IN POST-COLONIAL INDIA

The Bombay underworld would not indicate a longer lineage of organised criminality in India. Hereditary thuggee and criminal caste were whole categories of criminal constructed by colonial administrators in the nineteenth century to justify punitive ethnography, and the Criminal Tribes Act, 1871 created legal subjects whose identity was determined by presumed criminality [4]. Although a lot of that machinery was removed after independence, the conceptual remnant remained in policing practice, determining who would be surveilled and who would not. The economy of urban crime was the only thing that changed radically after 1947. The interchange of people to the new industrial cities, the unequal process of land reform, the prohibition of numerous states, and the steady degradation of formal licensing agencies opened the opportunities which were not long to be seized by ambitious men.

V. K. Saraf, who worked as Commissioner of Police in the mid-1990s and recorded the origins, activities and inter-gang warfare of what he referred to as the syndicates in the city of Bombay, was the first scholarly attempt to map post-independence organised crime in Bombay in a systematic manner [5]. Saraf determined three characteristics of the Bombay gangs: their territorial embeddedness, typically in a specific mohalla or slum; their ethnic or regional makeup, which reflected larger tendencies of labour migration; and being dependent on state actors to survive. The latter difference separates the modern syndicates of the colonial-era dacoit bands they have become the subject of rhetoric.

State of Maharashtra was the first to implement prohibition in late 1940s as a part of the wider Gandhian moral programme [2]. The long-term focus of legal alcohol production, of the marshy lands of Dharavi, among the Koli fishing caste, was criminalised. The economic impact was swift. There was still a pump of demand but the supply had been directed to the black market. Tamil Nadu migrants who had come to work in the leather tanning factories of Dharavi found illegal distillation to be a more profitable venture than wage labour in the tanning areas. By the early 1960s the older Koli producers as well as the various smaller players were pushed to the sidelines by a new syndicate which had its own internal structure and external partnerships. Vardhabhai would come to be the leader of this syndicate.

This was followed by another transformation of the underworld in the 1970s and 1980s. Smuggling of gold, buying out of real estate and contract murders became the main business and the boundary between a criminal organization and a legal enterprise gradually faded. The Muslim side of the trade was occupied by Haji Mastan and Karim Lala and the liquor routes and some territory of Dharavi were controlled by Vardhabhai network of the South [6]. In the early 1990s, following the growth of the D-Company of Dawood Ibrahim, and the carnage of the 1993 bomb blasts, the Bombay underworld had taken on a transnational and communally inflicted nature, one that the earlier years had been deprived of [7]. The Mudaliar era seems almost localist, against that later history. And it is the attraction of its analysis in this: it demonstrates what organised crime would appear like when completely integrated into the labour geography of one neighbourhood.

### III. MIGRATION, CASTE, AND THE MAKING OF DHARAVI

It was already in the 1960s one of the largest informal settlements in the Asian continent and by most accounts, it has since then grown to become the largest [8]. But this was not a homogeneous slum of the Dharavi of Vardhabhai. It represented a ragtime community of occupations and caste communities superimposed on decades of industrial development. The original fishing community of the coastline, the Kolis, had inhabited its marshy flats since the pre-colonial city was founded. Potters of Gujarat created their enclave around Kumbharwada. The leather pits were worked by Muslim tanners of Uttar Pradesh and Bihar. The Tamil migrants, who came in large numbers in the 1930s and beyond, settled in the eastern side of the settlement and the nearby Matunga because of the jobs in the tanneries and the textile mills [9].

Vardhabhai found his social base in the presence of the Tamil in specific. Numerous of these migrants were of lower-caste origin, and some of them were the Mudaliar caste group to which Vardhabhai himself was a member. The city exposed them to the standard crises of the marginalised migrant, such as the lack of any recognised forms of housing, the lack of access to ration cards and identity documents, and the lack of access to formal jobs. In this regard, as Appadurai has suggested, the infrastructure of daily life in these settlements is built bit by bit by relationships with brokers, middlemen and patrons who step into the void of a state [10]. In this regard, the activities of the syndicate were not simply extractive. It was, in any case in part, constitutive of community.

Vardhabhai had a reputation of addressing the people in Tamil, of sponsoring annual celebrations of Vinayaka Chaturthi in south Indian fashion and of settling quarrels among migrants without involving the police [11]. In oral histories of Dharavi, he is remembered as an ambivalent leader, feared due to his violence and credited with having constructed temples, funded schools and defended his own people during periods of communal strife. This two-sided image is not a contradiction but an indication of the type of sociological work organised crime is engaged in. The subaltern in the global South city, as Bayat has proposed in a different urban scenario, may only survive on what he termed as a silent transgression on the social order, and strong brokers are the ones who coordinate the transgression [12].

