

**Visceral politics of food: the bio-moral economy of work-  
lunch in Mumbai, India**

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## Abstract

This Ph.D. examines how commuters in Mumbai, India, negotiate their sense of being and wellbeing through their engagements with food in the city. It focuses on the widespread practice of eating homemade lunches in the workplace, important for commuters to replenish mind and body with foods that embody their specific family backgrounds, in a society where religious, caste, class, and community markers comprise complex dietary regimes. Eating such charged substances in the office canteen was essential in reproducing selfhood and social distinction within Mumbai's cosmopolitan environment. These engagements were "visceral" since they were experienced in and expressed through the intimate scale of the gut, mediating and consolidating boundaries between self and Other on lines of (incommensurable) food habits. Such tensions, most visible between vegetarians and meat eaters, were aggravated in the wake of the "beef ban" in March 2015, which illegalized the slaughter of cattle in the state of Maharashtra, wherein cosmopolitan pleasure gave way to visceral disgust and estrangement.

In connection, this thesis examines the vast work-lunch economy of Mumbai through three prominent businesses: the Dabbawalas, a 125-year-old home food delivery network; tiffin services, informal catering businesses operated by housewives, who commercially hybridize homemade food; and tech food start-ups, run by a generation of young entrepreneurs striving for novel takes on homemade food. Whereas anthropological literature on India has analysed *either* the emergence of a new urban public sphere since India's economic liberalization, *or* the ripples it has made in the domestic sphere, this thesis examines how these businesses address commuter specific bio-moral anxieties of maintaining communal identity, purity, and wellbeing within the stressful environment of contemporary Mumbai, by means of mediating domestic intimacy with the urban public, at an affordable price. These interventions are conceptualized as "technologies of purity", specific forms of visceral politics of food.

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**Note on Style**

All translations from Hindi and other languages into English are mine, unless stated otherwise. These are in the form of phonetic transcription, to best reproduce vernacular speech. Non-English words that appear for the first time in a chapter are given in italicized form.

I have changed the names for some public institutions, businesses, and individuals to protect interests. Names for places and large-scale historical organizations such as political parties have been unaltered for their widely publicized nature within popular culture and academic scholarship.

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## Chapter I. “Visceral politics” and “Technologies of purity”: Theories and Histories of the “bio-moral” in India

This chapter will introduce two key concepts, which permeate the entire thesis: “Visceral politics”, and “Technologies of purity”. These concepts sprung out of my various ethnographic engagements with urban commuters in the city of Mumbai, concepts that sought to capture the guiding principles of my informants, which they used to engage with and make sense of the world that they inhabited, a world that I lived in for a period of 15 months. In as much as these frameworks were embedded in the everyday negotiations of self and Other, these were not merely *conceptual*, but were always experienced and performed *physically* - the various tactics and anxieties regarding social cohesion and social distinction were mediated *through* the material plane of everyday substances and interactions. This co-existence of the mental and somatic is the realm of the “bio-moral”, a pertinent modality of thought-action that has figured prominently in the history of India, continuing to this day. This can be summed up as a heightened sense of awareness of and preoccupation with the absorptive qualities of particular substances, such as certain foods, clothing, and bodily secretions, which embody the qualities of the producer or handler of these substances, which must be transacted, provisioned, and consumed with care, in order to keep vital social identities and boundaries intact. In India, provisioning such essence-in-substance is synonymous with managing social relationships.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Preoccupations over the protean self and porous boundaries, as well as the micro-managements of substance and resources to overcome these, are not confined to India, and particular variations of these can be found in other South Asian cultures. Ring (2006) documents the perpetual struggle for “peace-making” through the everyday practices of women in domestic spaces in Pakistan; Janeja (2010) explores how people, food, and other actors co-produce qualities of *desh* (homeland) in Bangladesh; Spencer (2014) problematizes the very concept of “South Asia”, and re-examines the practices of place-making and selfhood in Sri Lanka, through its positionality within seaborne transnational flows. Moreover, there is much regional and communal variability *within* India - for instance, the *Chamar Dalits* (untouchable castes) in North India, which Ciotti (2006) studied, stress how an “educating substance” can be acquired in the present to achieve upward mobility, a bio-moral position which contrasts with local Brahmins (upper castes) who stress how such substance-in-essence can only be hereditarily acquired. In this thesis, I take Marriott’s (1990) transactional schema as a *starting point* of ethnographic analysis, instead of *reducing* the lived negotiations of my informants in Mumbai to a unified schema of thought-action. While the first section of this chapter explicates this schema as an entry point into the world of my informants, the rest of the thesis explores how these schemas actually unfold in action. In particular, Chapter II and III explore the specificities of Mumbai’s environment (and popular imagination) as a melting pot of cultures, its cosmopolitan ideal of acceptance and inclusion

“Technologies of purity” are conscious or routinized interventions into this bio-morally dividual and porous world, and in the following section, I re-examine the classic theories of Louis Dumont and McKim Marriott, as well as relevant ethnographies, to highlight the widespread prominence of this morality-modality within this region. The second section of this chapter will examine the vital boundary between *ghar* (home) and *bahar* (outside) to examine technologies of purity in action in colonial and contemporary India.

If technologies of purity denote the perpetual efforts to reproduce vital identity and boundaries, everyday successes to control the porosity of substance, which nevertheless balances on the razors’ edge of spillage and contamination, “visceral politics” captures the force by which such vital boundaries become evermore consolidated, or entirely breached. If “technologies of purity” reproduce everyday normality and equilibrium, “visceral politics”, which emanate from pockets of the out-of-the-ordinary within everyday life, or crisis situations which transform the political, economic, and the social spheres, serves to illuminate, transform, and challenge the very foundations of the boundaries between self and Other. These reconfigurations which I encountered in Mumbai were *viscerally* political, not simply because they were mediated by food, the centre focus of this thesis, for its potency as a political and bio-moral substance in the city and India at large, but because its mode of expression was the gut and the mouth. Such political engagements were problematic in that they were experienced as uncontrollable urges for its somaticity, mobilizing the experiencing-sensing subject from within ones’ entrails. In such instances, vital identities and boundaries between self and Other were envisaged less as routinized social distinction than visceral pleasure, distaste and disgust, cathartic modes of coming in terms with the (incommensurable) Other. As a result, not only are vital boundaries transfigured and consolidated, but also stereotyped subjectivities of self and Other become interpellated with it. The third part of this chapter will examine relevant Indian histories and ethnographies which will be re-read as works which capture such visceral politics in action. Finally, this chapter will end by mapping out how these two key concepts will be ethnographically elaborated in the subsequent chapters of the thesis.

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being aspired as a particularly *Mumbaikar* (being a Mumbai-ite) quality. These ideals became the very backdrop in which the bio-moral-economic negotiations of selfhood vis-à-vis Others unfolded.

## 1. Technologies of Purity - interventions into the bio-morally porous

This section will examine classic theories and ethnographies of India to highlight the modality of the “bio-moral”, as well as to contextualize the concept of “technologies of purity” as interventions into such a world. Louis Dumont (1970) influentially argued that “caste” was a holistic system of hierarchy which operated on the opposite and complimentary values of purity and impurity - each of the four “touchable” castes (*varna*) are in a relation of purity and impurity to its direct descendants and ascendants respectively, with the Brahmin, the ritual priest and world renouncer, at the apex of this system, and the “untouchables”, who were outside of the *varna* system, at the absolute base. Ethnographies of village India are rife with accounts of the two pillars in which the village caste system were reproduced - food and marriage (Marriott 1968; Mayer 1960; Parry 1976). The flow of food, which reproduces identity and body, and women, which reproduces communal group and society, were to be strictly regulated, a result of what Dumont identified as “the contradictory essence of caste”: while “the maintenance of purity required that castes must be kept separate, it also brought them together since Brahmans cannot do without the services provided by the lower castes. Dumont’s description combined the idea of interdependence with that of ‘repulsion’ of castes toward each other. This repulsion, manifest in endogamy, commensal restriction and contact, was complemented by division of labour which led to strong interdependence” (Banerjee-Dube 2008: xix). Commensality and marriage within same ranking castes ensures cohesion of intra-caste relationships, as well as of differentiation of inter-caste relationships. While Dumont’s insistence on ritual purity as driving force of caste has since been contested (Fuller 1996), his insight regarding the “repulsion” of castes is illuminating, not only because caste endogamy still exerts strength within contemporary India (Banerjee et al., 2009), but also because of its suggestive kinetic imagery. The shortcoming of Dumont’s theory was that it was only concerned with the fact that these repulsions always successfully took place to reproduce the encompassing principles of purity and impurity, and lacked a nuanced view of the kinaesthetic *process* by which people and things attached and dissociated from each other in the flux of everyday life.

This turn from structure to process, and to the politics of selfhood, was epitomized by Marriott and Inden (1977) with their “transactional theory of caste”,



and their aspiration to construct an “ethnosociology of India” (Marriott 1990). A continuation of Marriott’s (1959, 1968) earlier work, which looked at commensality in village India as the quotidian practice where social relations are produced - along with Mayer (1960, 1996), making the important methodological point that the matrix of the village caste system could only be build bottom-up from direct observations of what castes could eat, drink, or smoke with whom - Marriott and his pupils in Chicago emphasized that Hindus lived by a monistic cosmology whereby act and actor, the personal and collective, and the everyday and transcendent overlapped (Appadurai 1986a: 755), a formulation intended as a direct critique of Dumont, who asserted that the sole dualistic principles of purity and impurity formed the core of Hindu concerns. It followed that Indians lived by a variety of moralities, all of which mingled with everyday actions and material existence - the realm of the “bio-moral” - thereby a single act of sharing food with a subordinate caste was capable of inducing a moral crisis for the actor as well as the entire caste group which he belongs to, his substance transmitted to his kin by virtue of bio-moral association.

While I take much inspiration from Marriott, who saw that everyday bio-moral transactions were arenas for sticky existential dramas, confronting the neat coherence of Dumont’s holism, it must also be pointed out that his later project of constructing an “ethnosociology of Hindu thought” was highly problematic. In trying to be faithful to Hindu thought categories without relying on Western dualistic epistemology (thus the emphasis on monism), Marriott inadvertently essentialized the Hindu “person” as absolutely distinct from its Western counterpart. The assertion that the notion of the “dividual” (Daniel 1984) was more appropriate to describe the Hindu sense of protean being than the Western “individual”, which presupposes a clear boundary between the self and world, directly pitted Hindu monistic personhood against Western dualism. Busby (1997) sought to complicate the picture by comparing the South Asian “permeable” person with the Melanesian “partible” person, but was equally complicit of essentializing modes of being, a project perhaps only useful if one were inclined to write an entry in the “encyclopaedia of worldwide personhoods”, if there was such a catalogue (Bloch 2011).

I argue that these projects, largely out of fashion now, led to a dead end because the porosity of bio-moral being was taken to be *end results* of ethnography, rather than provisional *starting points*, in order to understand the nuanced attitudes, aspirations, and affects of those who live by these concerns, in relation to their

everyday world. This is also to take seriously the visceral struggles and real anxieties that are implicit within these everyday transactions, and to locate these struggles within history. Marriott's work aspired to challenge the rigidity of Dumont's systemic view of caste - but what to do with the real and tangible systems of hierarchy and power, based on caste or class or otherwise, in contemporary India? Does the emphasis on the fluid Hindu being not empirically overlook the prevalence of these rigid structures, perpetuated through ever-present commensal and endogamous proscriptions? I agree with Parry (1989) that, because "Hindu society has often seen itself as engaged in an endless battle against impeding chaos and disintegration, ... [where] decay and death result from involvement in disequilibrating transactions, ... [t]he impact of this menacing vision can surely only be message of strict obedience to the rigid order of caste. *What, in other words, the ideology of fluid substance implies is nothing less than that the disintegration of the self results from stepping off the tried and tested tracks of the established pattern of caste interactions*" (ibid: 512-4, my emphasis).

The problem, then, is that Marriott's concepts of the "bio-moral" and "dividual", in trying to destabilize Dumontian sociology, paradoxically loses its fluidity in accounting for the existence of prevalent social norms, which may be strengthened as the *result* of such porous anxieties. I make the point that efforts to block off fluidity become ever more important for actors to negotiate this world, with what I call "technologies of purity", conscious or routinized interventions into this world, where controlling worldly uncertainty is synonymous with socio-temporarily blocking off the exposure, overflow, and contamination of vital substance as much as possible. These are "technologies" in the sense used by Coupaye (2009) who, drawing from the works of Mauss (1990) and Strathern (1988) on the relationality between body, personhood, and action, "demonstrate that technology is as much about the making of relations as it is about the materialisation or the objectification of successful relations" (Coupaye 2009: 105). Such dynamic materializations of social relationships are directed toward "purity", not only because the modalities of purity and pollution are grave concerns within India, physically orchestrating social intimacy and distinction, but also because such interventions *conceptually* and *relationally* purify the muddled chaos of dividual bio-moral substance. Here, Mary Douglas' (1966) apt formulation that "the unclear is unclean" is salient because porous boundaries pose concerns over communal identity and boundaries, which must be

protected through such technologies which objectify social relationships, *in its proper distance from each other*. Technologies of purity lie at the interface of this dynamic equilibrium between porous dividuality and consolidation of vital boundaries.

The concept of “purity”, and its relation to forms of social stratification, has firm roots within the anthropology of India, especially since Dumont’s influential body of work. Ethnographies of contemporary Indian cultures have explored how the realities of “caste” and “purity” have become transvaluated through its intersections with electoral and democratic politics (Ciotti 2006; Michelutti 2008), as well as forces of globalization and economic liberalization (Liechty 2003). This thesis, rather than following these threads of exploring possible vernacularizations of “purity” oriented caste/communal politics in Mumbai, leads on with Marriott’s engagement with the kinetic transactional movements of substance between protean selves. The concept of “technologies of purity” takes purity as one such *transactional* value/substance, a distinct form of capital which can be accumulated, transacted, and purchased, through the embedded practices of cooking, delivering, eating, and sharing food. Technologies of purity are partly acts of creative improvisation, or, as it is commonly called throughout India, *jugaad*, an orientation which strives to make the best out of risk filled environments on the spot, with whatever available resources one has access to.<sup>2</sup> Yet *jugaad* does not fully capture the underlying anxieties of spillage, contamination, and mixing of vital substance, which is endemic to the cosmopolitan environment of Mumbai (Chapter II). Nor does its narrow definition of considering *only* economic problems and solutions fully capture the lived dilemmas of my informants, who aspired to solve a combination of somatic, familial, and communal problems of building selfhood and negotiating with Others, through food, as medium and message (c.f. Appadurai 1981).

In many ways, technologies of purity are implicated in the casting forward of “trust” (Broch-Due and Ystanes 2016). If trust is an ethical and political disposition towards the Other, the world, and futures (ibid: 1 - 2), technologies of purity are forms of micro-managing these webs of relations which ties together the giver and receivers of services and intimacies, as well as making a claim onto future orientations, by

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<sup>2</sup> *Jugaad* as “creative innovation” has recently received attention from the quarters of management science, as a form of vernacular innovation in environments where resources are scant (Birtchnell 2011; Jeffrey and Young 2014). This rendering largely mirrors the situation in which the Dabbawala organization has been celebrated in professional academic and business circles since the early 2000s, an aspect which I elaborate in Chapter VI.

means of intervening in the bio-moral plane of porous substance. For many of my informants, concerns over trust, regarding the everyday provisioning's of food were often understood in terms of maintaining and transacting intimacy between family, across a distance, mediated by a substance which embodies this relationship. The prime expression of this was *ghar-ka-khana*, or homemade food (Chapter II, VI), which was carried through the Dabbawala network (Chapter V, VI), and alternatively produced in commercial tiffin services (Chapter VIII). The functionality of these substances and foodways relied on the assurance of the foods' origins and routes, and its somatic effects on the eating-body, which signifies desired identity markers such as class and community. Taking cue from recent developments in the anthropology of work, which has studied the emergent forms of "intimate labour" within global capitalism (Boris and Parrenas 2010; Constable 2009), this thesis ethnographically and theoretically explores the everyday works and networks which produce, protect, and carry intimate, vital substance within a heavily congested and diverse megacity - technologies of purity are the bio-moral labour which facilitates such transactions - and how these technologies and foodways comprise the bio-moral economy of work lunch in urban Mumbai.

The detailed ethnographic accounts of commensality and materiality in village India from the mid-20<sup>th</sup> century can be seen as outcomes of technologies of purity. The distinguishing of *kaccha* (boiled/roasted) and *pukka* (fried, in oil) food is not merely for sake of culinary differentiation, but gains its bio-moral weight from the anxiety which boiled rice's porosity induces.<sup>3</sup> It follows that the importance of cooking ones' food in *ghee*, a sacred substance used in Hindu feasts and rituals alike, can be understood better through such frameworks, since cooking with this technology of purity doesn't merely *categorically* elevate rice into sanctity, but does so very much materially, the former upheld by an imagery of coating and protecting each grain of vulnerable rice with the protective layer of sacred substance. Clothing in India is rife with bio-moral negotiations and anxieties. Bayly (1986) notes that Hindus have historically taken an interest to the various fabrics, weaves, and colours of clothing, not only aesthetically but morally. For instance, silk and cotton were distinguished for its propensity to absorb, where the latter, due to its looseness and

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<sup>3</sup> The awareness of boiled rice's capacity in inducing both intimate bonding as well as anxious contamination is widely found in many rice cultivating cultures. See, for example, Bloch (1999) in Madagascar, and Ohnuki-Tierney (1993) in Japan.

coarseness, was “the most porous to spirit and substance, whether holy or polluting. [For] the looser and larger the knots, the more could be entrapped in them” (ibid: 288-9). Given this literal sense where cloth absorbs bio-moral substance at different rates, silk was the dress for rituals and ceremonies *par excellence*, owing to the way its knots were packed in tightly to block off substance, engulfing the wearer with a bio-morally protective coating. Silk as technologies of purity made it a much coveted material in India, but in other ritual occasions, more looser cloths such as the *raksha* (sacred thread), used by the Patwas, a ritually superior weaver caste, were chosen to be worn precisely because of its capacity to trap in the sanctity of beneficent deities. “The loose texture of the “sacred thread” that the high castes wore ... was a trap for godliness, but at the same time it was quite vulnerable to accidental pollution. During meals, for in stance, the thread was often tied around the head to avoid its pollution by contact with food” (ibid: 289).<sup>4</sup>

These negotiations always point to the successes of (caste) boundary making, a return to conventionality. Manpreet Janeja’s (2009) work on foodways in contemporary Bengal, which adopts an innovate actor-network-theory approach to understand how the assemblage of people, labour, and things produce a state of “normality” within the middle class domestic home, vis-à-vis its exterior, also emphasizes how “food... emerges as almost a conductor of an orchestra that conducts the eternal fine working balance between this inwardness and outwardness. The *dis*-capacity of food to do so is not-normality, i.e. shifts this balance” (ibid: 62). While in this endless battle to achieve normality, where middle class respectability and bio-moral purity is constantly challenged by unwanted intruders such as working class maids and “foreign”, unhealthy outside foods, Janeja’s ethnography always attests to how the balance is restored, the victory of technologies of purity performed by the mistress-managers to purify the domestic home. While in the next section, I will explore this prominent boundary where technologies of purity are exercised in

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<sup>4</sup> “Technologies of purity” are not magic bullets, especially in situations when the entire self may be the cause of pollution. Eating and defecating are good examples - the very act of incorporation and excretion, a temporary opening of ones’ vital organs to the world, invites unwanted substances with it, thus making one impure in relation to others - which may contaminate the people around you, especially those who share blood and kinship ties, as well as sacred objects such as the *raksha* or the shrine. In orthodox, high-caste families, menstruating women are not allowed in cooking and worshipping spaces for this reason. Physical segregation - relocating a cloth, or eating in separate rooms - is an effective way to deal with such situations, where a certain act, or transitioning between different spaces, creates an imbalance in relative purity.

colonial and contemporary India, between *ghar* (home) and *bahar* (outside), Appadurai's (2015) re-reading of Marriott's concept of bio-moral dividuality in the age of derivative finance, highlights how dividuality has the potential to transvaluate a political order which reproduces social hierarchy and caste-occupation based stigma.

Instead of "Indic dividuality", which reverts to social conventionality by means of technologies of purity by keeping vital boundaries in place, Appadurai examines the success of "toilet festivals" (*sandas mela*) of slum dwellers in Mumbai, where lack of space and infrastructure continually force many of the destitute poor to openly defecate, an act which is engulfed in stigma of ritual and medical impurity, which is aggravated by the historical association between Untouchability and occupations which handle human waste. Mumbai's slum dwellers from diverse ethnic, religious, and cultural backgrounds came together, not as dispersed communities-individuals, but *dividuals* with shared bodily practices (of open defecation), who assembled themselves into an amorphous collective who erected community toilets in slums throughout the city, inaugurating these spaces with flowers and festivals in the same way newly erected temples are, by upper caste priests. Such collective and somatic politics which turned "shit into social value and exclusion into empowerment" (ibid: 123) emanated from the margins of consolidated boundaries of social distinction, *in between* the technologies of purity which incessantly strives to bio-morally contain the flow of dividual substance. This opens up a new analytic focus, from *already* individualized bodies, communities, and political organizations, to fluid dividual groups that associate and dissociate to become individuated *in process*. The successes of such political movements powerfully attest to the pertinence of dividuality and bio-morality as a mode of thought-action in contemporary India, illuminating technologies of purity as conventionalizing, or indeed, individualizing, interventions into this world.

## **2. The porous boundaries of *ghar* (home) and *bahar* (outside) in India**

The conventionalized and conventionalizing interventions of technologies of purity are epitomized by the story of Banno the sweeper, described by Banerjee and Miller (2001), a working class lady in urban Delhi who changes her sari 5 times during a course of a day, suggesting the importance of bio-moral management in urban India, where traversing between "home" and "work" is the norm. Not only does she have a stock of "home saris" and "work saris", but also has a separate batch of

“bus saris” which is used for her congested everyday commute, where she comes into contact with numerous strangers. The latter “were clean, of course, washed at the end of every week when she brought them home. But she couldn't bring herself to play with her grandchildren or cook a meal while wearing one of those saris. ... Soap could clean the dirt, but it could never remove the association of the work she did in those saris and who she was when she wore them” (ibid: 115). Changing from work suit to comfortable home wear may be the norm everywhere; for Banno, the concern is not only cosiness, but of tactile social associations and particles that her clothes brought back with them.

Sweeping is demanding work which is seen as medically and ritually polluting in India, and her tactics of self transformation echo the view that the “family wardrobe is conceived as a collection of “selves” that is managed by the woman in the household; the accumulation of clothing reflects the development of the social self” (Norris 2010: 17). However, much of Banno’s sari-self management is “invisible”, in that her anxiety does not come so much from “visible” sartorial performance - although “she was sure that her neat appearance ... gave some quality which made young men call her ‘amma’ [grandmother] and help her off the bus” (Banerjee and Miller 2001: 116), no passer-by could tell the difference between a lower-caste sweeper’s “bus” and “work” sari. And so, her management of self is as much to do with appearance as it is for her own sense of being bio-morally acceptable, *for her*. It is largely psychological, based on her own standards of purity, neatness, and duty, but it is not at all *reducible* to psychology alone, for her motivations and anxieties are nurtured by her environment, in the form of a somatic ideology that makes one aware of the porosity of the world, as well as her engagement with the hustle and bustle of urban India’s public sphere.

These anxieties and managements are played out at the boundaries between “home” and “outside”, or *ghar* and *bahar*. This is a pervasive boundary and modality within India, that relegates the former to a sacred, pure, and ordered space of the family, and the latter as a dangerous, dirty, and disordered space of mixing and contamination (Banerji 2000; Bear 2007; Chakrabarty 1991; Kaviraj 1997). In India, going in and out of the home, to and fro from the world, is construed as a dangerous act filled with anxiety, since the home is understood as the interior of the orifice which is the family - as different cloths are used to protect the self from the outside, one changes to and fro from “home sari” and “work sari” in order to protect the

viscera of the home from outside contamination. “Homely”, nurturing practices, such as cooking for and feeding ones family, especially are sites of anxiety within this scheme of things - a polluted hand of a loving mother is poisoning to the child because of the porous intimacy between family members (Benei 2008: 107-108). As Khare (1976) notes for the high-caste Hindu hearth and home, the various areas of the house are also ritually graded in terms of purity, where the worshipping area is the most exclusive and pure, followed by the cooking-serving-storage area, all of which must be located far away from the impure entrance, courtyard, and drainage, pathways to the outside (ibid: 23-41). As such, movements of people and substance among varying spheres invite elaborate proscriptions: “if the family deity is brought into the food area from the worshipping place, ... [t]he footprints of the cook, who is otherwise pure, must be removed from the place by washing where the deity is to sit, although the food area is pure enough to send the food to the worshipping place for the deity’s consumption there” (ibid: 32). It is noteworthy that such bio-moral hypochondria are not only practiced among the most purity and respectability conscious upper castes, but also by working class urban dwellers like Banno, pointing to the salience of these attitudes throughout the social ladder.<sup>5</sup>

The bio-moral politics of *ghar* and *bahar* becomes ever more complicated in the setting of contemporary megacities such as Mumbai, which attracts a massive influx of global capital, people, and goods. This does not only mean that the *bahar* becomes ever more congested with novel commodities and newcomers to the city; this condition of heterogeneity generates a specific modality of coming in terms with the world, an *urban* orientation and experience, informing the everyday practices and negotiations to achieve a sense of being and wellbeing in the city (Hansen and Verkaaik 2009). As Holston and Appadurai (1996) note, if nationality and citizenship are the two pillars of modern forms of belonging, “the modern urban public signifies both the defamiliarizing enormity of national citizenship and the exhilaration of its liberties” (ibid: 188), in so far as this “urban public” offers a multitude of time-spaces where conventional forms of citizenship such as community and class become conflated and re-consolidated, becoming spaces of experimentation, speculation, and

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<sup>5</sup> Different types of technologies of purity are used by different social classes, as per its efficacy, availability, and affordability - as I explore in Chapter VI, the Dabbawalas, or lunchbox deliverymen, are used by high caste, lower middle class vegetarian commuters to maintain social distinction and purity in the urban public, within the limits of their disposable income.



reinvention of the self in relation to ones' numerous Others (c.f. Hansen 2001: 6 -7). My ethnographic engagements with my informants urged me to theorize these interactions of heterogeneity and uncertainty in its own terms, and the chapters which follow explore the cosmopolitan condition of Mumbai's urban public, and how its citizens - daily commuters in particular - engage with this environment. Much like the bio-moral, I liberally use the phrase "urban public" as an ethnographic starting point to foreground the lives of dwellers such as Banno the sweeper, and my informants, who navigate this field of complex conglomeration of different life trajectories and possibilities, through the means of technologies of purity.

