

BOMBAY BROKERS



EDITED BY LISA BJÖRKMAN

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PART IV DIFFERENCE

Anjali Arondekar

BOMBAY IS A CITY OF DREAMS, or so the story goes, a place of make-believe, where differences of gender, region, religion, class, and language (the list grows by the day) collide, mesh, and sometimes produce magical landscapes of possibility and futurity. As a “theatre of conflict,” its actors are characters spun out of competing and often violent narratives of development, where survival and success go hand in hand with clashing stories of erasure and emergence.¹ If my opening comments are beginning to read like well-rehearsed filmic lines from Netflix’s new series *Sacred Games* (an adaptation of Vikram Chandra’s wonderful novel), a sprawling masterpiece about the messy underbelly of Bombay life, then I am on the right track. The characters in this section are all scrappy, complex, and often divided protagonists who speak to the everyday perils and pleasures of sustaining the “sacred” games of survival within an ever-expanding and often unforgiving cityscape. Their stories are familiar, ordinary even, and variously address a specific genealogy of difference as delineated through histories of sexuality, migration, religion, labor, caste, performance, and language. At the heart of each of these stories is a studied attention to how structures of differentiation accrue and/or cede value within the broader networks of a city where lives

are constantly being made and undone by the machinations of power and location. We have here a wide array of liminal figures, each articulating a very distinct management of the politics of location and representation: Bhimsen Gaikwad, a self-taught Ambedkari *jalsa* performer, Laxmi, a *hijra* political strategist, Sultan, an Ismaili organizer, Raj, the street snack vendor, the multigenerational speakers of *Bambaiya* and Bombay Urdu, and Dharamsey, an archaeologist of knowledge and tradition.

For each of these characters, producing and sustaining individual and collective forms of belonging within the increasingly communalized urban landscape that is Bombay produce strategic gains and losses, compromises and heroics. Even as the short meditations assembled here emerge from a more or less contemporary engagement with Bombay, the questions they raise are of course deeply imbricated in longer histories of urban development. In fact, what these stories make abundantly clear is that the idea of difference itself has always been a spatialized, temporalized, and thus highly fraught site of constant contestation and emergence. Laxmi's gender identification as a *hijra* is as much of a shifting and affective historical form as are the many historical cadences of *Bambaiya* that inflect the speech of many city dwellers. Raj's Shiv Sena *vada pav raj* (street food kingdom) has much to offer and also to learn from Sultan's careful management of an Ismaili Muslim heritage, and vice versa. As such, it is equally fitting that the characters in this section do not cohere around a theme or genre; rather, their stories unmoor us from settled understandings of how identifications and representations of difference and belonging operate within a city like Bombay. There are no heroes or villains in these stories of situated difference, only a set of individuals and sensibilities that decode the demands of life in a megacity.

In "Bhimsen Gaikwad: Singer of Justice," Shailaja Paik travels to the home of Mr. Bhivaji, aka Bhimsen Gaikwad, a "famous octogenarian Ambedkari *shahir* (poet/singer)" as part of a larger project on *tamasha* (traveling folk theater) in the urban centers of Maharashtra and Pune. Paik, herself a *Dalit* feminist scholar/activist, is well tuned to the upheavals of caste, class, and gender, and she brings those sensibilities to her acquaintance with Gaikwad. They meet at his tiny working-class home in Dombivili, amid the traces of his expansive life as a performer and Ambedkar activist. We learn that Gaikwad is an autodidact, a *Dalit* migrant from rural Maharashtra who came to Bombay in search of a life and music, moving from one job to another (most significantly at Satguru's, a renowned arts store/gallery) until he earned the honorific "Bhimsen," a nod to his stature and influence within the local