The greater backdrop of structure bears mentioning. A legal means of livelihood was supplanted by prohibition. It was not substituted by an economic alternative of the state. Migration was not accompanied by housing, sanitation, or documentation. In the absence of formal institutions, informal ones emerged. The most visible and most violent of these was Mudaliar syndicate, but it is best thought of as a part of a larger production of informality that scholars of urban India have charted over the post-colonial decades [13], [14].

### IV. THE EMERGENCE OF VARDHABHAI

Born on 2 January 1926 in Kanyakumari district of Tamil Nadu, Varadarajan Muniswami Mudaliar arrived in Bombay as a teenager in the early forties and got employment as a coolie at Victoria Terminus railway station [6]. His early life followed a usual path of rise and fall, small thefts at the docks, contact with dock-worker gangs, and finally involvement in the traffic of smuggled goods outside the port area. The docks, still today, were an opening of league and informality in the city and the possibilities that it presented became formative to a generation of Bombay gangsters including Haji Mastan and Yusuf Patel.

By late fifties, Vardhabhai had shifted to illicit liquor business which was more profitable and provided a predictable customer base as compared to dock theft. His first legal tussle was in 1961 when he was apprehended on grounds of operating an illegal brewery. The prosecution against him failed due to what the police later explained as not new reasons: witnesses altered their stories, documentary evidence was lost and important exhibits did not arrive at court [2]. The arrest, which was the only time in his career, when the Indian state formally summoned him, was that one. The answer is not secret. During the next twenty years he developed working relations with police officers, ward-level politicians, and areas of the municipal bureaucracy that provided him with protection.

The syndicate itself grew in four major lines of business. The former was bootlegging that continued to be its main source of revenues and utilized hundreds of producers, distributors, and local sellers in Dharavi and Matunga. The second was matka, the numbers game that had turned into an obsession of the working-class in the post-war Bombay. The third was property, where Vardhabhai and his lieutenants divided the unutilized state and privately owned land to new migrants in exchange of rent and acted as informal landlords in the illegal property market of the city [5]. The fourth was the protection and contract services, which involved the occasional killing, and was carried out by a network of lieutenants who reportedly involved Rama Naik, Sukur Narayan Bakhia and Anjali Brahmanand Jadhav.

There are two aspects of the operation which are worth highlighting. First, it was ethnically hybrid in its outreach and Tamil-dominated in its core leadership that provided it with a coherence that more polyglot outfits lacked. Second, it invested a lot of energy in legitimacy performances. Vardhabhai frequented funerals, received petitioners throughout the set days in his house and funded religious and cultural events that did not attract the attention of other dons. His self-presentation was not as a gangster, but rather of a panchayat headman. This performance did not happen by chance in his power. It was the main tool through which the gang obtained the silence, and sometimes, even the active collaboration of the population it exploited.

## V. SLUM POWER STRUCTURES AND INFORMAL GOVERNANCE

The analytical difficulty presented by the reign of Vardhabhai is to characterise it without having to romanticise about it or to have it cut down to mere criminality. The most helpful conceptual tools are some of the resultant products of recent anthropology and political theory of the urban South. Hansen and Stepputat have contended that the modern state does not enjoy a monopoly of sovereignty even internally [3]. In much of the postcolonial city, informal sovereigns, in their sense, are effective sovereigns in that they can decide upon the exception and resolve life-and-death issues locally. These are not external or internal to the state but they occupy a grey zone where the state agents implicitly licence, condone, or engage in some manners of rule that are technically illegal.

A second layer is the theorisation of the state of exception by Agamben [15]. The slum encroachment of the Indian state placed the slums in the status of suspension of the normal exercise of the civil rights in the slums. The inhabitants were not, technically, outlaws, but the law machine treated them only selectively and in a typical fashion punitively. Within this zone of partially-legalized existence, a different order also had its room and the need to be. The fact that the alternative order employed violence does not make it any different than the state; the difference is the fact that the violence of the alternative order was not regularly accepted as legitimate.

In Dharavi, at least four governance functions which the municipal state refused or failed to provide were performed by Vardhabhai. He assigned accommodation to decide who the new migrant was going to build where and under what conditions. He presided over land, marriage and debt disputes, often in informal meetings, which were more likely to be attended by residents than any panchayat. He also offered protection against other gangs or against the police persecution and against instances of communal violence. And he held festivals and distributions of welfare that gave the settlement a tone of community life. These functions are virtually identical to those theorised by Chatterjee as the sphere of political society where populations who do not have access to the formal rights of citizenship bargain their survival by making collective claims mediated by patrons [16].