As Hansen and Verkaaik (2009) aptly theorize: "No city can be fully known and interpreted because it, like its people, is one of modernity's most powerful 'empty signifiers': too multi-layered and overflowing in both histories and meanings to be fully captured by a single narrative or name, and yet an object of irresistible desires and identifications," while those with "urban charisma" are those who "are able to convert the opacity, impenetrability, historicity and latent possibilities of urban life into a resource in their own self-making" (ibid: 8). In this sense, the everyday work of the Dabbawalas, weaving through numerous risks and uncertainties of the city, are entirely charismatic (Chapter VI), and this typically urban labour of turning the opacity of an environment into a flash (however fleeting and incomplete) of clarity, points to a larger "politics of visibility" (Casper and Moore 2009), where power relations within contemporary society are played out through the axis of making certain bodies more visible than Others. As I introduce in the following section, as well as explicate in Chapter III, this politics is inseparable from "biopolitics" (Foucault 2008), or the macro-level projects and discourses which enumerate and locate particular groups and populations as objects of governance. In Chapter III, I explore how a long line of anti-cattle slaughter legislature, commonly called the "beef ban", finally enforced in the state of Maharashtra, where Mumbai is the capital, managed to make certain groups and beings (Hindu farmers and cows) more visible, as indispensable for the wellbeing of the nation-state, while undermining other groups (Muslim butchers) as a hindrance to this project. What was really made invisible, however, was not only the interests of the Muslim butchers, but the fact that slaughterhouses were indispensable components of the cattle supply chain. From the point of view of right-wing Hindu parties such as the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP), who pushed for these legislatures, the abominable fact that the death of cattle had a

productive function had to be curbed. I additionally examine how such boundary making legislature cut into fluid spaces of experimentation within the urban public, such as back alley meat eating restaurants, where even avid vegetarians secretly dined, indulging in visceral pleasure. In making visible these shady areas of experimentation, endemic to Mumbai's urban orientation, the "beef ban" gave visibility to an inherently opaque field of mingling, rendering these acts of secretly accepted transgression as entirely illegal.

This thesis takes food as its centrepiece to explore these negotiations of social distinction, vital boundaries, and communal identity and somatic purity, traversing the domestic sphere into the urban public. This is not only because of its bio-moral pertinence within India, in its capacity to absorb and transmit vital substance and personhood by virtue of being physically incorporated within the body (Bear 2007; Ecks 2003; Khare 1986; Janeja 2010; Marriott 1968; Michelutti 2008), but also because it figures as a prominent medium *and* message whereby solidarity and stratification are played out, what Appadurai (1981) has aptly called "gastropolitics". Bio-moral anxieties are reconfigured by the multiple permutations of rank, life-stage, seniority, and gender of household members, with different implications and proceedings - for instance, when, how, where, how much, and what type of food is served to whom is a *literal* means to reinforce solidarity and hierarchy, as well as a potential gateway to subvert these conventions. If this is true among the same household members, domestic servants, who clean and remove the drainage, demand much more provisioning for the high-caste employer, owing to the dilemma that they are "needed but unwelcome" (Appadurai 2006: 44) - attesting to the uncanny fact that the purity of the home is upheld only by the polluting labour of these intimate Others, the *bahar* in the *ghar*. In the orthodox Hindu home, this is manifest in the dangerous but necessary proximity of the cooking and disposal areas, which also owes to the ambiguous nature of food - its carefully crafted purity prone to a quick descent into impurity, as *jutha*, or leftovers, a ritually impure substance in Hindu cosmology, its impurity mediated by the tactility of the rotten (Malamoud and White 1996).

A Hindu housewife must swiftly manage the entry and stay of domestic help - for instance, non-Brahmin servants are not allowed in the cooking areas, and wash dishes outside - coupled with another round of cleaning of their trail after they have left. As Dickey (2000) shows in the case of contemporary Madurai, these anxieties regarding the uncanny-ness of servants are as much an issue about purity as it is about

middle- and upper-class identity and respectability in urban cities. In contemporary India, emergent forms of social distinction, rank, and status, on lines of socio-economic class, complexly mingle with caste-based authority (Fuller 1996). For middle class domestic employers in Madurai, their sense of anxiety over “contamination” is not confined to ritual defilement, but are expressed in terms on undesirable flows of assets, habits, and information, to and fro from the home: they fear that servants “may transport in dirt, disorder, and disease and contaminate children with lower-class habits and language (cf. Bourdieu 1984); they may remove valued belongings and information through theft and gossip” (Dickey 2000: 473).

This trepidation regarding unwanted influence on “vulnerable” family members - whether through germs, bad language, or seduction - as well as of the vulnerability of the entire home’s prestige and assets, demands the housewife to carefully negotiate intimacy and distance within the domestic sphere. On the one hand, making them “one of the family” or “daughter of the house” is a unanimously aspired ideal, which nurtures affection and trustworthiness; on the other, one must discipline and “keep her in place”, or else this will lead to laziness and bad conduct. Gastropolitics is an important medium to “educate”: occasionally feeding servants the same warm, fresh foods fed to families nurtures intimacy and extends generosity, while they almost never ate *with* the families, either in separate rooms, on the floor of the same room (if the family eats on a table), and after the family meal and duties are done with. And yet, some anxieties are difficult to regulate: Janeja (2010) talks of a middle class Bengali housewife who complains that her two unmarried helps “did not work efficiently together, spent too much time engaging in idle talk, were probably lesbians which affronted her sense of respectability (*bhadrata*), and ate very hot (chilli hot) food that did not make her feel safe” (ibid: 60-2). Here, dissatisfaction towards misconduct and laziness are intimately linked with the bio-moral anxieties towards unconventional sexuality, as well as the excesses of eating over-spiced foods, a deviation from, and an assault on, middle class respectability.

What complicates this porosity between home and outside is the fact that the interface of these spheres changes with social class. On one level, a significant amount the population in urban cities like Mumbai live in precarious situations where home and outside are almost indistinguishable - for the numerous pavement dwellers who occupy the streets, unused railway tracks, and landfilled garbage heaps, “a sense of residence was established around a hearth, cooking spot, or other regular eating

place” (Massellos 1991: 40) - for the urban destitute, the interior spaces of eating and residence is incessantly made and unmade, punctuated by rhythms of eviction and re-habitation fought with and against various actors, such as NGOs and municipal authorities (Doshi 2013). Mumbai’s streets are filled with vendors and squatters, to semi-permanent objects such as roadside temples and newspaper stands, a world where people and structures spill over into sidewalks and “grey areas” between buildings, where living, working, and strolling are conflated (Anjaria 2016; Appadurai 2000: 636; Shetty 2012). The everyday rhythms of day and night, as well as out of the ordinary rhythms of festivals, riots, monsoons, and public religious tensions, render previously familiar, “interior” spaces into alien spaces where certain bodies become Othered (Massellos 1991). The middle class anxieties of protecting the domestic from the outside are, thus, largely predicated on the social and economic capital of *having a gated interior*, a form of semi-permanent technology of purity in itself (Dickey 2000; Donner 2008; Janeja 2010). The middle and lower-middle class commuters which I engage with in this thesis also share this baseline affluence of being sheltered within four walls, as well as a gated workplace, in the form of the semi-public office, aspects of the field and research methodology which I will explore in Chapter II.

I conclude this section by pointing out the colonial and historical variability of the boundaries between *ghar* and *bahar* in India. Not only are the bio-moral anxieties between home and outside distributed differently across social class, but are also altered through the flux of historical transformations, as Chatterjee (1993) notes in the case of colonial Bengal’s nationalist movements, in which “ghar” came to be projected as a heightened, gendered receptacle for a spiritual, pure, authentic “Indian tradition”, where men were to fight for its protection in the chaos of the outside world, while women were to be its guardians from within its domestic lairs. Colonial history had a large impact on the amplification and reformulation of everyday, bio-moral concerns, as I explore in the next section, such as through the anti-colonial “cow protection movements” of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, an instance of what I call “visceral politics” throughout this thesis.<sup>6</sup> For Chatterjee’s subaltern school of thought, the

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<sup>6</sup> As Bayly (1988) notes, countering the ahistorical holism of Dumont who saw the dualism of purity-impurity exerted the same influence on Indic thought for millennia, “the spirit of hierarchy and ritual distinction became *more pervasive* [in 19<sup>th</sup> century British India]. The

issue of the domestic and the outside embodies a pivotal point in anti-colonial politics. Banerji (2000) criticizes this politicization on the grounds that this dichotomy of “pure home” and “polluted outside”, and its pitting against the civil society of modern Western political organization, it invariably casts a particular, restricted picture of the national space, in which “[the home] is the [only] nationally permitted social space within which women must look for their social "formations and pleasure, emotions and ideas of good life." To disagree with this goal of a happy subordination to Hindu patriarchy would be construed as joining up with those "colonial minds" criticised by Chatterjee" (ibid: 911).

While such hegemonic and gendered constructions of the domestic space as “pure” and “comforting” is a common fact of life in contemporary Mumbai, as I will explore in Chapter IV, through the fascination and fetishization of “ghar-ka-khana”, or homemade food, as the epitome of comforting substance, to naturalize these sentiments and assemblages are problematic in three regards. First, as Banerji has pointed out, it naturalizes Hindu patriarchal ideals within the national space, using notions of respectability, chastity, and purity as barometers to define and restrict the scope of femininity in both the domestic and public spheres. Second, it does not take seriously the inherently porous boundaries of home and outside, as well as the efforts to instantiate these boundaries - “technologies of purity” - fuelled by bio-moral anxieties of contact, contamination, and mingling in the urban public, thereby forgoing the transactional dynamic between and within the two realms (Bear 2007). And third, the dichotomy forgoes a complex reality in which a variety of grey zone, hybrid “parallel publics” (Dewey 2009), which lie in between the domestic and the public, become enacted in colonial and post-liberalization India (Appadurai and Breckenridge 1995).

For Dewey (2009), the economic liberalization of India in 1991 opened up not only a proliferation of global capital, labour, culture, and ideas, but novel media and avenues in which intimate anxieties of contact and mingling, in both the domestic and urban spheres, come to be expressed. Popular female magazines such as *Femina*, where its female readership comprised of diverse communities and social classes send anonymous letters to the editors that explicate their (often devastating) personal experiences of sexual violence and frustration, provide a platform *in-between* the

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British peace speeded the rise of high Hindu kingship, Brahmanism and the *advance of principles of purity and pollution in the countryside*” (Bayly 1988: 157, my emphasis).

Habermasean public sphere of rational discussion, and the domestic/familial sphere where face-to-face contact with each other is the norm, a “space in which the private becomes a matter of public debate” (ibid: 128), an “intimate public” (Berlant 2009) upheld by the veils of anonymity and fleetingness of participation. Not only do such parallel mediascapes open up avenues for public intimacy to be reconfigured, as I will explore in Chapter III through the Mumbai “beef ban” and “meat ban” incidents in 2015, but urban, cosmopolitan megacities in India harbour many semi-public spaces where (semi) strangers congregate and dissociate in fleeting anonymity - for instance, roadside *chai* (tea) stalls (Chakrabarty 1999), public train carriages (Kusters 2017; Tara 2011), the mall (Phadke et al., 2011), the office canteen (Chapter VII), and home food catering services (Chapter VIII), spaces with distinct rules and modalities of gendered, caste, and class-based sociality and kinaesthetics, which neither fit neatly within the Habermasean dichotomy of “private” and “public” (Kaviraj 1997), nor the Indic, purified spaces of “home” and “outside”, as envisaged by Chatterjee.

These spaces within the various shades of the urban public, which garner temporary, “weak” associations, may function to provide avenues for experimentation with and transgression of the “heavy” markers of family, religion, and professional life, as I will examine through cathartic experimentations with meat by vegetarians (Chapter III), it also serves to reinscribe normative class/gender roles and expectations. A popular column in *Femina* magazine, “Proscriptions”, is rife with vivid stories where “female characters who transgress boundaries are punished with profound unhappiness because of their inability to fulfil the socially constructed feminine duties of marriage and motherhood. The message to readers is clearly that appearances are quite deceiving and that true happiness can only be found in the *orderly boundaries of the family*” (Dewey 2009: 131, my emphasis). These technologies of purity gain moral weight in an environment where female members of the house are taken to be barometers of family honour (*izzat*), and thus the explication of personal issues in public that may damage these are policed, both through family/peer pressure and self restraint.

As Bear’s (2007) historical anthropology of Bengali and Anglo-Indian railway workers and their (transforming) notions of bio-moral identity show, anxieties regarding contact and female respectability and purity have been aggravated through anti-colonial movements in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, a nuanced critique of Chatterjee’s naturalization of the “pure home” and “contaminated outside”. Anti-colonial

movements were rife with bio-moral anxieties regarding contact with the “foreign”, which combined with the (masculine) fears of emasculation vis-à-vis their colonial rulers: the wide reaching vernacular works of writers such as Surendranath Banerjee (1848 - 1925) “aimed to appeal to sentiments among the readership that would lead them to unite in order to protect not just middle-class women, but all Indian women. Yet these women would only deserve this protection if they remained “feminine” and outwardly virtuous” (ibid: 55). These injunctions not only served to rigidly mark masculinity/femininity over the domestic and public spheres of the urban railways, the latter envisaged as sites of uncontrollable pollution and mingling, but also amplified concerns over maintaining bodily pedigree and family-lineage purity, which ultimately served as the building blocks to achieve national purity. These colonial “consolidations” (Bayly 1988), which bio-morally linked body to nation, set up a discourse that dynamically interpellated “masculine middle class Indians” and their “respectable Indian wives and mothers”. Here, nationalist and anti-colonial movements of the early 20<sup>th</sup> century show how technologies of purity become aggravated through historical and political processes to instantiate vital boundaries which sought to mitigate anxieties regarding loss of power and place, as well as to assemble the complex totality of *jat* (caste) in an acceptable way: of somatic identity, respectability, family pedigree, and nationhood. The next section will continue to engage with strands of Indian history which attest to such negotiations, albeit through explicitly *visceral* relationalities, conjoining the gut, body, and communal identity - modes of vital boundary making *through* ones’ entrails, what I call “visceral politics”.

### **3. Visceral Politics - socializing through the gut**

The somatic and sensual language of “visceral politics” works less by conversational persuasion, than affective mobilization. A pertinent illustration of this is the difference between what comes out of one’s mouth and what one keeps inside of him, the thoughts and affects of the latter often experienced as forming in one’s viscera - this is the area where “gut feelings” emerge - metaphors of the stomach crop up when wanting to describe an alternative tract for communication, which may not always involve a known listener or a particular object, nor follow conventional forms

of expression.<sup>7</sup> Stefan Ecks' (2003) ethnography of "bowel obsession" in contemporary Calcutta, which explores the ubiquitous concern of all things gustatory in popular discourse, show how metaphors of the "belly" (*pet*) and "digestion" are salient ways for actors, both laymen and professional, to not only negotiate their health, but to critically assess the ills of society. For instance, the commonly expressed anxiety that Bengalis of the earlier generation could digest anything, while modern Bengalis "suffer from a lack of appetite, indigestion, tension, and [worry] constantly about the future" (ibid: 232), are instances where the metaphors of the *pet* are used beyond individual bio-moral technologies of "self-care", as a reflexive meta-commentary on the ills of a rapidly transforming Calcutta, in all its cultural and environmental degradation. Here, ailments of the *pet* is not only a passive, micro recipient of macro societal transformations; but rather, are active *media* in which these transformations are understood, processed, and expressed.

While Ecks' ethnography is a pioneering work of the hitherto unassembled history of visceral mobilizations in India, which this thesis contributes to conceptually and ethnographically, his formulation of the *pet* as "reflexive metaphor" unsatisfactorily *verbalizes the visceral*. The politics of the *pet* is visceral precisely because of the extent and effect of how societal transformations are calibrated through how much the belly can digest and deal with these ills, and is less a *comment on* the world, than a *literal embodiment* and measure of its implications. This is not to say that visceral politics comes before or transcends language, as unmediated, "pure affect" (Mazzarella 2009) - on the contrary, it speaks a different kind of language, not through rational-verbal commentary, but through the tactile gastropolitics of smell, sight, pleasure, disgust, spiciness, sweetness, and so on, which crystalizes social distinction on the bio-moral plane of substance and everyday interaction (Bourdieu 1984; Hankins 2013). In visceral politics, food and the gut are not merely symbolized mediums that illuminate a social order *out there*, but are the very messages in which the pleasures and anxieties of the social *emerge within* (Appadurai 1981). The visceral politics of the gut engages the social concerns of drawing the boundaries of what is acceptable and not, who to mix with or not, and so on, in terms of what is *digestible* or not, which, categorically speaking, is the same as "managing social relationships" -

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<sup>7</sup> I explore this dichotomy of mouth and stomach through the clash of cosmopolitan ideals of inclusion, and uncontrollable visceral disgust, a crisis situation experienced by vegetarian office workers towards their meat eating colleagues, in Chapter VII.



to regulate the vital boundaries of social distance and intimacy - but differs in the tactility in which these regulations are actually carried out and experienced, how experimentation and transgression are expressed, or the pleasurable comfort of returning to expected, conventionalized normality (Janeja 2009; 2010).

For instance, as I will explore in Chapter III, vegetarians and meat eaters in contemporary Mumbai are locked in an uneasy relationship of visceral incommensurability. A “pure vegetarian” Jain and a “carnivorous” Muslim do converse in a variety of spheres of life, such as the workplace, train compartment, or the cigarette stand; but very rarely do they converge in the intimate spheres of the home or the workplace canteen. This was because gustatory tastes and habits become cemented in the gut, making it difficult to unlearn it and *be* otherwise - in India, you don't “talk someone out” of being vegetarian. One of my “pure-veg” Jain informants, who abstained from all meats and a variety of other foods for reasons of health, mental purity, and self-discipline (Laidlaw 2005), was a self-proclaimed “progressive” - a successful businessman who was well travelled around India and the globe, working with a variety of communities and nationalities, and very critical about the “beef ban” bill, which banned the sale of all beef except the water buffalo, popularly understood as an attack on Muslims of the city, propagated by the Hindu right-wing BJP-Shiv Sena coalition. This was an attack on “Mumbai’s cosmopolitanism”. For him, the *rights* of Muslims and Dalits who ate beef should be voraciously protected, in principle. Yet it was a different matter whether he was able to *associate* with these minorities on a personal level, in practice. Having a conversation, or working together, with beef eaters is more than welcome; but a home party is uncomfortable - “how should we [as pure vegetarians], accommodate their [carnivorous] tastes?” Regardless of Mumbai’s cosmopolitanism, its openness and compassion towards the Other, which the Jain gentleman genuinely aspired to, his *Jain stomach* had a difficult time digesting the visceral stickiness of certain inculcated life trajectories, of which food was one of its immovably erect pillars. In these instances, gustatory (in)digestibility was the prime expression and barometer of whether ones’ numerous Others could be socially and existentially digested.

Such visceral negotiations should be contrasted with Foucauldian notions of “biopolitics”, an influential body of work within anthropology, which have explored the nuanced interplay between regimes of the body, knowledge, and power (c.f. Ecks 2013; Foucault 2008; Taylor et al., 2011). Foucault’s concept of “biopower” denotes

the processes by which entire groups and populations become objects of interest, enumeration, and ultimately, discipline and control, under the various techniques used by the nation-state, military, police, and other actors who influence and govern populations at a macro level. An important distinction Foucault makes is between what he calls “sovereign power” and “biopower”, the former which exerts control through the Hobbesian dictum: “take life or let live”, while biopower is the power “to foster life or disallow it to the point of death” (Foucault 1990a: 138, in Taylor et al., 2011: 43). In biopower, unlike sovereign power, techniques of discipline no longer limits itself to the strictly legal subject, whereby *death* was its ultimate action and threat against political deviation; instead, all aspects of *life* come under its scrutiny, entailing precise calculations regarding education, diet, population control, sanity, and safety - in other words, “how one ought to live” becomes a concern of the nation-state. “Biopolitics” is a critical concept which seeks to uncover these mechanisms of administration of life.

A useful distinction when thinking about biopolitics is between macro and micro forms of disciplinary power (Taylor et al., 2011: 45 - 46). If macro biopolitics concerns itself with domains such as population and race, where the nation-state employs tactics such as demographics and the census to achieve population control, micro biopolitics primarily concerns itself with the scale of the individual and the body. Here, lower order institutions such as schools, the army, hospitals, and the workplace function to produce desired “subjects” among individuals, often aligned with the objectives of the nation-state. Within this schema, the concept of “visceral politics” is a furthering of such micro-politics of the body, inwards, taking seriously the political and affective grip of the gut onto the individual and its environment, in ways which the concept of “disciplinary power” does not fully engage with. As such, while the manner in which people engage with their surroundings through the intimate scale of the gut is influenced by macro level politics and laws which serve to control and consolidate these frameworks of mingling and socialization, this thesis primarily focuses on the mechanics of these interactions as seen through a variety of foodways in contemporary Mumbai. However, Chapter III, which deals with the Mumbai “beef ban” scandal, explores how macro scale legislature and media discourses informed and distorted ground-level interactions among my informants. One crucial aspect of macro forms of discipline is that the population under administration does not exist *before* regimes of power - rather, they come into being through the very processes of

naming and enumeration, for example through the census, legislature, and mass political rallies.<sup>8</sup> The aftermath of the beef ban saw an intensification of the stereotyping of the Other, and the consolidation of social hierarchy and distinction on the lines of food habits.

Moreover, through a close examining of the language of the state government and the high and supreme courts regarding the utility of the cattle to serve the nation, rife with opinion and enumerations of how the nation-state of India ought to be constituted by whom, Chapter III explores how, paradoxically, *cows* are extended citizenship within the democratic national space, at the expense of certain other subjects (namely, Muslim butchers). This process is concordant with what Manent (2006) calls “disembodied politics”, where an aspiration for equal rights, and an abomination towards the idea that physical difference may affect these democratic ideals, paradoxically creates a new set of exclusionary social distinctions on the ground-level (c.f. Ecks 2009: 157 - 158). The supreme court takes pains to explicate that anti-cattle slaughter legislature is not to be based on a preference or dislike for particular communities; rather, the scale of reference is always the wider good and health of the bovine-nation-state-economy. Such disembodiment of the particular for the general results in an unintended preference for *certain particulars*, at the expense of an intricately interconnected cattle supply chain, which crosses over religion, occupation, and community. Further, as I explore in Chapter VII, the practices of commensality within the office canteen are also steeped in ideals for such disembodied politics, where social and physical differences, based on caste, community, rank, and so on, are wished away so as to not make a difference in the ways people shared food with each other. Many Mumbaikars took pride in such aspirations, embedded in its history as a welcoming melting pot of diverse cultures, where commensality functioned as a social mechanism to achieve these ideals; yet, these were viscerally challenged by the affective and sensory intrusions of *smell* coming from foods, producing a set of social distinctions based on incommensurability and disgust. When ideals for a disembodied politics clashed with

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<sup>8</sup> See Cohn (1996) for the exposition of how the census in colonial India commissioned by the British was crucial in achieving projects of colonial governmentality, especially with the unintended consequence of consolidating caste hierarchy and boundaries, and constructing these fluidities as rigid and endemic to Indian society. As I explore in Chapter III, Dave’s (2011) ethnography of the LGBT movement in Delhi documents how such subjectivities emerge amidst mass political movements.

these visceral affects, many of my “pure” vegetarian informants felt a sense of estrangement towards their carnivorous colleagues.

These visceral engagements, mediated through the gut, as with the technologies of purity of navigating the bio-moral charged field of contemporary Mumbai, are implicated in the politics of scale (Carr and Lempert 2016; Strathern 2004). As Carr and Lempert (2016) point out, social actors relate to their world through different scalar orientations, or the myriad ways in which people measure, objectify, and act upon the social relationships they are bound to. These orientations are first and foremost “processes and practices before it is product” (ibid: 8 - 9), and in this regard, the concept of visceral politics touches upon the ways in which social relationships affect and are affected by the gut, as well as quantified and measured, in everyday life. For instance, as I explore in Chapter VII, when a vegetarian is confronted by his meat eating colleagues’ tiffin, he is no longer operating from the perspective of colleague against colleague, but rather, that between community (vegetarian Jain) against community (meat eating Punjabi). The viscerally perceived incommensurability between the two communities are made possible through the scalar operations which push the perspective of the Jain colleague upward from an individual, where the cosmopolitan ethos of inclusion and acceptance should take a hold, to representatives of a particular community, with radically different dietary regimes. The biopolitics and disembodied politics of the beef ban legislature, which I explore in Chapter III, also play with sets of scalar orientations, where groups and communities are located, enumerated, and ultimately compared against the encompassing scale of the bovine-nation-economy.