music circles he inhabits. Gaikwad recounts his early informal training as a singer and *kalavant* (artist), signaling continuously to the centrality of caste in the navigation of his *kala* (art) as a musician. What marks Gaikwad's story is his astute mobilization of music as the medium through which he can simultaneously both embrace and bypass the sign of caste. For instance, Gaikwad assembles a group of musicians, a *gayan* (singing) group equipped with the requisite harmonium, *dholak*, and banjo, who travel to many venues to perform. "Everybody invited us to perform," he tells us with great pride. "Muslims, Maratha, Koli . . . they called us 'Jaibhimvale' or 'Ambedkarvali Party'" and "respected our art and invited us to sing at their events." At the center of such popularity, we learn, is an ever-present reminder of the circulation of caste as marker of value and identification. Even as Gaikwad claims that there is no discrimination against his group as people from all castes and religions flock to hear their music, the group remains routinely marked as a "Dalit" and "Ambedkar" group. Here, music both expands and contracts the differences of caste.

Through Gaikwad, we also learn of how his Ambedkarite vision profoundly affects the variegated genres of music that he studies and emulates. As he speaks movingly of his political awakening at the *pret yatra* (death procession) of Babasaheb Ambedkar in his native Pune, he explains how his creative ambition is fueled by the risks and struggles at the heart of Ambedkar's anti-caste project. To do so, Gaikwad literally reinvents the songs and tunes he learns, smuggling in anti-caste content within settled genres such as popular Hindi songs. The difference of caste becomes the creative impetus for the distinction of his *kala*, a performative practice that breathes new life into the very aesthetic forms that sediment caste and labor hierarchies. Gone are the days of our bondage and slavery, his songs tell us, summoning instead a brave new world of social and political equality.

If caste, craft, and location set the stage for our first story, the second meditation by David J. Strohl moves us on to a very different milieu. "Sultan: Image Manager" invites us into the interior workings of the minority (albeit affluent) Ismaili Muslim community in Bombay. Sultan, a key figure and organizer in the community, plays the central character, providing the reader with precise details of the elaborate self-fashioning that goes into the success and growth of the Ismailis in Bombay. Unlike the cramped quarters of Bhimsen Gaikwad's *chawl* flat, we encounter Sultan either in plush air-conditioned offices in Santa Cruz or in the privileged enclaves of the South Bombay Radio Club. Servants and workers of all ilk flit in and out of the

edges of this ethnography, marking the class status of the Ismaili community, making its struggles to stay relevant and nonpartisan within a divided urban landscape even more compelling.

Ismailis' problems, Sultan tells us at the very outset, is that their difference/belonging as religious and civil subjects is legible unevenly across communities in Bombay. For Hindus, they are mistaken as majority Muslims; for Muslims, they are perversely seen as not Muslim enough and as followers of an iconoclastic religious tradition. As Sultan succinctly puts it, "We're caught between the devil and the deep blue sea. When the riots come, the Hindus say we're Muslims, and the Muslims say we're Hindus." For Sultan, the Ismaili community's ability to be inclusive, expansive, and syncretic in its beliefs and practices can often lead to the community being cast as too flexible, incapable of marking its own differences and histories. Thus, the singular challenge, Sultan tells Strohl, is to fashion a representation of the Ismaili subject as one who is distinct yet inviting, progressive yet traditional, and, last but not least, a law-abiding and significant contributor to the city they inhabit. There is a certain self-referential irony in Sultan's laments around Ismaili misrepresentations; he interjects, "but we do not have it as bad as the Ahmadis do in Pakistan" and reminds Strohl that "when His Highness Aga Khan visits India, it's treated as a state visit." In many ways this ethnography echoes the structural ironies of the Ismaili agon of belonging and difference: it is both a record of the Ismaili success as a minority community and an account of the representational perils that undergird such success. One striking example of such an agon is the way the Ismailis handle the controversy around the placement of the photo of the Aga Khan in their central prayer hall. Wary of backlash from the mainstream Muslim community that would read such a placement as heresy against God, the Imam orders his followers to relocate the photo to the side walls, thereby continuing to honor the Aga Khan while keeping potential criticism at bay.