This was an expensive order. It was highly patriarchal and women were involved as extortion collectors or messengers [11]. It was ethnically biased, favouring Tamil migrants in comparison to the rest and occasionally employing violence towards those who questioned that favouritism. It condoned the activities, such as sexual exploitation of women and the force of children into labour, which would have been unacceptable in any humanitarian scale. The analysis is not an attempt to justify the existence of the syndicate but to render it legible. With no state to regulate, there was a counter-state; and the substance of that counter-state was the restrictions of illegality, and the biases of those who ruled it.

## VI. THE SYMBIOSIS OF CRIME, POLITICS, AND VOTE-BANK DEMOCRACY

The continuity of the Mudaliar syndicate through the various governments cannot be explained without alluding to the aspect of electoral politics. The municipal and state elections of 1960s and 1970s in Bombay were fought in constituencies, in which a single slum could be the determining factor. Vardhabhai also monitored voter mobilisation over vast areas of central and western Bombay, and he was able to exchange the ability to do so with police protection, legal immunity, and regulatory forbearance [6]. The connection was not clandestine, nor as controversial among the then political class. A few modern reporters covered the open campaign of the candidates in his home during elections.

This kind of dynamic has been termed in the academic literature on Indian urban politics as vote-bank democracy which is at times used polemically, but with real content of analysis [17]. Brokers with access to turnout in poor neighbourhoods have a political bargaining power that significantly surpasses their numbers when the electoral competition is stiff and voter turnout in poor neighbourhoods to win is a necessity. Vardhabhai was a broker on such a grand scale. It is said that he transported votes to Congress candidates in the 1967 and 1972 assembly elections and negotiated with the Shiv Sena in the early 1980s when the party had become a more dominant force [2].

The result of this symbiosis was a paradox in the midst of Indian democracy. The state institutions remained in place, and bore legitimacy through the Constitution and through periodic elections. The slum informal institutions still ruled and they were legitimized through delivery and force. To remain in power, politicians needed both. In this disposition the criminal is not external to the polity; he is a policeman unknown to it. Any critique that views him as simply a disruption of the legal order will overlook the structural role that he plays.

With this restructuring of this broker economy the fall of Mudaliar syndicate in the early 1980s. With the emergence of the Shiv Sena, the ethnic calculus of patronage shifted, ousting certain south Indian networks. It was the high profile killings that sparked the escalation of police action that compelled Vardhabhai to move back to Chennai in 1985. And with the advent of the organisation of Dawood Ibrahim, with his connections to the Gulf money and its readiness to act at an international level, the older Bombay-oriented syndicates started to seem small and outdated [7].

## VII. LEGAL FRAMEWORKS AND THE INDIAN STATE'S RESPONSE

The legal reaction of the Indian state to organised crime has been intermittent, and has tended to be in response to particular instances of crisis, rather than being a deliberate programme. The first specific statute was the Terrorist and Disruptive Activities (Prevention) Act, 1987 (TADA), introduced in the wake of the Punjab insurgency and whose Section 3 defined terrorist acts and provided harsh penalties, with Section 15 allowing confessions made to high-ranking police officers to be accepted as evidence [18]. In *Kartar Singh v. State of Punjab*, the Supreme Court found TADA constitutional, but struck down some of its more intrusive clauses [19]. In 1995, the Act was left to expire after much concern arose about its abuse especially on the minorities and political dissenters.

TADA is preceded by the Unlawful Activities (Prevention) Act, 1967 (UAPA), which has become the major anti-terror and anti-organised-crime law of the modern era. Chapter III and IV of the UAPA criminalise the membership of illegal associations, the

involvement in illegal activities, and the involvement in acts of terrorism. It has been revised many times, most recently in 2004, 2008, 2012 and 2019, and has now been substantially revised in terms of the process of declaring individuals as terrorists and the forfeiture of their property [20].

TADA was briefly replaced with the Prevention of Terrorism Act, 2002 (POTA). Section 3 defined terrorist acts, Section 4 criminalised the possession of unauthorised arms within particular areas, and Section 14 imposed responsibilities to provide information [21]. The POTA was subsequently repealed in 2004 after its continued criticism on its communal use [22]. Its substantive provisions, though, did mostly transfer to the amended UAPA.