Technologies of purity, and the quotidian negotiations within the bio-moral-economy of work lunch, are also implicated in scalar orientations. Strathern (2004) notes the metonymic function of everyday objects, where it can retain its specificity while addressing a “whole” larger than itself: for instance, an “old exercise book may simultaneously recall attempts to write a novel and an entire epoch of aspirations and hopes. ... [A]n object may make present powers or forces that affect a person’s life, whether imagined as the environment, the cosmos, or the community” (ibid: 7). It follows that the practice of ethnography is always implicated in the politics of scale, since it strives to translate cultural complexity through providing a range of stories, perspectives, relationships, and timeframes. This thesis, in ethnographically following the tiffin from the domestic into the public, as well as examining its hybrid variants in

the commercial foodscapes of tiffin services, explores how domestic intimacy, personhood, and social distinction become negotiated through foods, objects, and networks which carry these values. Technologies of purity function as scaling modalities within this bio-moral work, where social relationships become condensed and expressed in a series of scaling processes. If *ghar-ka-khana* embodies the relationship of wife-husband/mother-son, the labour of cooking (Chapter IV) and catering (VIII) is a scaling orientation which condenses a larger relationship into a specified substance, which then can be transported across distances (Chapter V, VI), when finally it becomes re-assembled and transacted in the urban public through eating and sharing in the canteen (Chapter VII). The tiffin foodscape in contemporary Mumbai is the aggregation of such scaled social relationships, and the chapters of this thesis progresses as each enters a different stage within this network.

#### **4. Histories and ethnographies of gustatory mobilizations in India**

Now, I turn to the historicities and ethnographies of the viscerally political. How food related life-styles and life-trajectories viscerally and substantially channel social hierarchy, status, purity, and power, has been a pivotal theme in the history of India, as evinced by the seminal work of B.R. Ambedkar (1990 [1948]). Ambedkar distinguishes “largely three categories of diet in India: (i) Those who are vegetarians; (ii) Those who eat flesh but do not eat cow’s flesh; and (iii) Those who eat flesh including cow’s flesh. Corresponding to this classification, we have in Hindu society three classes: (1) Brahmins; (2) Non-Brahmins; and (3) The Untouchables” (ibid: 329). These are sociologically abstracted classifications of a ubiquitous, vernacular food-social classification which exists throughout India, the *tri gunas*, or “three quality” classification system, which draws from the Samkhya tradition of Hindu philosophy - between *sattvik* (good, white, purity, cool), *rajasik*, (virility, red, energy, heat) and *tamasik* (sluggishness, black, impurity) - which are embodied by different food stuffs, which, in turn, become the building blocks of the bio-moral person who incorporates these essences (Osella and Osella 2008). While the purifying qualities of *sattvik* is synonymous with a vegetarian diet, “red meats” such as beef and mutton are regularly grouped in the latter two categories, of virile energy at best, or corrupting impurity at worst.<sup>9</sup> Ambedkar agrees with Dumont (1970) and many other

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<sup>9</sup> Historically, the consumption of beef among Untouchables denotes the consumption of carrion (decaying flesh of dead animals), understood as a particularly low-status dietary habit

ethnographers of village India that classifications of diet as well as practices of commensality and endogamy reproduce caste categories and hierarchies (Marriott 1968; Mayer 1960; Parry 1976). However, his task was not to confirm what many people in India take as a “given” - aspirations towards vegetarianism as the most pure, respectable and healthy diet (Srinivas 1956), and a conventionalized feeling of disdain towards beef and meat eating - rather, the problem for him was: When and how did such a system of classification come about, and why is “cow’s flesh” singled out? These were not incidental questions, since it was at the heart of how social hierarchy came to be established and rationalized within Hinduism.

Consulting the religious texts from the Vedic period (1500 - 500 B.C.E.), Ambedkar arrives at several provocative conclusions: that beef eating was widely practiced in the Vedic period, including by Brahmin priests, not because it lacked “sacredness”, or as an act of subversion as seen with some contemporary Indian vegetarians, but because it was revered and worshipped through *yajna* (ritual sacrifice); Vedic Brahmanism (the predecessor to Hinduism) was contested by a rapidly spreading Buddhism and other ascetic movements such as Jainism, which publicly criticized the former over animal sacrifice; in the face of such allegations, Brahman priests strategically dropped not only these practices, but started to adopt vegetarianism to “one-up” their critics, who regularly ate other meats; those “broken men”, tribesmen split-up by Brahmin conquerors, who were converting to Buddhism en masse but retaining their habit of beef eating, started to be held by contempt not only because of their faith but by their practice, which the Brahmins abandoned long ago; through these complex political entanglements, Brahmanism dynamically syncretized into early Hinduism, leading to the eventual waning of Buddhism in India, and the “broken men” being absorbed into Hindu hierarchy as beef eating “untouchables”. For Ambedkar, the emergence of the “untouchable”, heightened cow worship, adoption of vegetarianism by the Brahmins as means to assert “purity”, and the imposition of the hierarchical system separating vegetarians, flesh eaters, and beef eaters along lines of purity and respectability, were necessary counterparts of this historical process.

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throughout India, not only for it implicating the death of the sacred cow, but for Hindu dietary proscriptions of abhorring *tamasic* foods - the rotten and the decayed. See Chapter III for a more detailed diagram of bio-morally acceptable foods in India, especially among Hindus and Jains.

My intention here is to take Ambedkar's genealogy as polemic rather than history. Ambedkar (1891 - 1956), a contemporary and critic of Gandhi (1869 - 1948), and revered as the architect of the Indian constitution, was a Bombay native from *Dalit* (untouchable) background, who's one of many social impacts was revitalizing the Dalit Buddhist movement in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, by which he called for conversion of untouchables to Buddhism to move away from the oppressions of casteist Hinduism. His genealogical method sought to expose the contradictions, atrocities, and prevalence of the Brahmanical order passed onto this day - this is why he starts by deconstructing the prevalent common sense that Hindus don't, and never have, eaten beef. Ambedkar's work points to two important directions: that issues of meat eating and vegetarianism had, from the very foundations of Indian society and life, political gravity; and by being quotidian, dietary habits charged with such political gravitas have a strong propensity to be considered "matter of fact", as it inscribes inequality on the body and everyday practices, making it all the more trickier to critique (cf. Bourdieu 1984).

Most importantly, this meant that "cow worship" did not exist from time immemorial - contrary to the messages of Hindu revivalists, and the popular assumption which uncritically link Hinduism with worshipping the "holy cow" (Jha 2002) - the "holy cow" and the "unholy untouchable" were simultaneously interpellated as mirror images in this dynamic moment of history. If this was the original "bovine politics", a full fledged "bovine nationalism" movement emerged in late 19<sup>th</sup> century British India, amidst the Hindu nationalist struggle against British colonialism. The single most important proponent of the "cow protection movement" was the Arya Samaj (Aryan society), founded by Dayananda Saraswati (1824 - 1883) in 1875, a radical Hindu reformist group who preached a return to Vedic ideals and culture, to cure the ills of post-Vedic Hinduism, which has helplessly given away the right to self-rule (*swaraj*) to conquerors such as the Mughals and the British (Freitag 1989). These historical processes amidst the nationalist, anti-colonial struggle gradually shifted the focus from the Untouchable to the Muslim, as the epitome of the viscerally impure and incommensurable Other *within*, by their association with their "defiling" acts of carnivorousness, and religious and occupational propensity to slaughter.

The visceral symbolism of the cow played a central role in the organizations' political tactics and rhetoric, which gained support especially in the northern state of

Punjab, a place of fierce political and religious contestation between Hindus, Muslims, and Sikhs, all trying to strengthen their foothold amidst the increasingly communalist and confrontational climate (Hansen 1996: 143-4). One essential correlation made was between “cow” and “femininity”, culminating in the formulation of the “mother cow” (*gau mata*), where the rhetoric of the family was essential to give it sentimental gravitas. Concurrent with the feminization of the nation as “mother India” (*Bharat mata*), the cow became the life giving mother who nurtures the nation and its rightly, original inhabitants with its ever sacred *panchagavya* (5 gifts) - a concoction of milk, curd, *ghee* [clarified butter], cow urine and dung, used in Hindu rituals - a fragile and benevolent being which needs to be protected by the patriarchal authority of the Hindu state (her husband), as well as militant nationalists (her children), against the attack of its aggressors. This was a bold reformulation of Vedic values, if we take Ambedkar’s case to be correct - for cow worship was preached in the texts of Laws of Manu, which came much after the Vedas, and while the symbolism of the “sacred cow” existed throughout medieval India, the emphasis on notions of its “motherhood” only came to be heightened and solidified through the nationalist struggle (Benei 2008; van der Veer 1994). Amidst such a dynamic interpellation, the act of cow sacrifice and slaughter, most visibly performed by Muslims during *Bakr-Id*, became a site of agitation between Samaj sympathizers and Muslims. The British were equally framed as barbaric, “unclean butchers”, who, alongside the Muslims, were guilty of threatening Hindu patriarchy and of matricide (van der Veer 1994: 87 - 91).

The role of the colonial British must be taken seriously amid these heightened bovine nationalisms. They were not only objects of contempt, a hindrance to self-rule, but played an active role in “consolidating” (Bayly 1988) communal and nationalistic anxieties through practises of legal enforcement and codification. In 1888, amidst these tensions, the North-western Provincial High Court at Allahabad ruled against section 295 of the Indian Penal Code, denying that a cow was a sacred object. Subsequently, any Muslim who slaughtered a cow could not be held guilty of hurting “the religion of Hindustan”, and Muslims who wanted to slaughter cows had to be protected by police. As a result, the Muslims and the British were seen as allied barbaric butchers by angered Hindus. Further, “while goats could also be slaughtered at that festival, it became imperative for Muslims not to bow down to Hindu encroachments on their ancient right to sacrifice cows on *Bakr-Id*. Time and place



were thus set for violent encounter” (van der Veer 1994: 91-2). This points to the complex intersections of colonial rule and communal tensions, the former which sought to codify Hindu and Muslim law and customs, for its own sake of rule, which set up a bounded arena in which cultural and religious differences were asserted. “The legal orientalism of the colonial state challenges the ambiguous boundaries of Muslim and Hindu communities. A multiple response to that challenge is given by reform movements and orthodox movements. It is a creative reinterpretation of pre-colonial religious discourse on body and gender” (ibid: 105).

What emerges as the counterpart to the motherly cow and the butchering Muslim and British, is the masculine Hindu nationalist. The patriarchal project to protect “mother cow” and “mother India” meant that the multivalent nature of womanhood within traditional Hindu thought had to be converged to the single signifier, of the “mother”, while downplaying her aggressive and sexual sides, epitomized by blood-thirsty goddesses such as Kali and Durga (Hansen 1996: 141). This creates space for the Hindu man to step up and protect his feminine counterpart, an ample opportunity to overcome his effeminacy pushed down upon him by his conquering “Others”. One can argue that the feminization and purification of the cow is concordant to the policing of female respectability and sexuality amidst the anti-colonial struggle, fuelled by such masculine anxieties (Banerji 2000; Bear 2007). Themes of masculinity and overcoming effeminacy play an essential part in the substratum of Hindu nationalist thought, what Thomas Blom Hansen (1996) calls “recuperation of masculinity”, where “Hindu nationalist forms of organization and mobilization strategies in contemporary India, in crucial ways, are driven by an urge to overcome this perceived ‘effeminization’ by expunging the Muslim ‘Other’” (ibid: 138). Chapter III of this thesis particularly addresses these anxieties at its most visceral, towards the Muslim Other and their masculine carnivorousness.

If the cow protection movement led by Arya Samaj addressed the anxieties of communal and national struggles in the turn of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, the two organizations of Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS), the ideological wing of the currently ruling BJP, and the Shiv Sena, rose to prominence in the latter half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, through their martial tactics of bodily reform, public spectacle, and acts of violence in an attempt to overcome this anxiety, gaining much support from agitated youth (Hansen 2001). The chief ideologue and second leader of the RSS M.S. Golwarkar (1906 - 1973), forcefully put across the idea that the only way for a Hindu nation to be

realized was through the cultivation of strength and will, both physical and spiritual, within the to-become Hindu body and mind. The emphasis put on character development, education, and selfless devotion to the Hindu nation, cultivated through martial training and militaristic discipline, directly challenged the bio-moral politics of Mahatma Gandhi (1869 - 1948), who sought to control the body-politic through intricate experimentations with the body and self by means of vegetarianism, fasting, and celibacy, the taming of desire rather than fuelling it (Alter 2000). Gandhi's nonviolence was too effeminate for Hindutva ideologues such as Golwarkar, especially in the post-1947 (partition) landscape given India's tense relationship with its neighbouring Muslim nations (Pakistan and East Pakistan, currently Bangladesh), where issues over border security and national identity were agitating Hindu-Muslim tensions in unprecedented ways. As much as a unified Hindu identity and nation was envisioned, an essentially aggressive, threatening, and intolerant Islam was imagined, a force which Nehru's flaccid secularism could not battle off (Hansen 1996: 154).

The Shiv Sena, found in 1966 in Mumbai by the charismatic Bal Thackeray (1926 - 2012), has excelled in propagating the discourse of the vile and despicable Muslim, and sublimating this anxiety and frustration through masculinity channelled through violent public spectacles, culminating in multiple anti-Muslim agitations and pogroms over the years. The party, a member of the national network of Sangh Parivar (coalition of Hindutva parties) together with the RSS, which emerged out of the context of Maharashtra's struggle to establish itself as a unilingual state in 1956, propagates a Marathi regionalist and xenophobic version of right-wing Hindu chauvinism. The changing of the name from Bombay to Mumbai in 1995 was through the workings of the Shiv Sena - "Mumbai" is the Marathi pronunciation of "Bombay" - which in effect publicly displayed a "recapture" of the city from its Mughal and British conquerors. A few years before this name changing spectacle, was the infamous 1992-1993 Bombay anti-Muslim riots instigated by the party, in which approximately 900 people, majorly Muslims, but also a significant amount of Hindus, died as a result. This pogrom was triggered by the destruction of the Babri Masjid (Babri Mosque) in Ayodhya (in the state of Uttar Pradesh in north India) by a number of Hindu fundamentalists on 6 December 1992, where the Hindu right across the country took this as an opportunity to join in on this wave of Hindu-Muslim antagonism. Since the prominence of Shiv Sena, Bombay saw an increased level of ethnicization, fuelled by a rising amount of frustration among the unemployed,

lumpenized youth due to the city's deindustrialization - the Shiv Sena's tactic was to viscerally mobilize these agitated youths' through the rhetoric of the "Muslim Other" (Muslims) encroaching on "our soil" (*bhumiputra*), "taking our jobs and women", temporary alleviating this tension through bursts of violence to ethnically cleanse the city into a "sacred, Hindu space" (Appadurai 2000: 630).

The 2002 Gujarat anti-Muslim pogroms were equally atrocious and channelled through visceral associations. Yet again, the trigger for the pogrom was the burning of a train carriage carrying returning Hindu pilgrims from the Babri Masjid to Godhra, in Gujarat, killing 59 people - amidst intense speculation over the cause of the fire, and confused accusations and instigations that this was caused by Muslim mobs, extreme acts of violence by Hindu rioters ensued over the next few days and weeks, killing over 1000 people, and rendering many thousands as homeless refugees. Narendra Modi, prime minister of India<sup>10</sup>, and then chief minister of the state of Gujarat, was accused for inciting and fuelling this violence through inflammatory language - until he became prime minister in 2014, he was denied entry into many foreign countries, including the US and UK, for condemnation over his complicity in the pogrom.

Ghassem-Fachandi (2010a; 2010b; 2012), who was present in Gujarat during the pogroms as an ethnographer, devastatingly analyses how this violence was perpetrated through feeding into the deep seated anxieties of Hindus in Gujarat, viscerally experienced as "disgust" and then outwardly expressed as "anger", equated with the affect of *feeling* and *becoming* Hindutva - affects which were heavily informed the viscosity of the cow and dead meat, as well as a paradoxical inversion of the vegetarian ideal of *ahimsa*, nonviolence, to legitimize anti-Muslim violence. Many of the Hindu and Jain vegetarians which appear in his ethnography are disgusted with meat, and Muslims who eats it - yet, he asks, what is disgust without the intense identification with the "object" that rattles the stability of the "subject", an identification that is also necessary in order to experience the ecstatic "release" of violence and transgression? In other words, the desire to devour is the mirror image of disgust and the impulse to vomit; to be disgusted by meat is to confess that you are susceptible and seduced by its power, like a terrified child who cannot look away from that which frightens him. Disgust, in psychoanalytic terms, is "a strong defence

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<sup>10</sup> Since May 2014, and at the time of writing, in September 2017.

against a *particular and forgotten wish*, which has been rendered unconscious” (Ghassem-Fachandi 2010b: 566, my emphasis).

Such “hyperbolic vegetarianism” (Ghassem-Fachandi 2012: 162-3), colloquially and viscerally understood as *alagi* (allergic reaction), prevalent in Gujarat due to a widely shared vegetarian ideal through the salience of Jainism, Vaishnava traditions<sup>11</sup>, and of Mahatma Gandhi in the state, producing an ambivalent identification with meat and meat eating Muslims, is a potent material for Hindutva politics to exercise its mobilizations from within the gut. It is indicative that in violence stricken Ahmedabad, people vernacularly expressed their nationalistic sentiment as “‘*Hindutva* rises up in me’ or ‘*Hindutva* is happening to me’. ... [In Ahmedabad,] the political mobilization for *Hindutva* is habitually portrayed as an unguided and impulsive ‘awakening’ (*jagruti*) to the presence of that mysterious surging essence” (Ghassem-Fachandi 2010b: 558). This sensation of “coming-up” is “visceral politics” in its most devastating form, an ever so powerful medium because it requires no persuasion, which immediately puts one into relation with the abominable Muslim, the object of disgust, anger and resentment, for a Hindutva stricken body. Ghassem-Fachandi’s ethnography is a pioneering work which sociologically and phenomenologically contextualizes Hindutva politics within such visceral mobilizations, and these insights are ever more pertinent in the current political landscape of India under Narendra Modi led BJP, where many recent events are taking place which share the same visceral mechanism of violence, such as religious driven mob lynching’s and the emergence of *gau rakshaks*, or “cow vigilantes” - I examine these in Chapter IX, the conclusion of this thesis.

## 5. Thesis Outline

In this final section, I outline how the two key concepts of “Technologies of purity” and “Visceral politics” will be engaged with and elaborated in the subsequent chapters of the thesis. While Chapter I, the current chapter, introduced the two concepts through relevant theories, ethnographies and histories pertaining to bio-moral negotiations of self and Other in India, Chapter II will explore the methodology of this ethnographic study, situating the various locales and fieldsites within the city of Mumbai, which I engaged with over a period of 15 months. These will not only

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<sup>11</sup> Followers of the Vaishnava tradition, also called Vaniyas [trader castes], they are a Hindu sect who follow Lord Vishnu, obey strict rules of vegetarianism, and have been successful business communities throughout the country and internationally, alongside the Jains.

serve as an introduction to the city's history and (cosmopolitan) culture, but will also be used to contextualize my own visceral politics vis-à-vis my informants - throughout fieldwork, commensality, or the act of sharing food, was not only a fertile ethnographic object to understand their interactions with each other, but was the very *method* which I used to build meaningful social relationships.

Chapter III will explore the visceral politics of food through two incidents which occurred in Mumbai, which politicized food to a national scale: the “beef ban” and “meat ban” incidents, in March and October 2015, respectively. I engage with a range of legislative, statistical, popular media, and ethnographic data to trace how these incidents consolidated vital boundaries between self and Other, interpellating incommensurable subjectivities on lines of food habits. In particular, the “beef ban” incident, which banned the slaughter and sale of cattle (except the water buffalo) within the state of Maharashtra, where Mumbai is the capital, will be contextualized as a spectacular intervention into the urban public of Mumbai, transforming cosmopolitan pleasure into visceral disgust among my informants.

Chapter IV continues the exploration of visceral politics in the urban public through the vital boundaries of *ghar* (home) and *bahar* (outside) in contemporary Mumbai. I explore the various tactics and technologies of purity to negotiate this boundary through the two substances of *ghar-ka-khana*, or “homemade food”, and its opposite *bahar-ka-khana*, “outside food”, two ubiquitous substances in urban cities in India. The bio-moral-economic management of these substances proved to be essential ways for commuters in Mumbai to achieve their identity and wellbeing in the urban public.

Chapter V introduces the ubiquitous Indian work-lunch: the *tiffin*. These are sturdy, stainless steel containers that hold *ghar-ka-khana*, which city dwellers take to their workplaces to consume during the day, an important way to ingest community-body specific substances in the urban public. Its ergonomic function and history will be analysed to understand how the stainless steel tiffin is utilized by commuters throughout the city as a technology of purity to carry vital substance from home to city. The second half of the chapter will explore history of the Mumbai Dabbawalas, a 125-year-old tiffin delivery network with firm roots in the city, who are outsourced the task to carry this vital substance. Their history is integral to the rise of Bombay as an industrial metropolis throughout the 20<sup>th</sup> century.

Chapter VI focuses on the work, ethics, and the organizational network of the Dabbawalas in the contemporary age, which I contextualize, with the tiffin, as specialized forms of technologies of purity for a class of lower middle class, upper caste vegetarian office worker commuters to maintain purity and health in the urban public, at an affordable price. Their daily work rhythm and religiosity will be ethnographically explored, as well as their recent rise as brand ambassadors of cleanliness, efficiency, and hard work, a reputation which became cemented through a series of management science studies and popular media appearances, a technology of purity in itself for corporations, governments, NGOs, and media actors to exercise their aspirations to “up” their respectability quotient of their services and products.

Chapter VII follows the tiffin and the Dabbawalas into the office canteen, to explore how practices of consumption and commensality within this semi-public space harbours both cosmopolitan pleasure, as well as visceral disgust. I explore two offices as fertile sites for commuters to engage with social distinction, communal identity, and social experimentation with their numerous (known) Others. While these engagements were usually amicable and intimate, the informal, bi-weekly “non-veg” days in one of the offices, which viscerally split the canteen into “vegetarian” and “meat” zones, challenged the cosmopolitan ideals of mingling, and interpellated incommensurable subjects among the co-workers. While the meat eaters savoured these occasions as cathartic, carnivorous feasts, the vegetarians were engulfed in disgust and estrangement towards their colleagues who suddenly appeared irrevocably, and indigestibly, Other.

Chapter VIII examines a ubiquitous, yet academically unexplored, institution found throughout urban cities and towns in India: home based tiffin services. These are informal catering services, usually operated by housewives for side income, grey-zone institutions that commercially produce intimate substance for urban dwellers who do not have the skills, means, or time to cook for themselves. While most tiffin services in Mumbai are geared towards providing generic “Indian food”, lowest common denominator foods to appeal to the general mass, there are others which have been providing community-body specific foods for generations of migrant labourers and urban dwellers who share the same regional and kinship background. In the final section, I explore these mobilizations through the “East Indian” community, a coastal Catholic community native to Mumbai, for whom food is medium and message for visceral distinction, pleasure, and communal memory.

Finally, Chapter IX will conclude the thesis by recapitulating the argument of each previous chapter, and resynthesizing the argument through the key concepts of “Visceral politics” and “Technologies of purity”, while contextualizing these through recent, alarming events of communal and religious violence taking place in contemporary India.

## Chapter II. Research Methodology

### 1. Cosmopolitanism, commensality, and method

I conducted 15 months ethnographic fieldwork, between October 2014 and January 2016, in the city of Mumbai, to study how identity, health, and wellbeing were negotiated among urban commuters, through their everyday engagements with food. Initially, to simplify my research topic, I often explained that I came to Mumbai to study “food culture”, which at times raised eyebrows: why Mumbai of all places, and not somewhere with *real* food and culture, like Rajasthan, or Bengal, or Kerala, with lengthier and richer histories? A native to the city for 40 years passionately told me: “Food in Bombay is like it’s language - its absolutely hodgepodge. You can find anything here, from *dhoklas*<sup>12</sup> to *dosas*<sup>13</sup> to doughnuts, but its not the real thing, it is Bombay-fied. Like language. The average uneducated migrant speaks 5 languages, no kidding - Hindi, English, Marathi, Gujarati, and his native tongue - but the first four are not the real thing, they’re half languages, maybe a few phrases here to bribe cops, or couple of swear words there for daily use! We mix all of these, and we get *Bambaya* [Bombay-fied] Hindi.” It was precisely this hodgepodge sociality - what Appadurai (2011) calls “cosmopolitanism from below” - which prompted me to immerse myself in a city driven by its dynamic urban ethos of mingling and experimentation, a “maximum city” (Mehta 2004) of commerce, the migrant experience, and Bollywood.<sup>14</sup> Mumbai may have lacked the deepness of “authentic regional cuisine” (Appadurai 1988)<sup>15</sup>, but my aim had always been to capture food in India within the flux of everyday life, as mediators of both intimate identification and social distinction, however fleeting and hodgepodge. Mumbai’s popularly perceived lack of authenticity - previously a lazy conglomeration of 7 fishing islands propelled into modernity by the British Empire, although not at all reducible to it - was in fact an *effect* of complex confluences and improvisations of people, capital, and ideas which flowed into the city, blurring boundaries and identities, which always became re-consolidated through visceral assertions.