Maura Finkelstein's "Raj: Carting Cosmopolitanism" also engages with structures of self-fashioning in a rabidly divided Bombay, albeit in ways that both converge and diverge with Sultan's carefully scripted messages. This entry is food for thought, literally and metaphorically, as it walks us through the culinary empire that is the husband-wife duo Raj and Ketaki. But *vada pav*, that tasty morsel of Bombay's soul, is the true protagonist of this ethnography, its primacy as native Bombay fare narrated through a long history of divisive and violent communal and labor politics. Finkelstein's chief native informant, Raj, a different brand of *Marathi manoos*, moves us through this history, reminding us that *vada pav* began as a galvanizing instrument

of Shiv Sena's divisive politics. Shiva Vada Pav, during and after the ravaging labor strikes of the early 1980s, was meant to replace all "foreign" (read: non-Maharashtrian) foods and make hearty, Maharashtrian fare central again. Party supporters and striking laborers were invited to set up stalls selling vada pav in populous areas of the city, providing them part-time jobs while at the same time providing "street muscle" for the Sena. In turn, such workers were seen to be gathering electoral support for the Shiv Sena through the proliferation and popularity of such vada pav stalls. Finkelstein quotes Vikram Doctor's wry comment: "It's the only employment generation scheme that the Sena has ever been able to set up."

What makes Raj's (and connectedly that of his wife, Ketaki's) forays into vada pav entrepreneurship noteworthy is their rerouting of the founding regionalism and violence at the heart of the Shiv Sena's initiatives. Raj and Ketaki, we find out, broker vada pav into a menu of culinary diversity where the opening of a "Shiv Vada Pav" cart allows them to offer a range of South Indian and Western food options. As long as the cart says "Vada Pav," what is being sold under its auspices remains unexamined. And in case we read such diversification projects as progressive or secular, Raj quietly reminds us that his interests are not in the machinations of identity politics. It is at such counterintuitive moments that Finkelstein's ethnography provides its sharpest insights. There is no celebration of Raj as a dissident or radical voice; rather, Finkelstein turns our attention to the details of Raj's story where vada pav secures love, romance, and the security of family life. We learn that Raj and Ketaki meet and fall in love in a kitchen, work together as culinary entrepreneurs, and establish a life of upward mobility and eventual stability through their early forays into Shiv Vada Pav. Of note is the marked absence of any references to religion or region in their account of their success. As Finkelstein notes, "Raj never failed to remind me that his carts were about survival and not about politics: a deep-fried lifeboat in a sea of informal, insecure labor."

If vada pav is the overdetermined food of choice for the working-class Marathi manoos in Bombay, *hijras* (anywhere in South Asia) currently hold the same unenviable position when it comes to ethnographies engaging the difference of gender and sexuality. R. Swaminathan's "Laxmi: Dealer in Emotion" gives us a glimpse into the daily workings of a Bombay hijra known simply as Laxmi. In an ironic narrative twist, one of the key characters in the entry, a Shiv Sena leader, jokingly asks Swaminathan why he is writing about Laxmi and hijras in Bombay. "Write about us," he says, "there is no water, electricity, or jobs . . . their needs are nothing in comparison to ours." Laxmi

is also aware of her value as a subject and repeatedly provokes Swaminathan by noting that he, like her, is also looking for a "good deal." More than any other entry in part IV, Laxmi's story weighs heavily on the exigencies of embodied difference and its instrumentalization within a monetized world.

For Swaminathan, Laxmi's story is key to understanding the shifting barometers of Bombay (Mumbai) as it moves from the distributive networks of Sena *shakhas* (neighborhood party offices) to the aggressively digitized branded communalism of an *Aadhar* (national biometric identification) age. Laxmi enters the scene at Elphinstone railway station and slowly moves through spaces and temporalities of the city, gaining access to and contact with a wide range of collectivities. Laxmi and her cadre of hijras are affective "banks," hoarding and distributing positive and negative sentiment to secure economic stability. They cajole monies from customers anxious about their masculinity, provide live entertainment at Shiv Sena and corporate parties, and engage a whole host of informants and factotums to augment the earnings of their community. Shame and humiliation, affective markers of segregation and difference, are astutely mobilized by Laxmi and her comrades to assist loan companies in recovering their debts. "We are either feared or shunned. We arouse shame," Laxmi tells Swaminathan, speaking directly to the emotive capital that hijras accumulate and distribute through their circulation. One of the most remarkable moments in the ethnography arrives when Laxmi directly addresses the challenges of representation and mediation facing stigmatized subjects. In so doing, she couples the misreadings of hijras with the misreadings of Narendra Modi, pointing out that if the Indian populace can conveniently forget his role in the Gujarat riots and "look at him differently," they can certainly extend the same courtesy to the hijra community. Such a damning analogy deftly calls up Modi's tarnished past and uses its political reframing to signal a different future for the "invisible" histories of hijras.