The legislation which is most closely applicable to the type of syndicate Vardhabhai ran is the Maharashtra Control of Organised Crime Act, 1999 (MCOCA). Section 2(1)(e) of the law defines organised crime and Section 2(1)(f) defines an organised crime syndicate, with Section 3 prescribing tougher penalties on offences perpetrated by members of such syndicates, such as death penalty or life imprisonment in case the offence has resulted in death. Section 22 allows a special court to assume an offence has been committed in certain circumstances in defined circumstances, unlike the usual presumption of innocence which has spawned a long-standing constitutional controversy. Section 25 provides the Act with overriding power to inconsistent laws [23]. The Supreme Court declared most of the provisions of MCOCA, such as the admissibility of intercepted communications as constitutional in *State of Maharashtra v. Bharat Shantilal Shah*, and read down Section 21(5) [24]. Later rulings like in *Zameer Ahmed Latifur Rehman Sheikh v. State of Maharashtra* have shed light on how MCOCA can be applied to terrorist attacks [25].

In 2023, the new criminal code is another change. Section 111 of the Bharatiya Nyaya Sanhita, 2023 criminalises the organised crime in broad terms, including but not limited to contract killing, extortion, human trafficking, drug trafficking and cybercrime and makes the abetting, aiding or sheltering of offenders or the gaining of benefit through their actions a criminal offence. Section 112 deals with what is referred to in the statute as petty organised crime which includes theft, snatching, and cheating crimes with a sentence of one to seven years [26]. The text of the BNS will not be as effective as the predecessors will be; the changes in the administration and institutionalization that will accompany it are what determines this.

The perennial aspect of this legislative history is that organised crime can be resolved by increasingly increasing penalties and prosecutorial authority. The episode of Mudaliar indicates that this is not a complete assumption. The syndicate was allowed to thrive not due to the inadequacy of the law, but due to the social and economic circumstances that generated them. Even the best drafted statute cannot replace housing, documentation, livelihood, and civic recognition.

#### VIII. DECLINE, LEGACY, AND CONTEMPORARY RELEVANCE

In 1985, Vardhabhai abandoned Bombay and went to Chennai following a series of police crackdowns on his organisation and a rift with components of the Pathan gangs. He passed away on 2 January 1988, on the eve of his sixty-second birthday, and officially due to a heart attack, but then the contemporary journalists guessed that he was killed by younger competitors to inherit his place [6]. Admirers had his body flown back to Bombay and they still considered him as a patron.

His successors in direct succession did not reproduce the local character of his empire. D-Company led by Dawood Ibrahim established a transnational business in the 1990s attracting revenue through the Gulf, Pakistani logistics, and funding the acts of mass terror such as the 1993 bomb blasts [7]. Organised crime in post-Mudaliar Mumbai was thereby no longer anchored in the settlement-based moral economy which had kept him thrifty and instead in a more abstract and financialised, and fatal kind of business. In this respect Mudaliar time is a sort of last phase of a particularly urban, particularly local form of criminal sovereignty.

But the circumstances which gave birth to him have not disappeared. Today Dharavi is a location of suggested redevelopment plans that still cast doubt on the rights of long-term inhabitants [8]. Smaller land, sand and liquor syndicates organised around the same lines have emerged in other cities in India which replicate many of the characteristics of the Mudaliar syndicate on smaller scales. The informal-sector labour migration into metropolitan peripheries is an ongoing process, and the delivery of recognised housing, identity paperwork, and livelihood services are far behind the migration. In such circumstances, the social space within which such a figure as Vardhabhai can thrive is not confined.

#### IX. CONCLUSION

The Varadarajan Mudaliar syndicate suggests that we should consider organised crime in the light of identity, culture and power as opposed to deviance itself. Its membership was determined by a special history of Tamil migration to Bombay, a history which reproduced the caste and linguistic identities in the city, and by the cultural performances by which Vardhabhai established himself as a patron. It was empowered through a structural malfunction of the state to fully grant citizenship rights to informal settlements and maintained by an electoral democracy that relied on the turnout his syndicate was able to bring. It was not legal reform that pushed it to its ultimate downfall but rather the changing political alliances, new kinds of international crime, and the internal competition of the underworld.

To the student of the Indian city, the case indicates that the line between state and non-state power is porous, as law theory acknowledges. To theorists of identity, it demonstrates how the marginalised peoples create their own leaders and their own forms of recognition when the formal institutions fail them. To legal theorists, it provides a warning: laws like MCOCA, UAPA, and even the new Bharatiya Nyaya Sanhita are needed yet not enough tools. They are able to dissolve syndicates already formed, but not to stop the formation of the next in the next under-governed settlement.

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A large, light blue watermark logo is centered on the page. It features a stylized lightbulb shape with a circular top and a semi-circular bottom. Inside the circle, there are vertical lines and a small circle, resembling a circuit or a stylized 'I'. Below the circle is a grey rectangular box containing the text 'IJRTI' in white, bold, sans-serif capital letters. Below the box are two horizontal grey bars and a semi-circular grey shape at the bottom, completing the lightbulb-like appearance.

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