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<sup>12</sup> A vegetarian Gujarati snack made of fermented rice and chickpea batter.

<sup>13</sup> A South Indian crepe dish made of fermented rice batter.

<sup>14</sup> Popular culture is filled with representations of Bombay-Mumbai as city of glamour and cultural, linguistic, and regional cosmopolitanism, and before and during fieldwork, I consumed this image through numerous films, books, and histories (Roberts 2009; Mehta 2004; Nagarkar 1996; Patil and Thorner 1995; Thayil 2013).

<sup>15</sup> Although there exists a dynamic politics that solidify and circulate such representations, as I will explore in Chapter IV.



Unfortunately, Mumbai's vibrant cosmopolitanism is mirrored by excessive amounts of congestion, socio-economic inequality, and environmental degradation. Massive influxes of global capital have become a catalyst for reckless urban development to elevate Mumbai to a "global financial hub", at the expense of an ever-increasing number of slum dwellers, and the natural ecosystem (Gandy 2008). Such aspirations not only have so far failed to adequately address public health and infrastructure issues for the resident citizenry, but paradoxically has taken an active part in jumbling the distribution of natural resources, as essential as tap water, through obscure technocratic and financial projects, often for the benefit of the emergent middle classes, who is said to drive the economic growth of Mumbai, and India at large (Bjorkman 2015). Perhaps the clearest instance where urban planning in Mumbai has affected the wider socio-ecology, is the periodic flooding's which the city experiences. These "man made floods" - the 2005 Maharashtra floods killing over 1000<sup>16</sup> - are said to be so due to garbage blocking off drainages, and large scale land reclamation projects, such as the making of Navi Mumbai in the East of the city centre since the 1960s to absorb rapid urban growth, rendering Mumbai's intricate wetland and mangrove ecology, which helps de-pressure rainwater into the ocean, dysfunctional.<sup>17</sup> While this thesis primarily deals with how bio-moral substances, embodied with social relationships and values, are transacted within the urban public of Mumbai, such environmental realities pose real visceral fears of environmental pollution, as I also discuss in Chapter IV, through the distinction between *ghar-ka-khana* (homemade food) and *bahar-ka-khana* (outside food).<sup>18</sup> Yet, my engagements with my various informants were often optimistic, that despite such a backdrop, or even *because* of it, people laboured to come together and bond through ingesting shared substance. Technologies of purity, and the labour of provisioning, delivering, and sharing foods, were important ways for my informants to make the best out of difficult socio-ecological situations which affected daily life and work. Subsequently,

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<sup>16</sup> (2005 Aug 29). It's official: Maharashtra flood toll is 1493. *Rediff*. Retrieved 29 Mar, 2018 from <http://www.rediff.com/news/2005/aug/29rain.htm>

<sup>17</sup> Anuradha Mathur's (2009) *Soak: Mumbai in an Estuary* provides a fascinating socio-ecological history of Mumbai's waterways, and how colonial and post-colonial urbanization projects have artificially drawn a line between land and water, muddled and interconnected realms which interchanged as the islands of Bombay-Mumbai went through different phases, from monsoon to dry summer and winter.

<sup>18</sup> For an ethnographic account of these environmental and public health concerns in Indian megacities, see Solomon (2016) for Mumbai, and Ecks (2013) for Calcutta.

I made an ethnographic and analytic choice to capture this vitality and optimism, rather than only on the environmental fears which inform these practices and aspirations.

My own research methods gradually incorporated the cosmopolitan sociality that defined the lives of my informants. Although I spent the first 8 weeks of fieldwork attending private Hindi and Marathi language lessons, I quickly realized that textbook, *shudh* (pure) Hindi had little use value on the streets, except for the unintended consequence of highlighting my foreigner status, and instead I forced myself to pick up on fragmented but firm inputs from my Marathi, Gujarati, Punjabi and other informants, and mixing these with English and Hindi, two languages which I was most comfortable with, and were widely spoken within the city as the lingua franca of politics and business. Fluency in both undeniably denoted an elite status; yet, their ripples could be found throughout society, from slang to signboards. Here, languages were less discreet entities, than continuous ones with intermeshing hues. What started out as a journey of humble imitation of my surroundings, eventually led to constructing my *own* recipe of Bombay Hindi, not at all pure or perfect - for *shudh* Bombay Hindi is an oxymoron - but a *good-enough* common ground for communication, to discuss politics with taxi drivers from Uttar Pradesh, or to haggle for *bombil* fish with a Maharashtra *koli* (fishermen) vendor, with their respected languages at the base. When I was at pains speaking *shudh* Hindi to sound “correct”, my informants and friends laughed and put me in the “NRI” (non resident Indian) category, an increasing group of foreign educated/born Indians, for my Indian looks, foreigner accent which was trying too hard, and clumsy demeanour in navigating the city. As I shed my fear of speaking “partially” (Strathern 2005), this positionality gradually evolved into “JaPanjabi”, a name that became popular among my informants, a neologism combining “Japan” and “Punjabi”, the cultural background of my father and mother, respectably. While “NRI”, for me, denoted a *lack* of knowledge and skills, pushing me into the peripheries of the “foreign”, “JaPanjabi” was an entity of its own, its hybridity being an acceptable form of diversity in the cosmopolitan environment of Mumbai. I identified with the people around me not by perfecting a common language; but rather, by sharing the common condition of open-ended improvisation.

Such linguistic *bricolage*, an instance of what is commonly called *jugaad* in India, or “creative improvisation”, mirrored my omnivorousness regarding who I

made friends with, and, crucially for this project, what I ate with whom. Ethnography demands a double embodiment, of the self in the community in question, and its customs and values in the body of the fieldworker - for to inhabit a world is to make its habits ones own. Commensality occupies a unique place within this dynamic, a *lingua franca* of vital substance. While what prompted me to choose Mumbai over other Indian cities was the existence of the 125 year old Dabbawala network (Chapter V and VI), which I envisaged will provide me with a powerful narrative arc to make sense of a dizzyingly diverse city, I was not fixated on doing an ethnographic study of the organization itself, but rather, to put the centre focus on food, and its surrounding cooks, handlers, and eaters in various parts of the city. The Dabbawala network proved fascinating in the way it connected different actors throughout the city - a “bio-moral infrastructure” - that no previous academic study on them had contextualized in such a way. To do so, and to see what other foodways this network will take me to, I focused on the very thing that was delivered: “ghar-ka-khana”, or homemade food.<sup>19</sup> As I interviewed and spent time with Dabbawalas and their lower middle- and middle class office workers and housewife customers, I realized that ghar-ka-khana was, apart from being an interesting *object* of study, an indispensable *method* for intimate socialization, for both myself and my informants. As I will explore in Chapter IV, in India, ghar-ka-khana is not only an expression of ones regional, religious, caste, and class background, but is first and foremost the embodiment of the particular relationship between cook and eater, specifically that between mother and child, or wife and husband, a relationship that uniquely gives shape to the ethical act of *feeding*. No doubt, taking this act as radiating with pure love was problematic - it uncritically naturalizes this sexual division of labour, consolidating patriarchal ideals as timeless; as well as entirely ignoring the dilemmas of everyday cooking, where taste and health are strenuously negotiated with time and

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<sup>19</sup> Although I take Appadurai’s (1986b) “social biography of things” approach instructive, his approach of looking at things *as if* they have a social life seems to take this “as if” too seriously, by granting objects far too much capacity to act upon the world on its own, away from its creators. I distance myself from such “methodological fetishism”, and I agree more with Janeja (2010) who maintains that the potency of food emerges through the social relationship between cook and eater, which gives shape to the significance, form and materiality of it. The significance of the bio-moral is precisely that people exert their influence on the world *in* things, and I followed the movements of food as things which materialized the social relationship of its handlers (Coupaye 2009).

budget - nonetheless, cooking, feeding, and sharing food were essential ways in which familial and familiar values were bio-morally transacted between women and her kin.

Ghar-ka-khana was an open-armed process, one that *familiarized*, an act of literally and viscerally *making family*, through feeding. Focusing on the processual meant one had to move away from characterizing food as a passive object waiting to be consumed, and instead take seriously its magnetic pull to generate lasting social relationships. As I noted in Chapter I, while this has been well documented *within* the domestic sphere, much less has been theorized on its entanglements *between* the public and private, that so much characterizes life in contemporary, urban India.<sup>20</sup> This allowed me to approach the Dabbawala organization as a technology of purity that extended this ethical relationship into the city (Chapter V, VI), while the office canteen emerged as a fertile site to explore how this familial relationship garnered a new sociality of cosmopolitan intimacy and distinction in a semi-public space (Chapter VII). Moreover, I came to know that in Mumbai, it wasn't only ones *actual* home that became entangled with the urban public. The numerous tiffin providers operated by housewives from their home, were patronaged by bachelors, migrants, double working households and the elderly, who did not possess the skills, means, or time to cook for themselves (Chapter VIII). They outsourced the production of ghar-ka-khana to these caterers, who, for some, acted as “mothers away from home”, who were often chosen on the basis of regional and communal associations, providing them with a dose of affordable, comforting intimacy amidst the bustle of city life, nostalgically evoking childhoods and homelands.

And so it was with me, the fieldworker who had come to this unfamiliar land far away from family, longing for homely nourishment - housewives, working women, and khanawalis took pleasure in feeding this “hungry student-cum-son”, in their homes and workplaces, many jokingly saying that she wished her own children, who always preferred eating out, also praised her food as much as I did. What was normal for their children was novel for me, since I made sure to eat with different people everyday, to avoid exploiting their hospitality. Despite these intervals, the more I ate ghar-ka-khana with the same people, the out-of-the-ordinary gave way to the everyday, and I gradually became part of families and communities, viscerally,

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<sup>20</sup> On the emergent Indian public and its configurations, see Appadurai and Breckenridge 1995; Conlon 1995; Dewey 2009, 2012; Rajagopal 2009. On shifting domestic food practices in the post-liberalization era, see Caplan 2008; Donner 2008, 2011; Janeja 2009, 2010.

from inside out. And through commensality, I lived the very process of socialization lived by my informants everyday.

Throughout my fieldwork, I made it a rule to go everywhere and eat everything. My egalitarian attitude towards all types of cuisines - I wish to emphasize that I am a voracious omnivore and not an elegant gourmand - became even more exaggerated as my fieldwork took the shape of making acquaintances, cooking and eating together, and being referenced to more people and foodways, a relay system with food as its connective node. Rather than taking a particular community or neighbourhood as an absolute anchor (although I did plunge myself into several, as I explore in the following section 2), I found the mobility of food an alluring analytic lens to make sense of this immensely variegated city, with each dish and event a flash of singularity, pockets of Baroquely meditations. The schema of bio-moral food categories in India (Chapter III) were largely drawn out bottom-up from these daily engagements with my various informants, and strenuously noting the permissible and forbidden foodstuffs by various communities of different socio-economic status.

As Bloch (1999) points out, the flipside of intimate bonding is the anxiety of exposure - to open ones self (literally out for grabs) through commensality is to expose ones sensitive interior to the Other, a gamble with no guarantee that the Other will reciprocate. I recall occasions where my “JaPanjabi” omnivorousness, which mostly worked in my favour to connect with my informants, caused such alimentary tensions. When I was invited to Jain and Maharashtran Brahmin households, communities famous for their strict vegetarian diet and aspirations for bodily and mental purity, some families reeled when they came to know that I ate meat, let alone beef, back in my home country. Although my beef eating practices were distinguished from Indian Muslims or lower-caste Hindus eating beef, theirs supposedly being impure and abominable and mine explained away as “foreign” - the problem stemming as much from the *proximity* of such practices to ones home and self as the practice itself - it still evoked the idea that I was irreconcilably alien. Had I told them that just a few days before, I ate succulent Mangalorean beef fry with my Muslim friend, their suspicion of me would have increased to the point of outright not wanting to do anything with me - from the standpoint of respectability, such transgressors with loaded associations are not welcome within the sanctity of the home. Commensality in public spaces, such as workplace canteens, khau-gallis (street food lanes), and restaurants were decidedly more open and accepting to transgressions and

experimentations; yet, I always made sure that I respected my informants' dietary conditions by always consuming the same category of foods.

Food, especially when it is as personal as *ghar-ka-khana*, has the potential to both make bridges between disparate bodies, as well as to sharply highlight the fact that these bodies can be radically different. Such incommensurabilities not only existed *between* bodies, but also *within my own body*. The lack of teamwork between tongue and gut was the real source of my everyday dilemmas. All novice travellers to India are warned against street food and tap water, and food poisoning is almost considered a right of passage for those coming into the country from abroad. Being of Indian origin, but from a diasporic middle class Punjabi family who have adjusted to hygienic lives in Japan, my somatic capacities to filter out and break down toxins were not at all high. The problem was that the same International middle class upbringing harboured a taste for variety and exotica, what Tulasi Srinivas (2007) calls “gastro-adventure” (Chapter IV).

This caused a cursed situation where I would have an obsessive liking for certain foods, especially those with *chatpata* (tangy kick), such as the blisteringly spicy Kolhapuri masala, hot Konkani fish preparations, and my favourite local *vada pav*<sup>21</sup> made with wonderfully tangy dried green chilli condiments, which did not at all settle down well with my stomach. Every vada pav I had here strangely incapacitated me with an uncontrollable lethargy and dullness, sometimes carried over to the following day. Feeling that this was eroding my productivity and wellbeing, I decided to inquire the vendor. I cannot express my astonishment when I learnt that he, who has been running the place for the past 6 years, had never replaced the pan with the frying oil since the time of opening! As he dolloped more oil to the same pan, he casually explained that “The oil is hot; all the bacteria will be killed!” I had to resist the temptation to characterize his folk-theory of sanitation as pseudo-science, since my Mumbaikar friends seemed to be perfectly functional after consuming his 6-year-matured-oil. There was a temporal reversal of the relationship between my weak, foreigner stomach and the iron strong stomach of my informants, when they learned that I was half Japanese, which, due to the popularity of sushi in the global food circuit, increasingly indexed a taste that consumes *raw* food. Due to hygienic issues, as well as Hindu religious proscriptions to consume only freshly cooked foods

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<sup>21</sup> Deep fried potato burgers - the iconic Bombay street food. See Solomon (2016) for the politics of vada pav, especially in relation to the Shiv Sena.

(Chapter IV section 2), my Japanese stomach which enjoyed raw, “stale” foods induced nothing short of surprise in my informants. While the middle class youth, who were accustomed to eating sushi as a fashionable and healthy food option, were more accepting (yet even this class mostly consumed sushi which was cooked, such as boiled shrimp, or one with raw vegetables such as cucumber and avocado), the older generation, and most of my lower-middle class informants, gagged in disbelief that I ate raw fish. One informant, a Jain government office worker, whom I was interviewing on the streets, cut the interview short in knowing that I ate kaccha food, and stormed off shaking his head. Such severity was rare, but in principle was shared with many of my informants, who’s faces would crumple up with disgust. Yet again, my open omnivorousness had the opposite effect of what I intended. In as much as fieldwork is embodied, my thirst for knowledge and novel experiences were necessarily mediated through the contours and capacities of my gut. An ethnography of food, which explores its ethical and political complexities, must take seriously the viscosity of knowledge production through such a study. The next section will explore the fieldsites and methods of inquiry of this study.

## **2. Fieldsites**

### *Mumbai suburban railways*

The Mumbai suburban railways are the central nervous system of the city. Carrying over 7.5 million passengers daily<sup>22</sup> over four railways lines (Western, Central, Harbour, and Trans-Harbour), or approximately one third of the entire population, the commuter infrastructure covers large parts of the Mumbai metropolitan region spanning over 400 km from the north and eastern suburban districts to the southernmost tip of the island, where the central southern areas sustain the bulk of business activity of Mumbai city (Fig. 1). I frequently used the Western suburban railways, which connected the northern suburban station of Bandra where I lived during my research, to the southern station of Churchgate, where I chose as the location to explore office commensality. Much like all my commuter informants, the trains were both a necessary means of transportation to my respected destinations, as well as a distinct, urban space with its own set of rules of socialization, which I

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<sup>22</sup> Rao, S. (2017 Apr 12). It's Not Getting Any Better! Despite Metro And Monorail, Mumbai Local Trains Getting More Overcrowded. *Midday*. Retrieved from <http://www.mid-day.com/articles/its-not-getting-any-better-despite-metro-and-monorail-mumbai-local-trains-getting-more-overcrowded/18155192>

exploited as a site of research and mingling in its own right. The largest advantage of the trains over others popular means of transportation, such as busses, cars, and taxis, was that it was unaffected by the uncontrollable traffic jams which plagued the city on a day-to-day basis. The Mumbai trains were famous for its extreme punctuality, and it was rare that on the major train lines and stations, a train would be late for more than 5 minutes. What train commuters gained in much more certainty in estimated time of arrival (ETA), they lost out in the battle for personal space. During the morning and evening rush hours, to and from the central business districts in the south to the northern suburbs, socialization was virtually non-existent, which gave way to brutal overcrowding - increased living costs and real estate prices have pushed the majority of citizens far away from the central business areas. The Mumbai railways have one of the worst passenger congestion rates in the world, where up to 4500 people crammed the nine-car trains, with a rated capacity of 1700 - over 260% over capacity - and a whopping 16 people per square meter.<sup>23</sup> To put these figures in perspective, the most crowded stations of the London Underground are 140% over capacity, and 5 people per square meter.<sup>24</sup> Train related deaths are frequent, with over 3000 fatalities recorded in 2015.<sup>25</sup> Many people told me that one can call one self a Mumbaikar if he survives the peak-time train commute, and it took me months to master this habitus without my heart skipping a beat in a rush of panic (Chapter VI).

Outside peak-time hours, the trains show a different face. The different compartments, from first class, second class, luggage, and senior citizen and disabled, would retain its function to distinguish the compartments on lines of class, gender, and physical able-ness. I mostly took the second class coach, which was one-tenth of the price of the first class coaches - most of my middle and lower middle class informants took the second class coach, while a few in managerial positions took the first class coach - and the advantage of picking up the trains from Churchgate where I was based during the day was that these stations were the starting stations, which

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<sup>23</sup> (2010 Jul 06). Loan to relieve world's most overcrowded trains. *Railway Gazette*. Retrieved 28 Sep 2017 from <http://www.railwaygazette.com/news/urban/single-view/view/loan-to-relieve-worlds-most-overcrowded-trains.html>

<sup>24</sup> (2009 Feb). The Big Squeeze Rail overcrowding in London. *Greater London Authority*. Retrieved 28 Sep 2017 from [https://www.london.gov.uk/sites/default/files/gla\\_migrate\\_files\\_destination/archives/FINAL\\_Overcrowding\\_report.pdf](https://www.london.gov.uk/sites/default/files/gla_migrate_files_destination/archives/FINAL_Overcrowding_report.pdf)

<sup>25</sup> (2016 Jan 27). 3,304 deaths on Mumbai locals in 2015. *The Hindu*. Retrieved 28 Sep 2017 from <http://www.thehindu.com/news/cities/mumbai/3304-deaths-on-Mumbai-locals-in-2015/article14022057.ece>



remained relatively empty even during rush-hour, and only picked up heat by the time it reached 6 or 7 stations in, especially around Dadar station, where both the Western and Central lines passed. As such, my early-evening return journeys to Bandra from the business districts provided an unusual environment to socialize with my fellow passengers, who themselves congregated in specific train carriages to catch up with what they called their “train friends”. These were people who became acquainted with each other *only* during their commutes, by virtue of catching the same train and on the same compartment, a product of the punctuality of the railways, as well as the normalized rhythms and spaces of commuting. They would greet each other on sight, filling the still empty seats, catching up with the day’s gossip about their work and wider politics, while sharing *chaats* (snacks) among each other, which they picked up from *khau-gallis* outside the stations. Others would be jovially playing card games. I gathered interviews from 17 passengers in these spaces of peaceful socializing, which contrasted with the chaos of the mornings and later evenings.

#### *Dabbawala network and tiffin caterers*

As I explore in Chapters V and VI, the Dabbawala network relied heavily on the suburban railways, and my research segment with them consisted of following several delivery teams which I familiarized myself with over the course of fieldwork. Although they were constantly on the move, their delivery routes were fixed from pick up to delivery, and as such, had a recurring rhythm allowing me to visit the same team on the same routes everyday. While the morning rounds from homes to offices were the most stressful in terms of time frame and workload, the return rounds carrying the empty tiffins were much more relaxed, where Dabbawalas socialized among each other, and could take rest in the luggage compartments. As such, in the former segment, I mainly conducted participant observation running behind the Dabbawalas, taking part in their journey whilst observing their work attitudes and habitus, while during the latter, I was able to carry out personal interviews about their work and life. I familiarized myself with 2 teams consisting of a total of 48 members, and conducted questionnaires with all members about income, religiosity, and work ethics, to map their socio-economic positions, which helped contextualize the data from participant observation. Outside their everyday work rhythm, I interviewed key members of the organization, including Mr Raghunath Medge, the chair of the Dabbawala charity trust, who shared information regarding the accounts, structure,

and business trends of the entire organization. I became particularly close to Shankar, a Dabbawala who introduced me to different clients, and provided a new perspective on their work as tour-guides of the city, as I explore in Chapter VI section 3.1.

Shankar and other Dabbawalas introduced me to several tiffin caterers and khanawalis (Chapter VIII) with whom I conducted participant observation, through observing how they carried out their catering businesses by accompanying them on delivery rounds, their interactions with customers, and how they prepared the food everyday. I came across King Edwards Memorial (KEM) hospital in Parel area, a historic public hospital, with a prominent medical college called SGSM College, by following several Dabbawalas in the aforementioned team. KEM hospital turned out to have a high concentration of such tiffin services, and provided a useful platform to interview both caterers and customers to arrive at a fuller picture of this industry. I interviewed a total of 6 tiffin service providers and their families operating in the area, who served more than 500 tiffins combined on a daily basis, and 25 customers, mostly medical students but also 3 doctors, who used these services everyday. I came to be acquainted with other tiffin providers, such as those which I call “tech savvy tiffin caterers” (Chapter IV) through the Internet, by emailing them directly for interviews. While I conducted questionnaires about their business, industry, and histories, I became particularly close to some such as the CEO of SpiceDabbas, whom I spent extensive time together with who showed me the inner workings of his business, from production to advertising. Finally, I became acquainted with caterers such as Valery of the East Indian community through my host, Derek, who is also of East Indian origin, and whom I lived together over a period of 10 months in Bandra. Many Catholic communities live in this sprawling cosmopolitan suburb, side-by-side with Hindus, Muslims, and many other communities, and here I interviewed 3 caterers and their 10 customers, apart from doing participant observation with Valery and her long time customers.



Figure 1 - A section of the "heat map" of the Mumbai suburban railway network.<sup>26</sup>

<sup>26</sup> Gradation from white yellow to dark red denotes increasing concentration of stations and frequency of services per area. While the graph covers approximately 25km distance from north to south out of the 400km of the entire network, this section is by far the most congested. I did most fieldwork on the Western line trains, connecting the northern suburbs of Bandra, where I lived, to Churchgate in South Mumbai business district, denoted by the blue line that runs on the western coastline of the city.

Image by Techcompuser, 2015,

[https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Heatmap\\_of\\_Mumbai\\_Local\\_Train\\_%26\\_Station\\_Density.jpeg](https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Heatmap_of_Mumbai_Local_Train_%26_Station_Density.jpeg), distributed under a CC-BY 2.0 license.

### *South Mumbai office canteens*

I conducted fieldwork in the historic business district of Fort in South Mumbai to explore work-lunch in the urban public, and familiarized myself with two office canteens in particular, which I call Global Shipping Co. (GLC), a cargo and shipping company mainly dealing with large industrial containers, and M&P Co. (M&P), a flagship of a larger group of companies, specializing in contracting for industrial coating and chemical paints, also with interests in logistics and finance. Headquartered in Mumbai, both companies have offices and project sites all over India, and have established themselves in their industries since many decades - GLC has been operating since the 1940s, and M&P since the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, each firm employing close to 100 formal and contract based workers in their head office. Gaining entry into office spaces without an intermediary is a difficult feat in Mumbai, as these were carefully regulated spaces, with guardsmen and receptionists constantly screening visitors, and security tightening throughout such spaces in the city since the 2006 and 2008 Mumbai terrorist attacks.<sup>27</sup> Although following my Dabbawala informants allowed me to take a glimpse of office life, leading to several one-shot interviews, I did not have enough credibility to negotiate a longer-term stay with these firms. As such, I came to be involved with GLC and M&P serendipitously through my personal contacts, my mother and academic supervisor, who knew the respective CEO's of the firms. Apart from their mid-level size, providing a sufficient sample size to ethnographically engage with, the cosmopolitanism of the offices, in terms of regional and communal diversity, as well as its large hierarchical structure, employing a wide array of workers from upper class managers to working class drivers, peons, and manual labourers, which allowed a diverse sample to explore how social distinction and cohesion were negotiated through everyday practices of commensality in this semi-public space.