Edward Simpson's "Dharamsey: Assembler of Traditions" may seem far afield from the political and affective machinations of Laxmi and her collective of hijras. Yet Simpson's interests in systems of knowledge formation, in how and why we know our spaces and faces, echo many of the questions that Laxmi raises for her readers. If Laxmi calls on us to read "differently," to reexamine broader histories of political mobilization, Simpson's Dharamsey speaks to the complex sociology of religious and community identity in the city. In many ways this entry is less about an individual character, Dharamsey, than about epistemologies of knowledge formation and how they are informed and/or deterred by histories of migration and gentrification. Dharamsey

is more an archival figure, a treasure trove of information, citation, and imagination, drawing his listeners, specifically Simpson, into new orders of meaning. It is thus no coincidence that Simpson encounters Virchand Dharamsey, aka Dharamseybhai, in the reading room of the Asiatic Society as he voyages to Bombay to learn more about the Kutch diaspora in western India. A well-known and respected figure in Bombay bibliophile and scholarly circles, Dharamsey introduces Simpson to historical figures such as Bhagwanlal Indraji (1839–1888) who, like Dharamsey, were decoders of the past and translated landscapes, inscriptions, and people as sources for understanding history. As such, Dharamsey becomes a sort of allegory for modes of reading belonging amid difference, specifically through the legacies of a past mired in histories of migration and the displacement of material texts and bodies. Simpson acknowledges a shift in focus even as he is composing his ethnography: “The more I thought about the encounter [with Dharamsey], the more I realized that it wasn’t only about Dharamsey but about a broader history of scholarship and relations between the provinces and Bombay.” As such, Simpson invites us to rework our orientations to knowledge production, exhorting his readers to think difference within and without our research methods and objects. To understand Dharamsey is to understand a broader network of signification, of translation, and of citation.

It is fitting that the section concludes with an entry on the vagaries of language and code switching, and the histories of difference they congeal in their manifold articulations. Simply put, how are communities of belonging and difference literally vernacularized? This is the central question animating Gautam Pemmaraju’s rich and enlivening entry “Dalvi: Speaker of Cities.” The characters here are spoken vernaculars, a set of linguistic and aesthetic formations, attached to the bodies of multigenerational speakers flung across the divided landscape of Bombay. Our protagonist is Bumbaiya, a city dialect comprising a “wide word pool drawing from languages including Marathi, Gujarati, Konkani, Portuguese, and English” and mobilizing broad “types of slang, trade related and street registers, comedic use,” invoking poetic and prose traditions from a range of historical and regional genres. Hovering over the entry is the shadow of Abdus Sattar Dalvi, a learned proponent of Bombay Urdu, who guides Pemmaraju through his tour of Bumbaiya and its linguistic avatars and histories. Dalvi serves as a learned footnote throughout the entry, juxtaposing learned/archival wisdom alongside the interviews that Pemmaraju conducts along the way.

Pemmaraju introduces the reader to a cast of multigenerational speakers of Bumbaiya who flag different registers of its impact and circulation. Even

as such friendships have faltered, and religious divides hardened as communalism takes over the city of Bombay, Bumbaiya, Pemmaraju writes, continues to take hold of the linguistic imaginations of the young people living within its confines. Mohammed Iqbal and Rafique Baghdadi are two young Bumbaiya speakers who participate in such linguistic formations, touched more by their affiliations to film and gang culture. Throughout, Pemmaraju is keen to emphasize that Bumbaiya embodies "the living languages of Bombay," that it is a palimpsest of and witness to enduring histories, traditions, and migrations of peoples and cultures. Even as literary fiction (give or take a few stories by Manto) eschews the charms of Bumbaiya, its force as a proxy for Bombay toughness is best exemplified, Pemmaraju notes, in Sanjay Dutt's infamous onscreen and offscreen "angry young man" personalities. A scion of a famous Hindi film dynasty (his parents are Nargis and Sunil Dutt), he exemplifies the urban and urbane flavors of Bumbaiya: Dutt is an ex-convict in real life, as he is the savior of disgruntled young men on the screen. His portrayal of gangster life (in *Munnabhai*, for example) is spliced with the incantations of Bumbaiya, weaving us in and out of the jousts of urban struggle.

As we work our way through part IV's essays on difference and representation, it becomes abundantly clear that the scholars/authors behind these sketches are equally a part of the stories they tell, their political, intellectual, and affective ambitions and struggles writ large in the ethnographic canvases they paint for their readers. To speak to the challenges of scripting difference, as it were, is to speak directly to the mediations of politics, language, positionality, gender, and so much more in the stories each author tells. We see Shailaja Paik, for instance, foregrounding the burden of representation as she speaks directly to her difficulties with Bhimsen Gaikwad's Ambedkarite vision. How can we embrace Gaikwad, she asks sotto voce, if he celebrates Dalit patriarchy in his songs of transformation? Can his engagement with difference erase and escalate caste oppression all at once? What happens to the difference of gender within the kala of caste? David Strohl also underscores the strategic garrulity of his subject, who mostly provides him with scripted and authoritative answers to complex questions. As his entry concludes, we are left with a rich and fragmentary text whose ethnographic ambitions invite us to read and theorize further.

Maura Finkelstein's entry gives us a deft and often candid view of her main character, Raj. We are invited into his domesticity, his romance, and his economic future. Yet despite such ethnographic detail, Finkelstein learns little from Raj and Ketaki regarding any views on religion or regional divides.

Have their entrepreneurial voyages made them more aware (and even respectful) of religious difference? We know that Shiv Vada Pav bypasses the regional restraints imposed upon it at its formation, but Raj and Ketki appear remarkably reticent regarding how those restraints are affectively encountered and translated. These are questions that remain unanswered. Similarly, R. Swaminathan's own value as "Sweden's Mumbaikar" fashions the shape of his narrative. Laxmi becomes a valuable (and protected) commodity because of her relationship with him, a point made repeatedly by several characters in the sketch. However, we learn little of how such an attachment translates into Swaminathan's own deciphering of the substance of his ethnographic encounters. Questions of self, translation, voice, access, and mediation take center stage in Edward Simpson's and Gautam Pemmaraju's entries on knowledge formations and language circulation. Simpson speaks at length about his changed relationship to histories of migration after his meetings with Dharamsey, such that Dharamsey's "tradition" of learning becomes part of the broader canon of writers he studies. Similarly, Pemmaraju provides multiple exemplars of Bumbaiya speakers and of the difficulties of navigating those vernaculars during the course of his interviews.

Together, these rich ethnographies present us with snapshots of the articulations and navigations of difference that are tantalizingly revelatory, even as they underscore the staged nature of their own exposure. The central challenge here is for readers to embrace these stories of urban living and learning as allegories for a larger meditation on the concatenations of difference in a complex historical landscape such as Bombay. After all, each of the characters we encounter here are shape-shifters, strategic actors in a city *tamasha* drama where differences settle and unsettle the workings of daily life. What is most illuminating about the ethnographies assembled here is that they refuse the liminality and/or exceptionality of difference. Rather, each essay engages sites of difference as spaces of efflorescent and plangent creativity, inviting us to participate in a special Bombay remix.

Note

1. See Mariam Dossal, *Theatre of Conflict, City of Hope: Bombay/Mumbai, 1660 to Present Times* (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2010).