I took inspiration from Bourdieu's (1984) study of habitus and social capital in 1960s French society, by understanding and mapping the "tastes" of various actors in different social positions, ranging from food, music, and clothing. Although I did not have access to his extensive research resources (which collected over 3000 samples), I conducted questionnaires with 27 people in GLC, and 33 people in M&P, of diverse social ranks, from CEO, partners-managers, regular white-collar workers, and blue-

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<sup>27</sup> See Chapter VI on the unique privilege of the Dabbawalas in having an informal and temporary "pass" to tightly regulated private and government offices.

collar workers. On the one hand, my association with the Dabbawalas and interest in ghar-ka-khana gave positive value to my research, and on the other, it meant that I was interested in the informal aspects of office life (lunch), signalling that I would not be a burden to the daily work regime of the workers. This combination of positive ethical value and innocuousness was taken well with both CEOs, and we agreed that I would come visit the office at 12.30pm until 2.30pm, which more or less covered the accepted duration of lunchtime, on several days a week for 12 weeks to complete this segment of ethnographic study. While my main focus was their food habits - what types of foods they liked, disliked, and could/did not eat for one reason or the other - this data was always linked with other key areas of: economic standing (salary and/or rank in firm), family structure (who cooked the food), religion, and commensal behaviour (sharing or not; eating out or not; etc.). These sociological insights were used to contextualize the more in-depth data I gathered from participant observation in the office canteen, which I explore in detail in Chapter VII.

#### *Khau-gallis (food streets)*

Khau-gallis were clusters of street food vendors located outside office blocks, colleges, train stations, beaches and parks throughout the city, where informal hawkers set up impromptu stands around formally operated restaurants and snack stalls, in the hope to catch hungry commuters and strollers passing by. The sizes, tenancy, and formality of the khau-gallis varied: outside M&P was a humble setup of informal chai and cigarette vendors and a sandwich-walla selling their products on *thelas* (push carts), which vacated the premises after lunch peak-hours, and came back after 5pm when people started coming out of their offices; outside GLC was a larger set-up, owing it to being nearby Churchgate station, and its vendors sold beyond the “bare essentials” of chai, cigarettes, and bananas, and served a variety of foods from dosas to Chinese to pav bhaji. I spent a lot of time here, which was adjacent to many government offices, colleges, a large public hospital, a secondary school, “fashion street” (a lane of retail clothes shops), and “Cross Maidan”, a vast public park, always bustling with office goers, students, shoppers, and semi-professional cricket players. This lane was a conglomeration of close to 30 stalls, serving a wide variety of cuisines, products, and services, including a “Xerox store” (stationary and printing services) and a roadside massage parlour, and most vendors were part of the “Khau Galli Hawkers Association”, who had to pay a fee to operate in the area.

Spending time in khau-gallis not only showed how street food (bahar-ka-khana) were organically linked to ghar-ka-khana, as I show in Chapter IV, it but also provided a fertile fieldsite to chat to the numerous commuters who strolled in the areas. Acquaintances in khau-gallis were short, conversations lasting not more than 10 minutes, due to the limited time frame of lunch or after-work break. As such I conducted snap questionnaires of key areas of interest: information about their attitudes towards food, coupled with vital information about their work, economic standing, religion, and community. I gathered these data from 45 men and 35 women, most of whom were working in private and government offices in the area, the main research base of this study, but also students and cricket players to contrast different positionalities. I also interviewed 9 vendors in the two khau-gallis to understand their business and how they interacted with their customers - although this study did not mainly concern street food, their everyday experiences with customers proved useful to arrive at a fuller picture of this foodway.

### **Chapter III. The “beef ban” and “meat ban”: the visceral politics of boundary making in Mumbai**

#### **1. Situating the “beef ban”**

On the first week of March 2015, a singular issue and a catchy buzzword captivated the entire city, and made national and international headlines: “Beef ban” in the western state of Maharashtra, where Mumbai is the capital. The passing of the “Maharashtra Animal Preservation (Amendment) Act 2015” (MAPA 2015) meant that the slaughter, sale, and possession of all cattle and its flesh (cows, bulls and bullocks), except the water buffalo, were to be made illegal within the state to immediate effect. Violators could face up to 5 years in prison, one of the harshest penalties for similar laws in the country, at the time.<sup>28</sup> While the slaughter of “cows” (female cattle and her calf) has been banned in Maharashtra since 1976 through the original Maharashtra Animal Preservation Act (MAPA), it was in 1995 when the then Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP)-Shiv Sena alliance state government passed an amendment bill to grant also bulls (uncastrated male) and bullocks (castrated male) the same protection as cows. Almost all “beef” that circulates in Maharashtra, and India at large, come from these male bovines, as well as water buffalos. The amended MAPA 1995 bill was sent to the president the following year for review, to which it was sent back for questioning and clarification in 1999. By that time, the India National Congress (INC)-National Congress Party (NCP) alliance had taken power, for whom the bill apparently was not a priority, and left these queries unanswered. When the BJP-Sena alliance came back to power in 2014, after a landslide victory of the BJP in the India general elections led by prime minister Narendra Modi, these queries were finally dealt with, which saw this amendment bill revive after 19 years of meanderings.

5 months into fieldwork, having immersed myself in the various networks of *ghar-ka-khana* (homemade food: Chapter IV) that run throughout Mumbai, I felt an unmistakable change among my informants, as well as with the atmospherics of the city. The “beef ban”<sup>29</sup> - a joint phenomenon of state legislature (MAPA 2015), and the

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<sup>28</sup> (2016 Jul 27). Beef row: Where it is illegal and what the law says. *Indian Express*. Retrieved 28 Sep 2017 from <http://indianexpress.com/article/india/india-news-india/beef-madhya-pradesh-video-cow-vigilantes-gau-rakshaks-2938751/>

<sup>29</sup> Hereafter I use “beef ban” to denote the totality of this joint phenomenon of legislature and its subsequent social and political effects.

heated media coverage which gave this event its name, “#beefban” trending on social media, and TV news networks flashing the word every two seconds - was significant not only because it was the most talked about topic at that time, but because it gave shape to a distinct *framework* for Mumbaikars to come in terms with each Other. My informants were not only interested with the political intentions and repercussions of the ban, but were increasingly talking about what and how to eat, its relationship to ones’ community and political orientation, and more vocally making moral judgements about one another based on these associations.

The nature of these judgements were unsettling. From the same housewife and office commuter informants with whom I was having happy-go-lucky discussions about “home cooked food and wellbeing”, I heard sharp criticisms towards particular communities and food habits, especially those who ate beef, as being violent, dirty, or “impure”. The consumption of meat was equated with the sin of slaughter. Vegetarian communities such as upper caste Hindus and Jains started to evermore emphasize that they were “pure” vegetarians who never dared touched meat, invoking the Gandhian principle of *ahimsa* (non-violence); while working class Hindu Maharashtrians, especially those avid followers of the Shiv Sena party, made sharp distinctions between meat (mainly chicken and fish) and beef, saying that the former was acceptable and essential to build healthy vitality and identity, but to slaughter and consume the latter was a despicable act. In as much as the majority of people and the media agreed that the ban was pushed by the BJP-Shiv Sena alliance government with *Hindutva*<sup>30</sup> orientations and intentions, there was also an agreement that those who were primarily targeted were Muslims, the largest minority of the city and country, and increasingly being framed by these parties as unwanted outsiders within a Hindu majority nation (Appadurai 2006). Muslims not only had a large stake in the meat slaughtering, processing, and retail industries, but the link between Muslimness and cow/beef related work and lifestyles came to be more openly expressed, by both Muslims and other communities, for good or bad. While some Muslims and Dalits openly condemned the visible attack towards their livelihoods, taking to the streets to protest for their rights to profession and religion, consolidating these links, others

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<sup>30</sup> As I explored in Chapter I, *Hindutva* is a blanket phrase for right wing, Hindu-fundamentalist ideologies and politics, with origins in the political philosophy of Vinayak Damodar Savarkar (1883 - 1966), who has an intense followership among members of the RSS and Shiv Sena. *Hindutva* is currently sweeping India’s national politics under the BJP party led by Prime Minister Narendra Modi (Hansen 1999; van der Veer 1994).



found the entire turn of events uncomfortable, strategically downplaying their Muslimness by dissociating themselves from meat consumption, emphasizing that they ate “veg” foods on most days like their vegetarian colleagues. The ubiquitous categories of “veg/non-veg” started to acquire yet more political and moral gravitas.<sup>31</sup> Many Hindus, Jains and Christians, who until then, clandestinely but regularly, ate beef and other meats in the many popular “non-veg” restaurants, became evermore embarrassed about their nightly excursions, retorting to the safe haven of vegetarianism drawn by the ban.

Despite the emergence of these discourses and assertions, which took the form of both verbal remarks as well as altering ones’ food related behaviour in the urban public, there also was a collective sense of disbelief and loss in the face of these events - as a long-time resident of the city exclaimed, “who could imagine that this was happening to *Bombay*, of all places?” - a popular sentiment among the middle classes, one that worked in defence of the ethos of being a “Mumbaikar”. Beyond being merely a “resident of Bombay/Mumbai”, this meant celebrating an urban, cosmopolitan ethos, a loosely understood combination of an “openness” towards novelty, and a non-discriminatory “business” ethic that cut through the anchoring of origin, religion or community. In this light, the ban was an attack on the city’s long nurtured “secular” openness, and as much as there were stereotypes about the “beef eating Muslim”, there was an attack on the “right wing vegetarian Hindu” who jeopardized this ethos. Nostalgic reminiscence for a “good old Bombay” abound. Yet this was also an ideal archetype conjured by the glamour of Bollywood and Businesses, a romance about commerce and pleasure, propelled by the very economy of desire constituted by it (Dwyer and Pinney 2002; Patel and Thorner 1995). In truth, Mumbai’s ethics of inclusion have been constantly tested to the limit by an ever swelling population, divided into haves and have-nots, a disparage accelerated by the unequal flow of global capital; and by the periodic bursts of bigotry most visibly expressed by the many communal riots that have characterized the history of the city - especially between Hindus and Muslims - the same city which gave birth to the Shiv Sena, a militant, regional, xenophobic party which commanded its politics through

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<sup>31</sup> See Novetzke (2017) for the ubiquity of the concepts of veg and non-veg: “‘Non-veg’ is fundamentally an ontological category, a description of a kind of thing in India that signals the non-normative, even if it also identifies the normal and everyday. For example, a ‘non-veg’ joke is a dirty joke; a ‘non-veg’ movie is a pornographic film; a ‘non-veg’ drink is an alcoholic one; swear words and curses are ‘non-veg’” (ibid: 368).

populist violence for decades from the mid-20<sup>th</sup> century onwards (Appadurai 2000; Hansen 1999; Massellos 1993, 1994). It was significant that many of my informants said “Bombay” instead of “Mumbai” in this context, for it was also the Shiv Sena who pushed for the changing of its name to Mumbai, the Marathi pronunciation of Bombay, in 1995 - “Bombay” has come to stand for all the good things the city has lost (Hansen 2001).

In this sense, the beef ban was not only a blow to the ethos and ideals of openness, but a new chapter in the long line of oscillations between inclusion and exclusion that have historically constituted the city’s imaginaries and politics, an oscillation between *pleasure* and *disgust*, of the *intimacy with the Other*. If food as embodiment of “regional culinary traditions”, a source of pride and nourishment for my informants, demarcated a *horizontal* difference steeped in the language of cosmopolitan diversity and pleasure, the ban cut through this egalitarian landscape, exposing food as a marker of *vertical* difference, based on religion, caste, and class, ranked by the bio-moralities of purity and respectability. Certainly, the everyday lives of my informants were fraught with dilemmas of bio-moral-economic management, as I will explore through Chapters IV to VIII, and these mundane struggles were often far from the glittering ethos of “cosmopolitan pleasure”. But these negotiations were still far from the uneasy world in which people judged and were judged on the basis of ones’ association with particular habits and lifestyles of food, engulfed within the negative connotations of impurity, disgust, and *irreconcilable* difference with each Other, which Mumbaikars were increasingly facing and taking part in.

This chapter will explore how these events brought to the fore the latent anxieties, insecurities, and desires that people have come to experience in contemporary Mumbai, with food and its related practices as its decisive mode of expression. As I outlined in Chapter I, India has a complex history by which vital substances such as food and its associated habits and lifestyles have acquired rich ethical, medical, and political significance, informing how everyday substances and interactions became vehicles of both social cohesion and stratification. Historical force facilitated such socialites and consolidated boundaries. The beef ban was such a moment in Mumbai’s history where important boundaries were drawn, and new subjectivities and stereotypes were interpellated - in Naisargi Dave’s (2011) words, a moment where “a new social world [came] into being” (ibid: 660). If the MAPA 2015 legislature provided the foundation for certain forms of difference, such as eating

habits, to become located, demarcated and consolidated as “illegal”, the mediascape, of broadcast TV, social media, and street level gossip, made these consolidations a *problem to be solved*, and by problematizing it, it consolidated these differences further to the point of being irreconcilable with other ways of being. And these boundaries were all the more solid, and the produced subjectivities and life trajectories experienced as evermore incommensurable, precisely because of the *viscerality* of food, and its bio-moral gravitas which works the *gut*, much before it reaches the mind.

The fundamental characteristic of such “visceral politics” is that one *cannot help but be* interpellated into this political field. Although some of the hardliner, vegetarian Hindus and Jains openly pronounced their disgust towards their beef eating Muslim contemporaries, most were publicly critical towards the ban as a bigotry politics conjured by politicians to secure vote banks, at the expense of the city’s cosmopolitan ethos of acceptance and inclusion. Indeed, in semi-public spaces such as the office canteen, which I will explore in detail in Chapter VII, my middle and lower-middle class informants adhered to this Mumbaikar ethic, forming an alliance with each other despite differences in religiosity or dietary habits, mingling with each other pleasurably in this “small island of egalitarianism” (Dumont in Caplan 2008: 131). Yet, the uncanny fact was that the same vegetarians *could not help but be* physically sick when passing by a Muslim butcher, the glaring red of the meat piercing the eyes, its odour swelling into an unstoppable weapon amidst the heat of the day, infecting the smelling body from inside out. The innocuous and pleasurable daily office lunch turned into a battlefield between vegetarians and meat eaters over the boundaries of self and Other, when his non-veg office colleague starts eating a meat tiffin next to him on weekly “non-veg days”, the smell nebulously seeping into ones’ comfort zone. What the beef ban did was that these everyday nuisances, which one endured as tough aspects of life in a congested cosmopolitan city, much like uncontrollable traffic or the monsoon rains, came to be solidly associated with certain communities and lifestyles, with negative bio-moral value. The beef ban not only separated, produced, and reinforced sets of distinctions such as veg/non-veg, Hindu/Muslim, pure-veg Jain/beef eating Muslim, and so on, but did so in an uncontrollably somatic manner (Bourdieu 1984; Hankins 2013). And such inscribing of difference onto the material plane of bio-moral substance, and the process by which these inscriptions work to cathartically conjoin or repulsively separate, was all the

more problematic because they were experienced as the most intimate urges, emotions, and physical reactions, coming from within the gut, trumping feeble cosmopolitan aspirations of “inclusion and acceptance” formed in the mind (Ghassem-Fachandi 2010a; 2010b; 2012).

The beef ban opened up a debate in the urban public sphere about rights to self-expression and employment, communal identity and tensions, compassion and cosmopolitanism in the city, electoral politics, and national political belonging, all based on what one eats. It provided a new language and kinaesthetic for Mumbaikars to negotiate their sense of identity and belonging in the city *through* the stomach. Before going into the political and ethical ripples of such “visceral politics” of the beef ban, as well as its curious derivative which came to be known as the “meat ban”, a row brought upon by a Jain organizations’ demands to close all abattoirs during *Paryushan*, a period of ritual fasting for the Jains, with the meat-eating, *Maratha* centred, militant Shiv Sena and its relative party Maharashtra Navinirman Sena (MNP) taking all opportunity to viscerally politicize the issue, occurring 6 months after the beef ban in September 2015, it is necessary to investigate the inner logic of the state legislature which decreed cattle slaughter as illegal. Just as the beef ban emerged in a city where cosmopolitanism and communalism had long co-existed, the MAPA 2015 bill was the newest in a long line of legislature which regulated and restricted cattle slaughter throughout the country, since India’s Independence.

## **2.1. Article 48 - the ethic of cow protection, law for a bovine nation**

Article 48: *The State shall endeavour to organise agriculture and animal husbandry on modern and scientific lines and shall in particular, take steps for preserving and improving the breeds, and prohibiting the slaughter, of cows and other milch and draught cattle.*

Article 48 of the Constitution of India is the foundational, yet least referenced, aspect of the beef ban. Article 48 is a *directive principle* for state policy, or guidelines for governments to form laws so as to govern the nation in a just manner; since it is not classified as a *fundamental right*, or laws which are *justiciable*, or fundamentally enforceable by courts, it is on the burden of the state to actively make laws to enforce such directive principles, in practice, for good governance. While Article 48 has

informed and provided the basis for all important rulings regarding cattle slaughter legislature since Independence, the fact that these judgements were based on a *scientific and agricultural* rationale, to serve the *general public* and the *nation*, was not common knowledge in Mumbai even during the beef ban row, let alone before it. Contrary to popular opinion, in the principle itself, there is no mention of religion; yet, as Chigateri (2011) argues, the discourse of science opens up a space where pro-Hindu considerations clandestinely become introduced.

In this section, I consult the constituent assembly debate archives, as well as past Supreme and High Court judgements on anti-cattle slaughter laws, to explore how the beef ban in Mumbai was built on a long line of past judgments regarding similar issues in other states, and how debates regarding the *utility of cattle* within the *agricultural nation-economy of India*, were pivotal aspects of these arguments, constituting a distinct ethics and imaginary of India as a nation which cannot function without cattle, and her produce and his labour. This has brought forth a peculiar situation where, whether by conscious efforts by the State or by unintended consequence, cattle not only emerges as a symbol of sanctity within the Hindu religion, but comes to be implicated as a distinct member of India's national-democratic polity, where its rights should be protected even at the expense of certain people, namely Muslims, butchers, and paradoxically, those Muslim *and* Hindu farmers who have worked in tandem with butchers within the cattle supply chain. The law cuts through this fluid field, where only particular phases of the cattle supply chain, namely, when the cattle are *alive*, were considered *productive*, while the *productivity of its death* is entirely undermined. A radical broadening of the concept of utility of cattle's' labour and produce was necessary to make such an injunction, and I conclude that the law serves as a "technology of purity" to regulate and remedy the anxiety, aversion, and disgust towards the death of cattle, an abomination which is the driving force of the visceral politics of the beef ban.

## **2.2. The Constituent Assembly Debates - Religion or Economics?**

The archives of the constituent assembly debates, which chronicle the wake of the Indian constitution, show that Article 48, like many other constitutional issues, was crystalized through aggregating a wide array of different opinions and positions, and it took its current form through these grindings. Cow protection was introduced as an issue worthy of debate and inclusion by Pandit Thakur Dass Bhargava and Seth

Govind Das, two Hindu freedom fighters who were close associates of Gandhi, of which the subsequent debates ensued on Wednesday 24<sup>th</sup> November 1948.<sup>32</sup> Since the assembly jointly decided upon that the then Article 38, which is identical in wording to the current Article 48, should be a directive principle of state as opposed to a fundamental right - which should be reserved for *human* rights - its proponents had to support their position by outlining how its inclusion would serve the wellbeing of the nation as a whole, as a directive principle.<sup>33</sup>

Here, the *utility* of the cow within India's agricultural economy were presented as its central pillar, both Pandit Bhargava and Govind Das presenting national and international data regarding food self-sufficiency rates and the negative effects of not ensuring the protection of cattle in India's "predominantly agricultural economy".<sup>34</sup> Despite these efforts to locate the issue as purely "economic", the spectre of "religion" always hovered around. While Pandit Bhargava carefully sought to separate the economic from the religious, he uses the latter to confirm the former, *ex post facto*: "In the present conditions in our country, cow-breeding is necessary, not for milk supply alone, but also for the purposes of draught and transport. *It is no wonder that people worship cow in this land*" (my emphasis). Contrary to Pandit Bhargava's subtlety, the openly hardliner Hindu members invoked the *Upanishads* to back up the "economic" cause with the ethics of *ahimsa*, correlating cow protection with "mother protection".<sup>35</sup> They also maintained that not only the cow, but also all

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<sup>32</sup> All quotations in this section from the constituent assembly debates are taken from this date, the only day where the issue of cattle protection was jointly discussed among the assembly members. The quotes are taken directly from the Parliament of India online archive, volume VII, retrieved from: <http://parliamentofindia.nic.in/ls/debates/vol7p12.htm>

<sup>33</sup> Pandit Thakur Dass Bhargava: "To my mind it would have been much better if this could have been incorporated in the Fundamental Rights, but some of my Assembly friends differed and it is the desire of Dr. Ambedkar that this matter, instead of being included in Fundamental Rights should be incorporated in the Directive Principles."

<sup>34</sup> "Pandit Thakur Dass Bhargava: Today, we have to hang our head in shame, when we find that we have to import cereals from outside. ... If we utilize water properly, construct dams, and have proper change in the courses of rivers, use machines and tractors, make use of cropping and manuring, then surely the production will increase considerably. Besides all these, the best way of increasing the production is to improve the health of human beings and breed of cattle, whose milk and manure and labour are most essential for growing food. ... [T]he whole agricultural and food problem of this country is nothing but the problem of the improvement of cow and her breed."

<sup>35</sup> Shri R. V. Dhulekar: "... Our humanity which resides in this Bharatvarsha for several thousand years has marched forward and has taken the cow within the fold of human society. Some people here talked to me and said, "You say that you want to protect the cow and want it to be included in the Fundamental Rights. Is the protection of the cow a fundamental right

her produce, such as milk and pure *ghee*, were sacred substances which should be protected.<sup>36</sup> To assert the utility of cow derived dairies as an important source of nutrients is one thing; to assert that ghee, a sacred, but excessive (both economically and nutritionally), substance majorly used by high caste priests in Hindu rituals, is at all necessary for the health and wealth of the *entire nation*, is another.

These assertions were sharply problematized by the Muslim assembly members, the most scathing of them coming from Syed Muhammad Sa'adulla, chief minister of Assam. His critique of cow protection is notable in that he refuses to confront the issue in terms of religion, which may lead to the danger of a dispersing debate of weighing Hindu and Muslim religious sentiments, and instead sought to critique cow protection on the very grounds of economic utility.<sup>37</sup> He scrutinizes Pandit Bhargava's conviction that cows, even beyond the productive milking phase, remain *always useful*<sup>38</sup>, by pointing out that unserviceable cattle are "dead weight" on both farmers and the national economy, which totalizing cow protection laws will only serve to weigh the burden further down. Questioning the logical link between improving the nation's agricultural economy and a law which *entirely* bans cow slaughter without exception, he also cuts through the prevalent stereotype that Hindus are pro-protection and Muslims are against, an attitude that seems to be reinforced by both the Hindu and Muslim assembly members.<sup>39</sup> With Mr Z. H. Lari of the United

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of a human being? Or is it the fundamental right of the cow?" *I replied to them and tell them suppose it is a question of saving your mother or protecting your mother*" (my emphasis).

<sup>36</sup> Prof. Shibban Lal Saksena, another prominent Hindu freedom fighter, problematizes "... the use of Vanaspati [plant derived] ghee, which has become an economic necessity, because there is no pure ghee available anywhere. If we are able to give effect to this amendment we can improve the breed of cattle and then we will be able to do away with the use of Vanaspati, which is so injurious to the health of the nation".

<sup>37</sup> "Syed Muhammad Sa'adulla: I do not also want to obstruct the framers of our Constitution ... if they come out in the open and say directly: 'This is part of our religion. The cow should be protected from slaughter and therefore we want its provision either in the Fundamental Rights or in the Directive Principles'. But those who put it on the economic front ... *do create a suspicion in the minds of many that the ingrained Hindu feeling against cow slaughter is being satisfied by the backdoor*. If you put it on the economic front, I will place before you certain facts and figures which will show that the slaughter of cows is not as bad as it is sought to be made out from the economic point of view," (my emphasis).

<sup>38</sup> "Pandit Thakur Dass Bhargava: Experts ... came to the conclusion that the cattle which are regarded as useless are not really so, because we are in great need of manure. A cow, whether it be a milch-cow or not, is a moving manure factory and so, as far as cow is concerned, there can be no question of its being useless or useful. *It can never be useless*. (my emphasis).

<sup>39</sup> "Seth Govind Das: [F]rom the time of Akbar to that of Aurangzeb, there was a ban on cow slaughter. I want to tell you what Babar, the first Moghul Emperor told Humayun. He said: "Refrain from cow-slaughter to win the hearts of the people of Hindustan." Here, he invokes

Provinces, who explains that the Quran merely *permits* eating and sacrificing cattle on Bakrid, thus displacing the notion that cattle slaughter is an integral aspect of Muslim religion and life, Syed Muhammad Sa'adulla presents a more intricate picture of the nation where people have a variety of interests which cross cut positions of religion and profession: Hindu agriculturalists, as much as Muslims, slaughtered cows and ate beef when cattle became unserviceable, alleviating the burden to maintain them, an important source of protein during times of distress; and Muslim agriculturalists, as much as Hindus, loved their cattle as *assets* and indispensable means to enable their livelihood.<sup>40</sup> Here, the practicalities of profession and economic interests cut across a stereotyped link between “religion” and “profession”; or rather, in his nation, “if the central claim of the ethic against cow slaughter rested on the usefulness of the cow, then *both* Hindus and Muslims had the same ethical relationship” (Chigateri 2011: 145, emphasis in original). These important comments came at the very end of the entire debate. With only minutes left before a verdict, Pandit Bhargava reinstates his position being defiant against any notion that cattle can ever be considered useless.<sup>41</sup> The motion was shortly put to the vote, which the majority accepted, and finally became included in the constitution.

These debates show that considerations and intentions for Hindu sentiments and religion were always part of the issue; yet, as *law*, it became purified and crystalized in the words of “economic science”. As Chigateri (2011) observes, it “is this double move, of at once reflecting Hindu sentiment while purportedly *not* doing so that has been at the heart of the juridical relationship with cow slaughter. In this double move, religious considerations come into view and then disappear, allowing for the myth that Article 48 is indeed not about religion at all, but in fact about the scientific organisation of agriculture and animal husbandry” (ibid: 146). Indeed, the

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the *compassion* of past Muslim rulers towards Hindus, consolidating cow-protection as a specifically Hindu characteristic. “

<sup>40</sup> “Syed Muhammad Saiadulla: I personally found that droves of cattle were being taken to the military depots for being slaughtered not by Muslims, but by Hindus who had big “sikhas” [lock of hair grown on the shaved heads of orthodox Hindus]. When I saw this during my tours I asked those persons why, in spite of their religion and in spite of Government orders, they were taking the cattle to be slaughtered. They said: “Sir, these are all unserviceable cattle. They are all dead-weight on our economy. We want to get ready cash in exchange for them”.”

<sup>41</sup> “Pandit Thakur Dass Bhargava: Does not the honourable Member know that many useless cattle have been turned into good cattle by goshalas [protective shelters for cows] and other organisations and at least 90 per cent can be salvaged by proper feeding and treatment.”



ambivalent Article 48 became the base of how subsequent Supreme and High court rulings on anti cattle-slaughter issues were decided upon. The concept and scope of the utility of cattle remained the central feature of anti cattle slaughter cases, and being able to mobilize this logic was paramount for a successful argument; yet these were disproportionately taken advantage of by pro- and anti slaughter proponents. The latter, represented by the State, was more successful since they invoked the wellbeing of the *nation* as backed up by this science of bovine utility, while the pro cattle-slaughter petitioners, majorly Muslim butchers and organizations, expressed their rights as *individuals* and *communities*. I suggest that this disjuncture in scale prompted the Supreme and High courts to side with the State, who successfully convinced the jury of the benefits of cattle protection for the nation and general public, even at the expense of *some* individuals and communities.

### 2.3. Supreme and High court rulings - the Nation vs. minority rights

The first anti-cattle slaughter case since independence was the *Mohd. Hanif Qureshi v. State of Bihar* case in 1958, taken up to the Supreme Court. While the petitioners, a joint group of Muslim butcher communities, maintained that the newly passed law that made totalizing restrictions on the slaughter of *all* cattle of *all* ages, (bulls, bullocks and she-buffaloes *in addition* to the cow, which was already protected), infringed on the petitioners' freedom to practice their profession<sup>42</sup> and religion<sup>43</sup>, the court rejected these claims on the basis that, firstly, the sacrifice of cattle on the religious holiday of Bakrid was *optional*, and not an *essential* aspect of Islam (*Id.* pp. 650-652.).<sup>44</sup> As of their profession, the Court did find that the law would have an immediate effect on the freedom of the petitioners to practice their trade or profession; yet, as clause 6 of Article 19<sup>45</sup> permits, the State can restrict this

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<sup>42</sup> As per Article 19, regarding the "Protection of certain rights regarding freedom of speech etc.", especially that of clause (1)(g), which states that

(1) All citizens shall have the right ... (g) to practice any profession, or to carry on any occupation, trade or business.

<sup>43</sup> As per Article 25, which guarantees the "Freedom of conscience and free profession, practice and propagation of religion."

<sup>44</sup> The numeric of sacrifice was invoked: since the cow or camel amounted to 7 sacrificial units, while goats amounted to 1, and the sacrificer could *choose* accordingly to fill in their quota, cow sacrifice was deemed an *option* and not an *obligation*.

<sup>45</sup> "Article 19: (6) Nothing in sub clause (g) of the said clause shall affect the operation of any existing law in so far as it imposes, or prevent the State from making any law imposing, in the interests of the general public, reasonable restrictions on the exercise of the right conferred by the said sub clause..."

right if the measure is determined by the Court to be in the *interest of the general public*. The Court found that the “country is in short supply of milch cattle, breeding bulls and working bullocks”, and therefore a “total ban on the slaughter of these which are essential to the national economy for the supply of milk, agricultural working power and manure” is reasonable. As such, “a total ban on the slaughter of cows of all ages and calves of cows and calves of she-buffaloes, male and female” is reasonable and in “consonance with the directive principles laid down in Art. 48.” (*Id.* p. 690.). However, the Court held that a total ban on the slaughter of “useless cattle,” which “involves a wasteful drain on the nation’s cattle feed which is itself in short supply and which would deprive the useful cattle of much needed nourishment, cannot be justified as being in the interests of the general public.” Therefore, the Court held that a total ban on the slaughter of bulls, bullocks and she-buffaloes *after they had ceased to be useful* was invalid under the Constitution.

Petitions and legal battles after this ruling debated what “useful” here meant: what types of cattle are useful (cows, bulls, bullocks, buffaloes, etc.), for what end (dairy, labour, manure, etc.), and up till what age (calves, adults, and old cattle). Here, developments in agricultural science were time and again invoked. For instance in 1986, in *Haji Usmanbhai Hasanbhai Qureshi & Ors. vs. State of Gujarat*, the Court upheld an amendment to the Bombay Animal Preservation Act in 1954, which banned the slaughter of bulls and bullocks below the age of 16. The Court held that based on scientific developments since 1962, “the longevity of the cattle and their useful span of life has increased and, therefore, the prescribed age of sixteen years can be said to be a reasonable restriction on the right of the appellants to carry on their trade and profession as mentioned in Article 19(1)(g) of the Constitution.” (*Id.* p. 730.) Since *Qureishi vs. Bihar* in 1958, the Supreme Court maintained its position regarding the importance of precisely determining the various shades of utility of cattle, and have opposed a *total* ban on slaughters of non-cows, or bulls and female buffaloes after it has become unproductive in terms of produce and labour.<sup>46</sup>

A turning point ruling, however, came in 2005 in the case of the *State Of Gujarat vs. Mirzapur Moti Kureshi Kassab* where the Supreme Court upheld an amendment to the Bombay Animal Preservation Act, 1954 the effect of which was to

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<sup>46</sup> It is not made clear as to why old *female cows* are not considered a drain on resources. This may be an instance of “uncontested Hindu sentiment” (Chigateri 2011) slipping in under the discourse of science.

impose a *total ban* on the slaughter of cows, bulls and bullocks of *all ages without exception*. The *Statement of Objects and Reasons* of the Amendment Act contains a series of important statements to understand the then BJP run State of Gujarat's reason for the motion, and their vision of the nation:

“It is an established fact that the cow and her progeny sustain the health of the nation by giving them the life-giving milk which is so essential an item in a scientifically balanced diet. The economy of the State of Gujarat is still predominantly agricultural. In the agricultural sector, use of animals for milch, draught, breeding or agricultural purposes has great importance. It has, therefore, become necessary to emphasise preservation and protection of agricultural animals like bulls and bullocks. With the growing adoption of non-conventional energy sources like biogas plants, even waste material has come to assume considerable value. After the cattle cease to breed or are too old to do work, they still continue to give dung for fuel, manure and biogas, and therefore, they cannot be said to be useless. It is well established that the backbone of Indian agriculture is, in a manner of speaking, the cow and her progeny and have on their back, the whole structure of the Indian agriculture and its economic system.”

The amendments were first struck down by the High court, but its constitutional validity eventually became upheld by the Supreme Court who backed up its decision by pointing out the changes in the economic and agricultural situation of the country: first, “fodder shortage [was] no longer a problem” and that cow's progeny can be “fed and maintained without causing any wasteful drain on the feed requisite for active milch, breeding and draught cattle” (*Id.* p. 47); second, regarding the argument that old cattle was a source of protein for the poor, the Court (rather surprisingly) concluded that food security was no longer as much a concern in the country compared to the past; and third, that all cattle remain useful past a certain age, since urine and dung are “tremendously” useful as renewable sources of energy.

It is problematic that these arguments set forth by the State and decreed constitutional by the Supreme Court, which reconsidered the cost-benefit of maintaining cattle, a significant move in the long line of legislature since *Qureishi vs. Bihar* in 1958 which have extended the utility of cattle right to the end of their

lifecycle, don't seem to be actually validated by scientific data.<sup>47</sup> There is, in fact, ample evidence of the contrary, that prohibiting the slaughter of cattle is disadvantageous for the entire bovine economy and its fluid supply chain, as I will explore in the following section 2.4. This raises the question whether there was a moral injunction slipped in underneath the language of utility; traces of a distinct vision of the nation, an ethics and aesthetics of a land which is constituted by an utopic bovine economy of cattle, her tenders, and her life-giving, pure substances.<sup>48</sup> Science, here, is imbued with profound ethical gravitas as the realization and maximization of cows' productive and affective potential; this must be supported by the law that serves to realize this mission by cow-protection legislature.

The Supreme Court, besides further expanding the notion of utility of cattle through a liberal interpretation of Article 48, also invoked Article 51-A(g), which introduces the fundamental right that the "State and every citizen of India must have compassion for living creatures", concluding that cattle should not lose its protection even if it ceases to become "useful". The strengthening of the utility argument by invoking the duty to be compassionate adds an additional layer to this "bovine nation-economy" backed up by ideology, agricultural science, and legislature, that, in as much as it works to include cattle in its body politic, it does so by necessarily excluding certain other sections of society. The Supreme Court struck down the argument of the petitioners, who, like their many precedents, argued their position against cow-protection on the lines of Article 19: a total prohibition on cow slaughter is not a total prohibition on the right to profession, since only a *part* of the petitioner's

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<sup>47</sup> Jain S. (2015 Mar 20). Truth vs Hype: Anti-Beef Laws in Maharashtra, Haryana Based More on Hyperbole Than Facts. *NDTV*. Retrieved 28 Sep 2017 from <http://www.ndtv.com/india-news/truth-vs-hype-anti-beef-laws-in-maharashtra-haryana-based-more-on-hyperbole-than-facts-748141>

<sup>48</sup> See, for instance, "Dung is Gold Mine", a mission statement circulated by the Viniyog Parivar, a Mumbai based Jain trust, who also lobbied for the MAPA 2015 bill: "Dung economy was a most scientific economic system evolved by the great Aryan race. Unless we accept this, our future will become more and more gory. We urgently need our dung culture and its restoration to the predominant place where it belongs. This is not possible unless a total ban on animal slaughter is imposed."

Retrieved 28 Sep 2017 from <http://www.viniyogparivar.org/Essays/Dung%20is%20Gold%20Mine.pdf>

While the mission of the State of Gujarat in 2005, during when Narendra Modi representing BJP was chief minister, may not be as feverishly worded, this may be a case of them being a political party rather than its ideological wing/sympathisers such as the RSS and Viniyog Parivar - they are continuous in their bonding of science and ethics, with cattle as their centrepiece.

business is affected, in that they are “not prohibited from slaughtering animals other than the cattle belonging to the cow progeny.” (*Id.* p. 48). The position of the Supreme Court is clearly summed up in their concluding remarks:

“In the light of the material available in abundance before us, there is no escape from the conclusion that the protection conferred by the impugned enactment on cow progeny is needed in the interest of the nation’s economy. *Merely because it may cause “inconvenience” or some “dislocation” to the butchers, restriction imposed by the impugned enactment does not cease to be in the interest of the general public. The former must yield to the latter.*” (My emphasis.)

Herein lies the fundamental disadvantage of the petitioners who have argued their motion on the lines of their rights to practice their religion and profession: what is set up through these debates is a *calculus between the benefits for the nation, against rights of minority communities*. Such arguments are commonplace outside the courtroom: many of my informants for cow-protection noted how “no one will starve without beef”, and that the inconvenience of beef traders are offset by the benefits for the general public - “besides, they can always move into dealing with other meats?”<sup>49</sup> Resonating with such opinions, the Supreme Court continues:

“Desirable diet and nutrition are *not necessarily* associated with non-vegetarian diet and that too originating from slaughtering cow progeny. Beef contributes only 1.3% of the total meat consumption pattern of the Indian society. Consequently a prohibition on the slaughter of cattle would not substantially affect the food consumption of the people.” (My emphasis).

Finally, at the very end of their verdict, they mention:

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<sup>49</sup> The difficulty in “switching” from selling beef to mutton, lines of work with rather different skills, networks and competition, are not fully considered by those who make such comments. Johari A. (2017 Apr 02). 2 years after the Maharashtra beef ban, the lives of Qureshi community in Mumbai is tough as ever. *Scroll India*. Retrieved 28 Sep 2017 from <https://scroll.in/article/833198/two-years-after-maharashtras-beef-ban-mumbais-qureshi-butcher-community-struggles-with-poverty>

“...Slaughtering of cows on *BakrI’d* is neither essential to nor necessarily required as part of the religious ceremony. An optional religious practice is not covered by Article 25(1). *On the contrary, it is common knowledge that the cow and its progeny* i.e. bull, bullocks and calves are worshipped by Hindus on specified days during Diwali and other festivals like *Makar Sankranti* and *Gopashtmi*. A good number of temples are to be found where the statue of “*Nandi*” or “*Bull*” is regularly worshipped.” (My emphasis).

In these statements we see how the law consolidates certain important associations between profession, religion, lifestyles, and food habits; moreover, such discourses are entirely biopolitical in the way it sets up a comparative field in which these can be pitted against each other by the scale of *necessity* against *optionality*. Being in the cattle butchering business, sacrificing cows on Bakrid, and a non-vegetarian diet, are all rendered an *option*, while cattle and her produce become *necessary* for the health and wealth of the nation. It is the brute force of scale that dictates this line of reasoning: the former are options because they are performed by a *minority*, while the latter must be defended because they reflect the interest of the majority, which constitute the general public, and ultimately, most of the nation. It is only a step away to align these consolidations with the “fact” that the largest minorities are Indian Muslims while the majorities are Hindus. The verdict regarding the *necessary* link between Hinduism and cattle worship, and only the *optional* one between Islam and cattle slaughter, is telling in that it makes this politics of numbers explicitly about Muslims and Hindus - in a line of judgments where it has always preferred to talk about the nation (as backed by agricultural science) against the (optional) preferences of single communities (Muslims, butchers), it is the first to have directly pitted Hindus against Muslims, and bluntly preferred the former’s preferences as *necessary*. While the Court based this judgement on the *State of West Bengal vs. Ashutosh Lahiri* rulings in 1995, which maintained that “slaughtering of healthy cows on *BakrI’d* is not essential or required for religious purpose of Muslims”, the only evidence they give to support their claim that Hindu religion necessarily worships cows is: “common knowledge”. One wonders whether this was a

clearer instance of an “uncontested Hindu sentiment” being slipped in through the scientific discourse of national necessity.<sup>50</sup>

#### 2.4. The abomination and productivity of slaughter

The MAPA 2015 (Amendment) bill, pushed forth by the State of Maharashtra, ruled jointly by the BJP-Shiv Sena alliance, drew much of its inspiration and grounding from the motions of the BJP run State of Gujarat in 2005. The significant difference was that not only *slaughter* was problematized, but also of *possession* and *sale* of the flesh of these animals - the bill thus not only sought to expand cattle protection from females cows to bulls and bullocks, but also expanded the scope of types of activities which both implicate and encourage cattle slaughter. This did not come without contestation. One year after the ban, in May 2016, the Bombay High Court struck down the sections in the MAPA 2015 bill which sought to restrict possession of cattle meat, as long as it was procured outside the state, on grounds of protecting the fundamental Right to Life<sup>51</sup>, saying that “[p]reventing a citizen from possessing flesh of cow, bull or bullock slaughtered outside the state amounts to prohibiting a citizen from possessing and consuming food of his choice.”<sup>52</sup> Although the media reported this as a “relaxing” of the beef ban<sup>53</sup>, the injunction against cattle slaughter within the state, which the Muslim butcher community petitioners most violently protested against, was still upheld as constitutionally valid; thus, the verdict was only relaxing to the point of rendering possession of meat as peripheral to the larger issue of “protecting cow and her progeny”, in faith with Article 48.

As we have seen, the Supreme and High Courts have consistently rejected the claims of Muslim petitioners who argued against cattle slaughter on lines of protecting their minority rights, due to the disjuncture of scale between nation and

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<sup>50</sup> Upendra Baxi writing on the differential treatment by the court regarding Hindu and Muslim customs related to cow-slaughter: “...it is extremely doubtful if scrupulous research in Hindu religious traditions (in the same manner as the Supreme Court investigated the contention of the Muslims that they were enjoined by their religion to offer the sacrifice of the cows on their holy day) will endorse the view that cow-killing is prohibited by these traditions” (Baxi in Chigateri 2011:149).

<sup>51</sup> As per Article 21, “Protection of life and personal liberty. No person shall be deprived of his life or personal liberty except according to procedure established by law.”

<sup>52</sup> Khan A. (2017 Jan 27). What the Bombay High Court verdict on beef ban means. *Indian Express*. Retrieved 28 Sep 2017 from <http://indianexpress.com/article/india/india-news-india/decoded-what-the-bombay-hc-verdict-on-beef-ban-means-2788254/>

<sup>53</sup> Machado, K. (2016 May 06). Indian Court Relaxes Maharashtra Beef Ban. *The Wall Street Journal*. Retrieved 28 Sep 2017 from <https://blogs.wsj.com/indiarealtime/2016/05/06/indian-court-relaxes-maharashtra-beef-ban/>

minorities. As Syed Muhammad Sa'adulla proclaimed during the constituent assembly debates, effective arguments against cattle slaughter must come from economic grounds instead, cutting into its internal logic of a bovine nation. In this spirit, an important line of critique has come from the direction of environmentalists and animal scientists, in view of the economics of the cattle supply chain. The most eye opening aspect of these is that it presents an unexpected victim, other than Muslim butchers, leatherworkers, and animal traders: the livelihoods of the many *farmers* who work with cattle on a daily basis. An important perspective is the *production cycle of cattle*. Currently, milk is the most important produce and labour of livestock; although this was not always so. As N S Ramaswamy calculated, while in 1980, “90 million work animals was equal to the installed capacity of the electric power in the country”, this changed by the 2000s after the wave of mechanization, reflected by a steep decrease of the male work animals in the livestock census, to around 30% of the total population. Now, males are mainly reared for breeding purposes, while females to produce milk. The problem is that, as environmental activist Sunita Narain notes, “cows and buffaloes give milk for seven-eight years of their 15-20 years of life. Farmers use this productive phase for the birth of calves and for milk sale. Maintaining animals is not cheap. ... [I]f the animals are fed properly and looked after well, it costs about Rs. 70,000 per animal per year.”<sup>54</sup> As much as cattle are assets to farmers during this phase, it is essential that there is a system of sale and resale whereby unproductive cattle above the age of 8 become utilized in profitable ways, or else it becomes entirely uneconomical for farmers to hold onto cattle.

While the law, since the Gujarat case in 2005, sought to tackle this conundrum by expanding the notion of utility of (live) cattle, the reality is that at the post-dairy phase, the most productive cycle for it to enter is neither extracting manure or urine for “renewable energy”, for which sufficient technology and logistical systems are yet to be set-up, but to resell it as beef, leather, and offal, where there is already a large domestic and international market for.<sup>55</sup> The slaughterhouses have functioned as the

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<sup>54</sup> Narain, S. (2017 Mar 27). Why I would not advocate vegetarianism. *Down to Earth*. Retrieved 28 Sep 2017 from <http://www.downtoearth.org.in/blog/why-i-won-t-advocate-vegetarianism-57449>

<sup>55</sup> Value of cattle is transformed into “[b]eef as cheap protein, and the thriving domestic leather market valued at “US \$ 17.8 billion, generating 95% of India’s foot wear needs, and its offals used widely in the pharmaceutical and manufacturing industries”, in Ramdas, S.R.



final safety net for the farmers - within the bovine agricultural economy of India, cattle slaughter is an essential point to continue the productive lifecycle of cattle to sustain the livelihoods of the farmers. It is not only farmers who depend on this *productivity of death* within the cattle supply chain, but, somewhat counter intuitively, the entire breed of cattle. Sagari R. Ramdas (2017) points to the phenomenon where cow-protection laws have become an incentive for farmers to rear buffalo instead of cows “as even a dry (non-milking) female or a male buffalo, will fetch a good price due to their slaughter value, as buffalo slaughter is legal country-wide.”<sup>56</sup> This is a rather staggering paradox: a ban imposed which seemingly desires to “protect” the cow, actually leads to its slow demise, in terms of population. The purifying impulses of the bovine filled nation also purifies, by the forces of rational economic choice and market incentives, that animal that which one wanted to proliferate.

Anti cattle-slaughter laws which not only prohibit slaughtering within the state, but also of transportation of cattle *across states*, such as is the case with the MAPA 2015, which in the May 2016 verdict the High Court of Bombay upheld as constitutionally valid, produce large frictions within this fluid economy by clogging exit routes for farmers. In as much as anti-slaughter laws can only be enforced within a certain state, to ban the transportation of cattle to a state which does not have these stringent laws is the final nail in the coffin. As I alluded to in Chapter I, these routes are also informally policed by the numerous *gau rakshaks*, or “cow vigilantes”, whose violent attacks towards cattle transporters are now alarmingly commonplace throughout the country. From an economic point of view, the burden of proof lies with proponents of cow-protection to show how unproductive cattle may continue to be productive by producing dung and urine, and to work together with farmers and scientists to put such a system into place. To not do so, and merely privilege a certain

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(2017 Apr 06). The Beef Ban Effect: Stray Cattle, Broken Markets and Boom Time for Buffaloes. *The Wire*. Retrieved 28 Sep 2017 from <https://thewire.in/121728/beef-ban-cattle-market/>

<sup>56</sup> The figures are telling: “According to the livestock census 2012, buffaloes comprised 38% of India’s total bovine population. States with stringent anti-cow slaughter laws however, had much higher buffalo percentages than the all-India average: Haryana (77%), Punjab (67%), Uttar Pradesh (61%), Gujarat (51%) and Rajasthan (50%), confirming farmers’ preference to rear buffaloes in these heartlands of the holy cow. On the other hand, states without bans on cow slaughter had the highest cattle population shares: Kerala (93%), West Bengal (96.5%) and Assam (91%). ... Buffalo populations in Maharashtra are increasing and contribute the maximum to milk production. It would not come as a surprise to see a spurt in buffalo populations in Maharashtra in the upcoming livestock census 2017, in wake of the total slaughter and transportation bans on cattle in the state”, (ibid).

productive phase of cattle at the expense of the entire bovine economy, which is essentially maintained by the *productive potential of slaughter*, is to brutally cut into this fluid supply chain which connects farmers to butchers, transferring value from cattle to its carcass. What arouses disgust for cattle-protection proponents is the very potential for this transformation, what I will explore in the next section as the movement from pleasure to disgust.

### **3.1. The “visceral politics” of the law in Mumbai - from pleasure to disgust**

The metaphor of cutting into a world, of creating boundaries amidst a fluid field of associations, is not only significant when thinking about the repercussions of anti-cattle-slaughter laws on the cattle supply chain, but also of the everyday biomoralities within the city. Here, the internal logic of the beef ban legislature - characterized by an ever expanding interpretation of the utility of cattle throughout its lifecycle, a process of cunctation fuelled by a lurking stubbornness to acknowledge, despite overwhelming evidence, the value of *dead cattle* - mirrors the transformation of people's attitudes when coming into terms with each Other, a movement from *pleasure* to *disgust*. Here, I take *pleasure* to cover the liminal practices and spaces of experimentation and mingling which Mumbaikars engaged with each other, by intimately consuming and digesting the Other; *disgust*, on the other hand, is less a *lack* of such intimacy, than an all-too intimate and nauseating association with the Other (Ghassem-Fachandi 2010a; 2010b; 2012). Intimate contact with the Other is paramount to both sensations; yet the nature of the reaction differs, from digestion and incorporation, to vomiting and repulsion. Here, the symbolic merges with the somatic. To illustrate this point, and to explore how the visceral politics of the beef ban facilitated two interlocking transformations in everyday Mumbai, namely, the strengthening of boundaries between self and Other, and the resulting interpellation of incommensurable subjectivities, I will discuss an exemplary case study who lived this transformation.

### **3.2. The story of Viral**

I had befriended Viral, a 22-year-old operations assistant working in a shipping company in the business district of Fort, through numerous lunches in the office canteen. It took me by surprise when this shy Jain man with a boyish sense of humour, who always brought his self-acclaimed “pure vegetarian” tiffin made by his

newly wed wife, one day invited me out to eat “the best beef fry” in Mumbai. Jainism, the ancient Indian religion originating in the 4<sup>th</sup> century BCE, widely considered the first cousin of Buddhism with which it shares its central doctrines of salvation from Karmic reincarnation through worldly renunciation and *ahimsa* (non-violence), has approximately 4.5 million followers in India, or 0.37% of the population.<sup>57</sup> Despite their small numbers, Jains are widely known for two characteristics: exceptional mercantilism and economic prosperity, by virtue of many followers historically professing prominent positions in business and trade, Mumbai city being one of the most concentrated Jain areas in the country<sup>58</sup>; and one of the most stringent dietary regimes among Indian communities, where most non-ascetic, lay Jains regularly renounce all meats, and a variety of foods eaten by other vegetarians, punctuating their lives with calculated fasting cycles throughout the week and year, in accordance with the ideals of *ahimsa*, and self-cultivation through self-discipline (Dundas 2002; Laidlaw 2005).

Their over-exacting punctuality regarding all things dietary is often made into jovial ridicule, a stereotype which became confirmed when I accompanied an orthodox Jain friend to a “pure vegetarian” restaurant which I recommended, who, upon entering the premises, asked the manager to escort him into the kitchen, so that he could check whether different knives and cutting boards were used to cook the onion-and-garlic free “pure veg” dishes with the other, “regular veg” dishes. Onion and garlic, being root vegetables growing in the dirt, are considered by Jains to harbour myriad microorganisms which will inevitably be killed through the process of consumption, thus an obstacle to *ahimsa*. Moreover, these are “hot” vegetables which induce virility, passion, and uncontrollable base urges in the eater, based on the popular psychosomatic theory in India of the isomerism between food and eater, and thus are strictly avoided (Chapter I). Many Hindus too abstain from these fiery vegetables on fasting occasions to keep the bodily humours and mental balance in check, but only Jains openly abstain from this category on an absolute basis. When a restaurant serves a “Jain menu”, this most often means dishes made without onion and garlic, a food fit for even the most somatically conscious. The sick, the pregnant, and

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<sup>57</sup> According to the 2011 all India censuses. Retrieved 28 Sep 2017 from <http://www.censusindia.gov.in/2011census/c-01.html>

<sup>58</sup> Mumbai is home to 0.5 million Jains, or 4.1%, of the city’s population, well above the national average. Retrieved 28 Sep 2017 from <http://www.census2011.co.in/census/city/365-mumbai.html>

the infantile, that is, the somatically unstable, also eat such Jain foods irrespective of their religion, for health. Many Jains, especially women and the elderly, avoid eating out of the home to save everyone the time and energy to accommodate these purity and hygiene standards - it is also this class of people who value *ghar-ka-khana* and related “technologies of purity” the most, as I will explore in Chapter IV, V, and VI. Due to these reasons, Viral’s invitation to indulge in beef, of all things, was extremely startling.

One Friday evening in January 2015, I went to the office to be greeted by Viral and his Keralite Christian friend from college, and we meandered our way into the back lanes of this historic and affluent neighbourhood, famous for its colonial legacy and Victorian architecture. The 2-storey restaurant was a shabby hole-in-the-wall joint, and when we entered the AC (air-conditioned) section, I was struck by how dark the place was, with only four or five bare light bulbs of fluorescent red and orange blinking off the comically low ceiling. There was only a faint chatter, and it took me several seconds to realize the floor was packed to the brim. I commented that this place is a perfect setting to make illicit drug deals, to which Viral grinned provocatively: “No drugs, no alcohol - only meat.”

A vegetarian Jain, a beef loving Christian, and myself, an omnivorous Japanese-Indian, surrounded by Muslims, Hindus, Sikhs, Parsis, and everyone else, all devouring succulent Mangalorean beef, Indo-Chinese chilli chicken, and Mughlai style mutton chops - this was the epitome of Mumbai’s cosmopolitanism.<sup>59</sup> We had a great conversation about the standard things 20-something men talk about - girls, work, life - it was fascinating that it wasn’t a pint of beer that was the social conductor here, but meat. And by the end of it, we were definitely intoxicated. The feeling of juicy fat slowly saturating my cells; the sound of slurping and sizzling creating an intense feeling of anticipation for the next dish; a dumb bulb suddenly flickering in your eye, transforming the faces around you into grotesquery. As I felt my two companions slowly enter *jouissance*, I realized that I have never known him like this - has his colleagues, wife, or mother, seen such a face on him? “No way,” Viral said, annoyed that I took his family’s name out, “I’m born a Jain, and I’m proud. I love my

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<sup>59</sup> The audiences in these restaurants are almost exclusively male - the occasional female was always accompanied by a male friend or partner. See Phadke et al. (2011) on the unevenly gendered nature of public spaces in Mumbai. Additionally, see Donner (2008a; 2008b) on paternalistic ideals of women renouncing meat in order to “tame” their uncontrollable sexuality, in the context of contemporary Kolkata.

mother, her food, vegetarian food, being a Jain. That is my life, but this is for enjoyment. Real good enjoyment.”

Two months later, immediately after the beef ban, I went back to Viral’s office to hear out what everyone had to say. Everyone was confused as to how this law would be enforced - will the police raid abattoirs, restaurants, even homes, with a permit or even on mere suspicion? No one knew because no one ate beef regularly. Yet, everyone was vocal, and what seemed to be clear was the why - forming a round table in the canteen, many mocked the BJP-Sena government for stirring up communal tensions between Hindus and Muslims, undermining the cosmopolitan ethos of acceptance and inclusion that Mumbaikars lived for. Amidst the heated cacophony, the usually quiet Viral opened his mouth: “But if we’re so open minded, should we not respect the sentiments of the Hindus too? Who eats beef here regularly, anyway? Of course, there’s no mercy for Ken and his Japanese Wagyu!” Laughing along with everyone, I remembered our beef feast, thinking it would surely be awkward to mention it in front of his colleagues now. “But that’s not the point!” came in Mr Iyer, his Tamil superior. “I’m a Brahmin, I never touch meat, and I think this is unacceptable. How can the government dictate what an individual eats or not? This is fascism....” The discussion spiralled out.

The following week, I decided to set up a dinner with Viral at the very same restaurant he invited me two months ago. My outward intention was to see how the business was coping with the ban, and to get an interview or two out of the owner and regular customers, if there were any. Deep down, however, I wanted to talk to Viral in that dark, clandestine atmosphere which might get him to splay his real thoughts, and perhaps contradictions, out on the table - a tiny bit of revenge for his, what I thought at that time, two-faced comments regarding eating beef he made in the canteen. However, Viral politely declined my invitation, saying that it’s “not a good idea to go to those restaurants at this current climate”; besides, he’s “not really into those things anymore”, but he’d be glad to meet me at the local Udipi restaurant<sup>60</sup>, which had “great *masala uttapam*.”<sup>61</sup>

I complied, and we met up the following day at the bustling, clinically white restaurant with a huge, green “PURE VEG” sign on its façade. After some ordering

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<sup>60</sup> These are popular, affordable, South Indian vegetarian eateries. Madsen (2009). Retrieved 28 Sep 2017 from [http://asiandynamics.ku.dk/pdf/udupi\\_hotels\\_-\\_toft\\_madsen\\_gardella.pdf](http://asiandynamics.ku.dk/pdf/udupi_hotels_-_toft_madsen_gardella.pdf)

<sup>61</sup> A popular South Indian pancake snack, and a signature dish of vegetarian Udipi restaurants.

and catching up, I cut to the chase. “What do you actually think about the ban? No more beef fry is certainly bad for me!” Showing the same annoyed face when I asked him about his family at the beef restaurant, Viral lectured me with a firm tone: “Ken, the ban is a good thing. The reality is that no one is going to starve without beef. You’re a well-educated guy, and a foodie. You appreciate this [pointing to the *uttapam*] as much as beef fry, right? The ban is only bad for some people, like Muslims, who are addicted to meat, eat it everyday. They cannot live without it. That’s not healthy. All that meat gives you unwanted passion, and eventually leads to violence. It’s painful for them now, but 100% good for the country, in the long run.”

The *uttapam* was great, but it was no beef.

### 3.3. Meat, transgression, and incommensurable subjects

As I outlined in Chapter I, there has historically been a construction of the Indian diet as predominantly vegetarian, a rendering that asserts social hierarchy based on the Brahmanical ideals of bio-moral purity (Ambedkar 1948). To take this ideology as representative of reality in contemporary India is to ignore the recent emergence of large-scale statistical data regarding vegetarianism in the country: according to the Sample Registration System (SRS) baseline survey conducted in 2014, based on nationwide census data, more than 70% of the population above the age of 15 identified as “non-vegetarian” (Figure 2).

Figure 2 - How India Eats.<sup>62</sup>

(This image has been removed as the copyright is owned by another organisation.)

Yet, while these figures attest to the prevalence of meat consumption in India<sup>63</sup>, it in no way undermines the popularity of vegetarian values and practices among these

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<sup>62</sup> Only the five north-western, western, and central states of Punjab (PB), Haryana (HR), Rajasthan (RJ), Gujarat (GJ), and Madhya Pradesh (MP), can be rightly categorized as “vegetarian majority” states, with Maharashtra (MH), which Mumbai is the capital of, as majorly non-vegetarian, but less so than many other states, a fact largely to do with the many vegetarian Gujarati (from Gujarat) and Marwari (from Rajasthan) migrants residing in the state. Bose, A. (2016 Jul 15). Vegetarian India A Myth? Survey Shows Over 70% Indians Eat Non-Veg, Telangana Tops List. *Huffington Post India*. Retrieved 28 Sep 2017 from [http://www.huffingtonpost.in/2016/06/14/how-india-eats\\_n\\_10434374.html](http://www.huffingtonpost.in/2016/06/14/how-india-eats_n_10434374.html)

<sup>63</sup> In addition to analysing such data, it is important to ask the social impact of such statistics. Most profoundly, such data carry with it political-moral force which is especially pertinent within India, since the region has, and still is, popularly conceived as a majorly “vegetarian

“non-vegetarians”. For this survey takes “non-vegetarian” to mean “one who *ever* eats meat”, and had the question been “how *often* does one eat meat?”, a rather different picture would have emerged. The per capita yearly meat consumption in India is around 5kg/ year, compared to 122kg/year of the US - one of the lowest scores in the OECD countries - and the countries’ lack of protein from meat sources are covered by high national rates of dairy and pulse consumption.<sup>64</sup> Throughout my fieldwork, it was very rare to find people who ate meat for the majority of the week - as I will explore in Chapter VII, there were informally decided upon “non-veg” days of the week in office canteens, usually on Wednesday and Friday, which were considered “treat” days for non-vegetarians.

Meat, in other words, is an occasional indulgence among a generally vegetarian dietary regime, one which more often just happens to be that, than out of conscious identification and aspiration (Donner 2008; Srinivas 1956). Moreover, the categories and boundaries of “vegetarian” and “non-vegetarian” are, in practice, very much fluid; Mumbaikars always moved between different dietary regimes punctuated by the religious and medical rhythms of the day, week, and month.<sup>65</sup> These are the complex cycles of fasting and feasting, to take part in lifecycle rituals, to appease the Gods<sup>66</sup> (Appadurai 1981; Khare 1976), to regulate health and to purify mind and

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nation”. The rise of such data set forth by Leftist journalism, strives to displace Brahmanical casteism and Hindutva, which is clandestinely introduced through an idolization of vegetarianism. See Gorringe and Karthikeyan (2014).

<sup>64</sup> Lewis, M. (2016 Mar 08). Mapping the Consumption of Milk and Meat in India. *The Wire*. Retrieved 28 Sep 2017 from <https://thewire.in/24181/mapping-the-consumption-of-milk-and-meat-in-india/>

<sup>65</sup> There were practical reasons for why meat is an infrequent treat/excess. Considering cost per calorie, it was an indulgence to eat it compared to lentils, pulses, rice, flour, and staple vegetables available throughout the year. Meat was also time consuming to cook, requiring more steps for marinating, seasoning, and cooking than an ordinary *subzi*, thus was reserved for special occasions and relaxed holidays. Even those who could afford to eat meat everyday, or those self confessed “meatarians”, chose not to out of medical concerns - many felt it was “too heavy”, taxing on ones’ stomach, affecting the ability to work productively in the afternoon if taken for lunch, and building up sluggish discomfort if eaten in the evening. I will explore the construction of a baseline “Indian meal” as a vegetarian one in Chapter IV.

<sup>66</sup> In the polytheistic cosmology of Hinduism, every day of the week is represented by a different deity - Monday was for Lord Siva, Tuesday was Lord Hanuman, and Thursday was Lord Vishnu, etc. - and people would renounce their excesses, such as meat and alcohol, on the days of their favourite Gods. Monthly auspicious days such as *Ekadashi*, and the month of *Shravan* are added to these rhythms. In Islam, such renunciation is practiced during the month of *Ramadan*, and spectacularly broken by the slaughtering and gargantuan consumption of meat on *Eid*. Jains take part in fasting festivals such as *Paryushan* over a period of weeks, and practice well-defined, fine-grained fasting proscriptions for different occasions and points of the day.

body, comprising an individuated ethics and technology of “caring for the self” (Donner 2008: 159; Ecks 2003: 41-9). In as much as these movements are characterized by the oscillation between abstinence and celebration, and that meat has historically been constructed as a problematic *excess* in Hindu India (Ambedkar 1990 [1948]), it is often expressed by the movement from a meat based diet to a lacto-vegetarian one, or, if already regularly lacto-vegetarian, a further renouncing of certain vegetables and foods on the basis of bio-moral purity and psycho-somatic humours. If, especially for Hindu and Jain communities, meat is an excess compared to vegetables, since it involves the bio-morally problematic act of *slaughter*, there too are hierarchies *within* the categories vegetables and meats. Jains distinguish between leaf vegetables and root vegetables, roots avoided by virtue of being *more* implicated by *slaughter* (of microorganisms).

Meat must assume slaughter of one form or another, but are graded on the lines of bio-moral acceptability. Beef and pork, the former widely considered to offend Hindus for the sanctity of the cow, and the latter being detested by Muslims for being polluting, are those meats which have the most ethical baggage for the two major religions in the country; mutton and goat, “*red* meats” like beef and pork, are expensive and cherished by Muslims and others as a food for feasts and source of virility, but its visceral bloodiness is abhorred by strict vegetarians. Fish is problematic for those not used to its pungent smell, but are cherished by coastal communities, and is acceptable for the relative lack of blood when it is cut - some argue that it is not “slaughter” at all, since fish cease to live the moment it comes out of water. “*White* meat” such as chicken, and eggs, are the most “accessible” or “inert” meats, and most consume this category when they turn to “non-vegetarianism”. Ranking of acceptable slaughter is mirrored by acceptable *consumption* by means of psychosomatic theories of bodily humours - beef and red meats must be handled with care since it gives potency and virility, also inducing violence and uncontrollable urges; fish, chicken, and egg have a lower threshold, the lack of bloody redness making it an easier meat to morally handle and physically digest. These qualitative trends largely agree with data of per capita meat consumption in urban and rural India, where chicken and fish are by far the most consumed meats, followed by mutton/goat, beef, and pork (Fig. 3.).



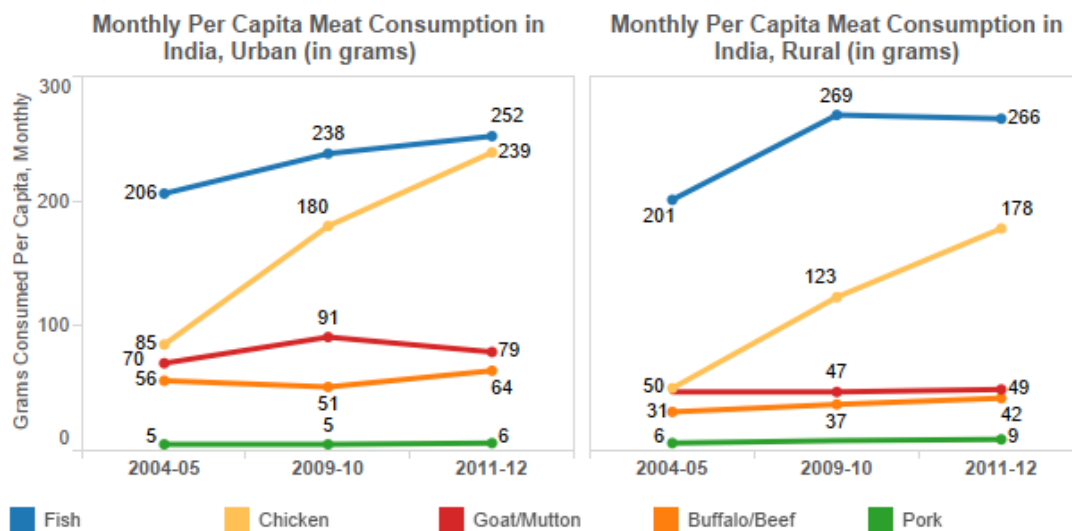


Figure 3 - Monthly Per Capita Meat Consumption 2004-2012.<sup>67</sup>

This gives a general outline of a bio-moral dietary schema in which contemporary Indians operate, internalized mostly by Hindus and Jains, a refined version of Ambedkar's (1990 [1948]) insights about how social and moral hierarchy in Hindu India was synonymous with making distinctions between vegetarians, flesh eaters, and eaters of cow's flesh (Fig. 4.). The fluid movements between vegetarianism and meat eating in India as per lifecycle rituals and religious rhythms, is none other than the *permissible movements* among the different sections within this general schema based on bio-moral health and purity, where abstinence is to move higher up, and excess to go towards the base. The idea of Sanskritization set forth by M.N. Srinivas (1956) can be understood as the spectacular leap towards the apex in an attempt to achieve bio-moral purity and respectability. The intrigue with Viral's movement is that he not only goes the opposite direction, from a strict, vegetarian Jain diet down to an excessive one based on meat, but that this direction is absolutely *unsanctioned* by the limits of his faith. The excess here is not that of a regular meat eating Hindu who, after turning vegetarian on an auspicious day, may celebrate afterwards by eating certain acceptable forms of meat, what he and his community *normally* eats within his boundaries; the equivalent for an orthodox Jain would be to renounce, for instance, the purifying but indulgent *ghee* as an excess, or to eat nothing but fruit or drink water, then returning to an acceptable Jain diet. There are different

<sup>67</sup>Malapur, C. (2015, April 8). Indian Beef-eating Up, Chicken Tops Meat Surge. *IndiaSpend*. Retrieved 28 Sep 2017 from <http://www.indiaspend.com/cover-story/indian-beef-eating-up-chicken-tops-meat-surge-71788>

degrees of excess. To eat meat for a Jain man is a leap into the unknown, to enter a life trajectory which was not readied for him at birth - it is *beyond* excess, a *transgression*.

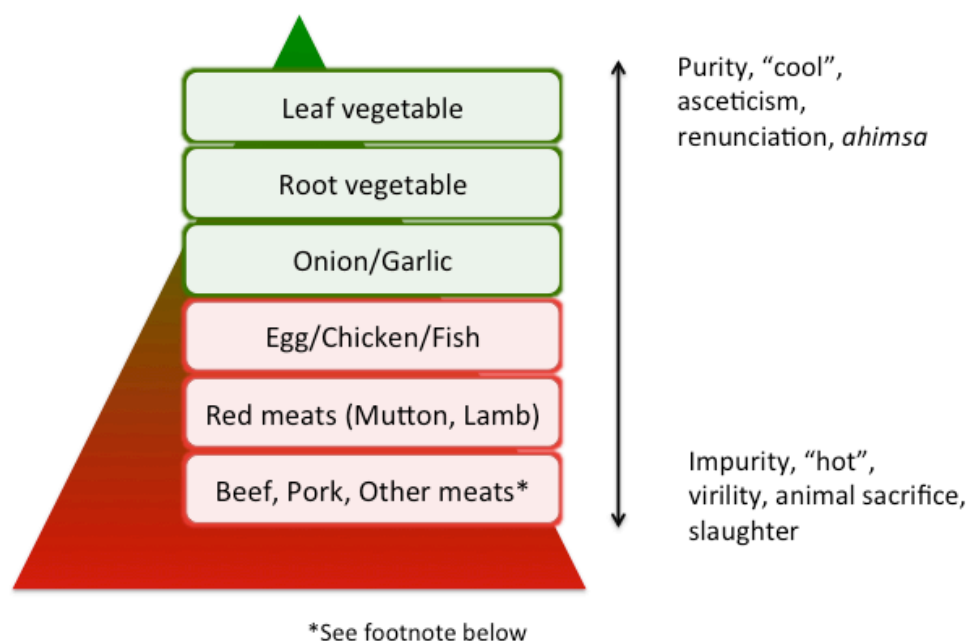


Figure 4 - Schema of bio-moral food categories in India.<sup>68</sup>

This is what I call (cosmopolitan) pleasure, the unabashed mingling with the Other, or more precisely, the *visceral experimentation with Other ways of being* (Fig. 5.). Mumbai is rife with such times and spaces of experimentation, where new forms of visceral associations with the Other are made and unmade, in ways which often contradicts trajectories and expectations of “ordinary life”.<sup>69</sup> Jim Massellos’ (1991) argument that urban spaces in 19<sup>th</sup> century Bombay were marked by shifting “accustomed spaces”, spaces “where individuals moved about during their normal rounds of activities and at their usual times of doing so” (ibid: 39) - for instance, an “accustomed route at midnight, long after the usual hour, was perceptually unfamiliar” (ibid:40) for women - is pertinent to understand how normality is

<sup>68</sup> A wide array of “other meats” are consumed throughout India - boar, field rats, frog, dog, red ants, turtle etc. - which are all peripheral to this “normal” repertoire, and are stigmatized as signs of extremely low social status. These highlight the visceral political processes by which certain foods become, and represented as, edible or not, and the politics of banning beef is none other than anxieties over this issue of normality and peripherality (Kannabiran 2012). Not only do animals, but also different cuts of meats, such as offal, reflect social status - I have seen how the Muslim and Punjabi delicacy *bheja* (lamb/sheep/goat brain) fry causes self-identified “meat-lovers” recoil, as “low class, cheap cuts”.

<sup>69</sup> I explore in detail one such space of experimentation, the office canteen, in Chapter VII.

constructed and transgressed in contemporary Mumbai. While spaces and related practices of food undergo transformations under different timescapes, such as by the rhythms of day and night (lunch and dinner), of working day and leisurely weekend (normality and celebration), seasons such as heavy monsoon rains (seasonal produce and bio-moral management), and times of collective effervescence marked by religious processions (fasting and feasting), Viral's movement is from a *vegetarian in daylight*, to a *carnivore in the dark*.

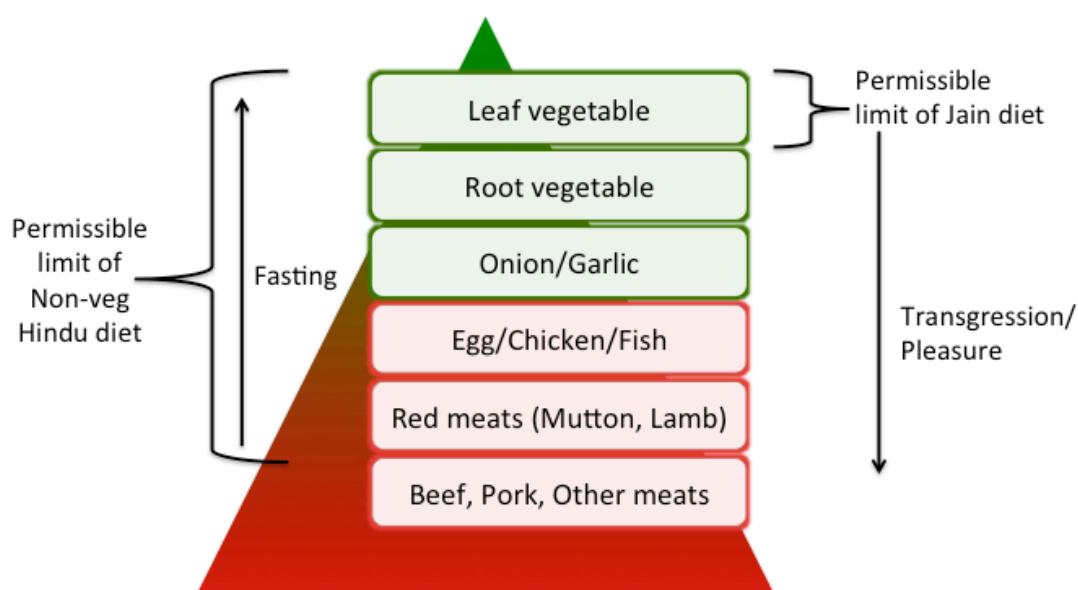


Figure 5 - Movements among and between dietary regimes

The politics of luminosity is pertinent. The back ally darkness of the non-veg restaurant was a necessary devise for this transformation, its dinginess creating a sense of anonymity, dissolving previous associations (Jain, vegetarian), setting up a platform for people with diverse backgrounds to come together in communion - a return to a *dividual* state, before individuation-interpellation occurs (Appadurai 2015; Marriott 1968). The ambiguity with this anonymity is that, on the one hand, it must function as a veil to cover these associations to enter a new life trajectory; but, just like veils, it should easily come off, for it is these associations which set up the very boundaries which should be transgressed. In truth, the anonymity in the darkness could be easily be shattered by a single comment or gesture - my question towards Viral about his mother brought him back to sobriety, destroying his fantasy of viscerally entering a different life trajectory. Yet, the conscious realization that he was doing something unsanctioned by his family, like a child in a candy store or a married

man in a strip club, the dictum of “you shall not ...” is a necessary condition for the intense release which comes from breaking it.

The release was largest when the act was the most forbidden - in accordance with the bio-moral schema of foods (Fig. 5.), for Viral, this was consuming spicy, red meats. As Ghassem-Fachandi (2012) points out, the symbolism of meat in India is marked by bio-moral ambivalence - on the one hand, it is a source of virile potency, and on the other, it is a source of violent impurity (ibid: 179-180). This duality is captured by Tambs-Lyches’ (1997) study in the Saurashtra region in Gujarat, who poses a schema which contrasts the Vaniya (merchant) and the Rajput (king), where not only the formers’ restrained, mercantile and vegetarian ethos lead to ascetic power, but also the latters’ values of honour and chivalry, garnered through animal sacrifice rituals, leads to a different strand of ritual potency and *shakti* (power).<sup>70</sup> As such, the schema of meats which I have presented in Fig. 4 is largely a view from Vaniya-Jain values, but it no less incorporates it’s dangerous attraction to its opposite, Rajput values of *shakti*, sacrifice, and non-vegetarianism, which it tries to contain under the coating of “impurity”, at least in broad daylight. The fascination for opposite *shakti* arises only in the dark; Viral’s consumption of meat gave him a forbidden bio-moral kick. Yet, as someone who embodies all things Vaniya in terms of habitus, the after-meal comedown was rather stark. After leaving the restaurant, we went out for a long leisurely walk towards *Chowpatti* beach, and had a large dose of *mitha paan*<sup>71</sup> together. We were reminiscent of the fabulous meal, slowly digesting the buzz while chewing and walking away. Yet, Viral was noticeably jittery and conscious of his breath, the traces of his transgression which may linger on - he took the 1-hour walk slowly as if to gradually ready him back to his family and ordinary life.

The beef ban cut into such grey-zone areas of experimentation and deviation; or rather, it consolidated and surfaced certain boundaries which may have been incompatible (Jain and beef), but were nevertheless practiced under the darkness of the night, as absolutely “illegal” and viscerally incommensurable. Naisargi Dave’s

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<sup>70</sup> Dumont’s model of contrasting the Brahmin and the Kshatriya, which subsumes the potency of the latter under the singular scale of purity, has been criticized by the literature on “Rajputaziation”, the achieving of upward mobility through adhering to the warrior and kingship ethos of Rajputs (Banerjee-Dube 2008; Michelutti 2008).

<sup>71</sup> A mouth freshener with herbs and sweets wrapped in betel leaf; usually, *paan* includes tobacco, but *mitha paan* is a desert version that kids can also chew on.

(2011) ethnography on queer politics in contemporary Delhi documents a similar moment, in which the ambiguous and clandestine practices on same-sex love in India came to be dramatically problematized as an issue of whether being “lesbian” was compatible with being “Indian”, following the debates and protests regarding the controversial film *Fire* (1998), which depicted the love relationship between a young woman and her mother-in-law. The women’s wing of the Shiv Sena violently protested that “lesbianism” had no place within the nation, that it was a degenerate culture imported from the West; while activists marched on the streets holding up signs which read “Indian and Lesbian”, to outwardly announce that these two entities were indeed compatible: such an announcement was sensational for “the gap between the two words on the sign, and the gap between the sign’s message and world in which it was embedded. *Indian* and *lesbian* might have been incommensurate terms before this sign was held aloft in 1998, but ... the introduction of their incommensurability through the vehicle of this public-making text is *what enabled that incommensurability to emerge as a problem to be solved or a fate to be sealed*: Something now had to happen” (652, my emphasis). Before the “Fire incident”, same-sex love may have clandestinely existed, like two women holding hands or exchanging letters, under the watchful eye of patriarchal/normative gender norms which was confident that such acts were platonic and could not possibly entail eroticism; yet, after the “Fire incident”, such elusive acts of subversion were given a clear name under daylight, “lesbianism”, and gave rise to suspicions that such clandestine acts could happen right under one’s nose - daughters who spend too much time with her girlfriends, the housewife alone at home with her maid, and so on. Both the Sena activists who opposed, and the lesbian activists who celebrated, “lesbianism”, worked in tandem to give clear contours to a muddled field of association, what Dave calls, after Massumi (2002), an “affective field of immanence”. The catharsis of “Indian and Lesbian” was not of posing a solution, but a problem and a formulation, that the world *could* be brought together and lived in a particular way, a formulation emanating from a field of potentiality.

If the internal logic of anti cattle-slaughter legislature found the death of cattle as incommensurable with its national vision, the “beef ban” made certain lifestyles and trajectories within Mumbai incommensurable with each other, and particular ones as incommensurable with such a vision. The beef ban, by law, defined a particular way of life (eating beef) as illegal, and thus sharply put into the fore “Indian *and*

eating beef” as a problem to be solved. As a result, Viral no longer could get himself to dabble in his transgressionary pleasure - the boundary consolidated by the law was all too strong, the bar set too high for a casual experiment of self-transformation. He retorted to the sheer brightness of the “pure veg” Udipi restaurant. But more problematic than the elimination of shady spaces of night-time experimentation by the luminosity of the law, was the way “beef eating” and “slaughtering of cows” came to be consolidated as a specifically Muslim life trajectory, a construction all the more problematic since this stereotype carried with it the negative bio-moral connotations of bloody slaughter and violent consumption.

In reality, beef is consumed in India by a diverse array of communities. According to the 2011 survey by the National Sample Survey Organization (NSSO), around 80 million people, or 1 in 13 Indians, eat either beef or buffalo.<sup>72</sup> The largest consumers of bovines are Muslims, at 63.4 million, or 40% of the total Muslim population. But comes in second by numbers are Hindus, at 12.5 million, or 2% of the entire population. Most of those Hindus who answered they ate beef are from Scheduled Castes (SC) and Official Backward Castes (OBC), disadvantaged groups from lower castes and *dalits* who are constitutionally protected through affirmative action - one can expect that these figures to be higher if people like Viral, upper castes and orthodox vegetarians, who clandestinely consume meat, would be included in these statistics. In percentiles, Christians rank high too, at around 26.5% of the entire community regularly consuming beef or buff, many of them asserting beef consumption as part of the distinct identity (Staples 2017).

Yet, the threatening masculinity and sexuality of Muslims, caused by their excessive consumption of beef, are extremely common stereotypes expressed throughout India. Viral, after the beef ban, started to assert rather strongly that Muslims were violent because they “always” ate beef, accumulating impure potency within them - his acts of eating beef were legitimized as an occasional detour from his healthy, pure, Jain diet. More visceral versions of such sentiments were common among young Shiv Sena followers in the city, who equated Muslims with violent, dirty, lustful, and over-sexualized outsiders, who intruded the soil of Maharashtra to take their jobs and women away from them (Hansen 1996; 2001). Atreyee Sen

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<sup>72</sup> Kishore, R. (2015 Oct 20). Who are the beef eaters in India? *Live Mint*. Retrieved 28 Sep 2017 from <http://www.livemint.com/Politics/RhPVLUFmclIDWRliSoTC7N/Who-are-the-beef-eaters-in-India.html>

(2007), who did fieldwork among the women's wing of Shiv Sena in Mumbai, note how militant "Sena women" would constantly talk about Muslim mothers breeding violent children through cooking "blood food", most despicably cooking beef, while Hindu mothers raise children with love and ideology.<sup>73</sup> In a different setting, Indian psychoanalyst Sudhir Kakar's (1990) study of spirit possession in North India, who found that 15 out of 28 cases he analysed turned out to be perpetrated by a "malignant Muslim spirit", who tried to "make them eat beef, kill family members and commit other unspeakable acts" (ibid 1990: 136-7), shows the symbolic pertinence of the abominable, carnivorous Muslim, precipitating so deep in the unconscious psyche of this community.

However, taking these assertions and stereotypes as *fact* is problematic, in that it would overlook the intricate politics behind such formulations, and the historical and temporal processes of subjectification by which these sentiments and habitus became naturalized with great regularity. If *jati*, or the bundle of national, class, caste, occupational, genealogical, and gender identity markers asserted in everyday life in India, is "a term that suggests that in the flow of social life there exist hidden, shared, and often inherited essences that are revealed by personal demeanour" (Bear 2007: 287), visceral politics is the process by which these essentialized markers became surfaced and solidified. This is also to historicize and problematize the assertion that *only* Muslims ate beef; as is epitomized by Viral's change in attitude, the "identification of the Muslim meat eater is a form of *practical expiation*, insofar as the figure of the Muslim comes to stand for all those vices that many are incapable of renouncing on the one hand, and that are associated with meat consumption on the other. Muslims are made to stand openly for what many others do anyway more clandestinely, or find various alternative contexts to engage in" (Ghassem-Fachandi 2012: 19-20, emphasis in original). Such practical expiation, which is none other than a re-establishment of the bio-moral schema/rank of purity and respectability by food, consolidates Muslim lifestyles and practices as bio-morally impure, *and* incommensurable with the moral superiority of vegetarianism. In the post-ban phase, the schema undergoes a further solidification of its boundaries between bio-morally acceptable/pure diets and those which are deemed impure, sanctioned by the authority and the technology of purity of the law, and with it, interpellating the related

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<sup>73</sup> Personal communication.

subjectivities of pure-veg Jain/Hindu, against the impure, illegal, carnivorous Muslim (Fig. 6.).

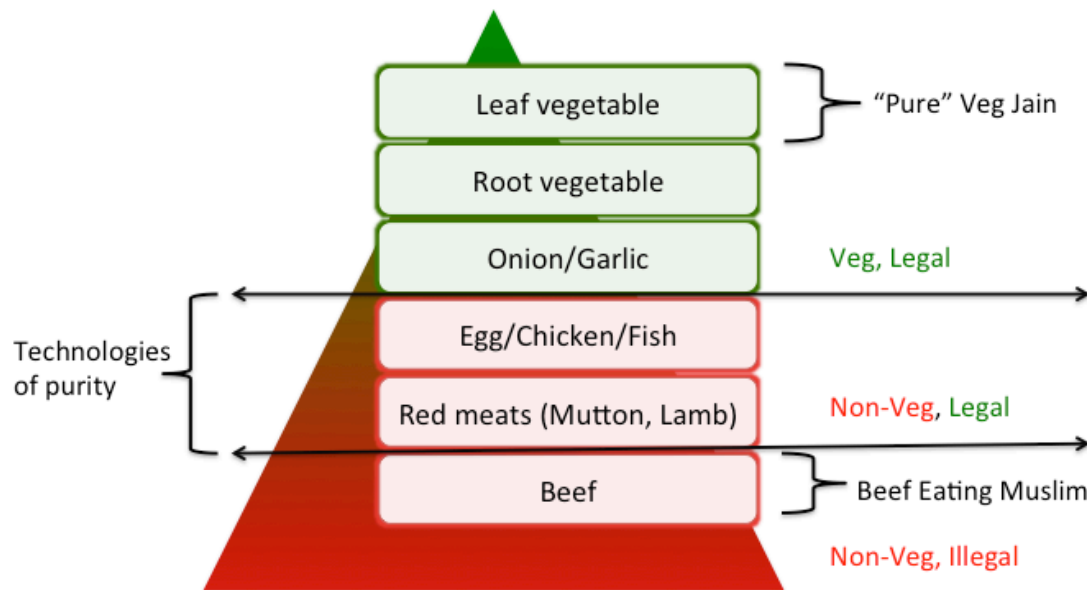


Figure 6 - Post-beef ban boundary making and interpellation of subjects.

Ghassem-Fachandi (2012), in his ethnography on the politics of militant vegetarianism during the anti-Muslim Gujarat pogroms in 2002, notes how traditionally arms-bearing “warrior” communities such as Rajputs and Adivasis in the state, and those associated with “impure” professions and food practices such as Dalits, have come to strive to emulate the *savarna* (forward castes/upper classes), Hindu Vaishnavs, Jains, and Patels, who link their economic successes through vegetarian purity; and in turn, the “symbolic space they [traditionally lower castes] have vacated came to be signified by Muslims” (ibid: 181). Amidst such a context, the historical moment of the pogroms in 2002 and the predominant “slaughter discourse” that fuelled it, was perpetuated through an intensification of gossip, clichéd jokes, and dismissive stereotypes about Muslims and their inherently violent nature, connecting them to cattle slaughter and bloody consumption. On the one hand, Hindus and Jains became increasingly critical of their Muslim counterparts for these connotations; while on the other, young Muslim men started to assert their association with meat as a source of positive, masculine identity making, often through subversive word plays, such as openly maintaining that *Bakrid* is actually the sacrifice of cows, after the Arabic *Baqr*, or cow, as opposed to the much more common practice of sacrificing goats, or the Hindi *Bakri* - to be a “real” Muslim came to be equated with the daredevil practice, or at least public assertion, to sacrifice and consume the forbidden



cow, or *gau-mata*, the mother of all Hindus (ibid: 140-42). Thus, in pogrom stricken Gujarat, while the vegetarian ethos propagated by Vaishnavite Hindus and Jains “practically expiated” Muslims as impure beef eaters, also its inversion, of positive identity and masculine virility, were attested by Muslims themselves by means of subversive discourse, doubly locking in the incommensurable yet complimentary relationship between the two groups and lifestyles.

In the case of the Mumbai beef ban, the role of the law and the mediascape were instrumental for such double-way consolidations. As I outlined in Chapter I, since the time of the late 19<sup>th</sup> century cow protection movements, colonial legislature regarding cattle slaughter has consolidated practices such as slaughtering cattle on the occasion of *Bakrid* as specifically Muslim, in its aim to codify and map religion and custom, which led to increased assertions and identification by Muslim communities in the public arena of this link, making it the prime site of Hindu-Muslim agitation (van der Veer 1994: 91-105). In the case of post-Independence anti cattle-slaughter legislature, Muslim butcher petitioners, in asserting their right to profession and religion, consolidated these links, yet to no avail, since the Supreme Court in the 2005 Gujarat case pitted the *necessary* Hindu bull worship against the *optional* Muslim *Bakrid* cow slaughter, a worst case scenario for the Muslim petitioners who’s religiosity became undoubtedly equated with the (negative) practice of cattle slaughter, yet were not granted any form of minority rights, leaving space for these communities and their practices to be marginalized in a Hindu majority field.

The mediascape, which reported on the beef ban in sensationalist headings, further consolidated these links. Many major national and international papers ran analysis focusing on how the ban was motivated by the Hindutva BJP-Sena led government, to encroach on the largely Muslim dominated meat processing industry in a country where 80% identify as Hindus, who deem the cow sacred.<sup>74</sup> Although these observations were not incorrect - the group of people who were immediately and directly hit by the ban were indeed the majorly Muslim butchers and traders from the Qureishi community<sup>75</sup> - there was only passing mention of the fact that non-

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<sup>74</sup>(2015 Mar 03). India's Maharashtra state bans beef. *BBC*. Retrieved 28 Sep 2017 from <http://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-india-31712369>

<sup>75</sup> Butchers dealing with buffalo meat, which was still legal, also were affected by dropped sales due to increased prices, for the lack of similar alternatives circulating in the market. Muslim restaurants, who altogether stopped serving beef, also lived in fear of reduced revenues and unsubstantiated accusation, stemming from a confusion between illegal beef and

Muslims, including Hindus themselves, ate beef commonly in many states throughout India<sup>76</sup>, and, more problematically, took cow worship as a traditional and stable stereotype existing *before* the ban, thus a cause to motivate the legislature. This was not only a matter of insufficient information being presented; rather, such media coverage helped create the world it was describing - a polarized world between cow protecting Hindus and cow slaughtering Muslims. In this chapter, I have demonstrated how sentiments of cattle protection and disgust towards meat become consolidated amidst the temporal discourse of legislature - the cow loving Hindu and cow slaughtering Muslim are simultaneously interpellated through this process, and not stable representations existing before the emergence of such discourse. What was most visibly problematic with these media reports was the consolidation of these two subjectivities, with the scale of majority and minority. Viral's comments in the Udipi restaurant not only signalled a movement from transgressionary pleasure to stereotyped disgust, but also marked a re-entrance into a different type of pleasure, a *pleasure of identifying with a majority*. The mediascape which incessantly projected the beef ban as a battle between majority non-beef eating Hindus and minority beef eating Muslims, set up a field for all those disparate people in the former dietary regime to come together and identify as a unified majority, while readying the practical expiation of the latter minority; a process which follows the same logic as the law, which compared the former to be with the interest of the nation, and the latter as an obstacle for such national unification and purification (Appadurai 2006).

The visceral ripples of the beef ban brought to the fore various changes in attitudes among my informants, who all grappled with the ethos of cosmopolitanism. While Viral's transformation most spectacularly showed how assertions of purity through a vegetarian ethos, as well as disgust towards meat, were not at all stable representations and became consolidated through visceral politics, he himself openly taking side with the former while striving to ambiguously hide his past transgressions,

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legal buff - a restaurateur in the Muslim neighbourhood of Mahim sighed that "people were unsure about the exact extent of the ban, and thus did not want to take any chances."

<sup>76</sup> During the course of the beef ban row, some articles made this point, but were largely outnumbered by articles which emphasized the Hindu-Muslim agitation angle. When it was made, there was reference to Brahmanical casteism, and how anti-cattle slaughter ideologies were central to caste hierarchy, à la Ambedkar's (1990 [1948]) insights.

Sebastian, M. (2015 Mar 04). 'Maharashtra's beef ban is not merely communal, it is theocratic': Kancha Ilaiah *DNA India*. Retrieved 28 Sep 2017 from <http://www.dnaindia.com/india/interview-maharashtra-s-beef-ban-is-not-merely-communal-it-is-theocratic-kancha-ilaiah-2066223>

his contemporaries went through other types of ambiguous oscillations between pleasure and disgust. The imposition of incommensurable subjects based on different bio-moral trajectories were commonplace, and were certainly more talked about during the beef ban. The sentiments of Mr Parekh, a vegetarian Jain manager who worked in the Mumbai office of an American real estate firm employing a diverse array of people from all over India, were characterized by a mixture of intimacy and separation with the Other, a distinction which mapped onto the spaces of the semi-public sphere of his workplace, and the domestic sphere of his home. Unlike Viral, he did not come out openly criticizing others for their non-vegetarianisms - he strongly maintained that his Muslim peers were extremely talented, and judging his colleagues on the basis of their diets was absurd. Yet, he was rather clear on certain ways of coming in terms with them: "See, I have absolutely no problem with Muslims. But we are just colleagues. For example, I won't be comfortable if I was invited to his home for *Eid* [Muslim sacrificial feast] - I wouldn't be able to eat any of his food! Likewise, he would probably feel awkward if he had to fast together with me during *Paryushan* [Jain fasting period]. He is not used to such things." To my follow up question, of whether he would allow his children to marry a foreigner, or a Muslim, he replied with a dry laugh: "Foreigners, maybe, but Muslims, can't imagine. We live different lives." Here, food and marriage were erected as the visceral strongholds determining the permissible ways in which you can mingle and experiment.<sup>77</sup> It is not that a Jain and a Muslim cannot come in terms with each other - indeed, they do in many spheres of life, such as the workplace or the train compartment - but the reason they don't converge in the home, or the canteen, spaces of gustatory associations, is because it is construed that the Jain stomach and a Muslim stomach never converge since they digest different things. This state of incommensurability is strengthened by virtue of being implicated in the intimate scale of the gut.

Talking to one of his Muslim colleagues, Mr Sheikh, surfaced a more anxious reaction to the beef ban compared to Mr Parekh's nonchalant dismissal of any possibilities for the two communities to conjoin beyond the workplace, not because he wanted to be friends with his vegetarian colleagues, but because he felt ashamed and

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<sup>77</sup> The rising and anxiety over "Love jihad", of Muslim men supposedly seducing Hindu girls to convert, and the emergence of "anti-Romeo squads", vigilantes who patrol the streets to punish such acts, also construct the excessive sexuality of Muslims with the potency of virile "meat".

threatened that his professional career may be jeopardized by the controversial attention his communities' eating habits were receiving as of late. Mr Sheikh, who identified as a "meatarian", signifying his love for all things meat, nevertheless emphasized that he never touched beef, and, moreover, ate meat only on special occasions such as *Eid* and weddings, and regularly, would eat "more or less the same food as vegetarians." He explained that this was because he was getting old - he was 36 - and his physiology did not allow him to digest heavy foods all the time, and, "vegetarian food was lighter and healthier". These comments were made in front of Mr Parkekh, his senior in the department who was 52 years of age, who was visibly pleased at these words. Rather serendipitously, I bumped into Mr Sheikh later that weekend in a butcher in Bandra where we both lived, who gave me an awkward look, a mixture of confusion and shame. He was buying goat brains (*bheja*). That look confirmed to me that I caught him at a bad time, and I quickly went on to explain that I was sent to the butcher by my Christian landlord to buy pieces of mutton leg, which we both loved. Amidst the red wall of hanging pieces of meat and the punishing smell of carcass amplified by the April heat, he said he was worried that I would mention this "incident" at the office, which would cause unwanted friction. I reassured him that this will certainly not happen on my account, and he hurriedly left with his weekend treat, making me feel the visceral repercussions of the ban, such that a perfectly sanctioned food habit had to be handled with care for possible negative connotations in the not-so cosmopolitan space of his office, surveilled by the watchful eye of vegetarianisms.

As I will explore in Chapter VII, these semi-public spaces of mingling were characterized by the tension between embracing, and viscerally repulsing, the Other - clear-cut distinctions between public/private life would become challenged during office lunchtime, where the "domestic", embodied by the *tiffin*, were brought together for intimate sharing and digestion. The contradictions between aspirations for mingling, and the bio-moral impossibility in doing so, were most clearly attested to by the numerous vegetarian Hindus and Jains who were vehemently against the beef ban, but could not help but feel disgusted by the people who were disadvantaged by it. Mr Iyer, 45, Viral's superior, despite being a "pure vegetarian" Hindu Brahmin, was extremely critical of the ban for being an "infringement on human rights", a "moral fascism", a position truthful to his ideals of an open minded Mumbaikar - yet, after several commutes together, he confessed to me that every morning, when he goes to

Mahim station to catch the morning train to work, he has to walk past the numerous Muslim kebab shops and butchers filling the streets with its piercing odour, covering his mouth and nose with his handkerchief as he walks past the small alleyways of densely packed visceral alterity. This smell differs from the usual hovering city smog, for it is imprinted with a symbolic stigma associated with a particular community, much like how Hankins (2013) describes the case with the Japanese *burakumin*, historically marginalized occupational groups comparable to dalits, who's impurity and marginality are socio-physically identified and reproduced by their "disgust" inducing odour.<sup>78</sup> Mr Iyer bitterly told me as we approached the jam-packed platform: "I really won't understand how they [the butchers] take that smell everyday. It is poison for the body." At that moment, compassion for the Other is overwhelmed by the sensation of visceral disgust coming from within. For Mr Iyer, the beef ban infringes more on the *idea* of free choice, rather than an embracing of such lived difference.

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<sup>78</sup> I explore how social distinction become sensorily crystalized within the office canteen, especially through boundary breaking "smell", in Chapter VII.

#### 4. The “Mumbai meat ban”, or the visceral politics of purifying the city

6 months after the beef ban row, in the first week of September 2015, there was yet another public outrage, as Mumbai roared over a new sensational headline: the “Mumbai meat ban”. Major newspapers reported a “ban” on the slaughter of animals and sale of buffalo, mutton, chicken, and pork in the city for a period of 4 days, in accordance with the Jain festival of *Paryushan*, where orthodox Jains intensively fast over an 8 day period - this would restrict slaughterhouses and butchers to operate on select days during the festival. People reacted on Twitter with humour and anger, both #meatban and #bantheban going viral.<sup>79</sup> The name “meat ban” was a media phenomenon which followed up on the “beef ban” in March, but except for the name, the two “bans” had little in common. At that point, the meat ban had not been made into legislature; it was a government circular issued on the 1<sup>st</sup> of September, which ordered the Brihanmumbai Municipal Corporation (BMC), the municipal civic body which governs the city of Mumbai, to shut Deonar abattoir and meat shops selling meat except for fish and eggs on four specific days - September 10, 13, 17 and 18 - *Paryushan* in 2015 fell between the 10<sup>th</sup> and 18<sup>th</sup>. Moreover, the Mira-Bhayander Municipal Corporation, in the outskirts of the city centre, issued a circular saying that shops and butchers will be shut for the full eight days of *Paryushan*. In Mumbai, these dates were supposedly decided on the basis of three past such circulars, one in 1964, 1994, and 2004, all of which list a two-day ban on specific auspicious days for Jains and Hindus: the 1964 and 1994 circulars ordered closure of slaughterhouses on the first day of *Bhadrapad* (in the Hindu calendar) and the day of *Samvatsari* (the last day of *Paryushan*, especially for the *Swetambara* sect of Jains).<sup>80</sup> In 2015, these two days fell on September 13 and 18. In turn, the 2004 circular ordered bans for the 12<sup>th</sup> day of *Shravan* (an auspicious month in Hindu calendars), and the fourth day of *Bhadrapad*, days which correspond to September 10<sup>th</sup> and 17<sup>th</sup>. The 2015 circular combined these past resolutions to extend, as it were, a two-day ban to a four-day ban.

Despite the heightened public debate, none of my informants, both vegetarians and meat eaters, knew that such a two-day ban existed in the city in the first place. This partly meant that the ban was not fully enforced on the ground, as regular meat

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<sup>79</sup> (2015 Sep 15). Outrage after Mumbai meat ban. *BBC*. Retrieved 28 Sep 2017 from <http://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-india-34206688>

<sup>80</sup> *Paryushan* is typically celebrated between September 18 and September 27 by the Digambar sect, one week after the *Swetambara* sect.

eaters never noticed it; it also was the case that the Deonar abattoir, the single largest source of mutton, buffalo, and, prior to March 2015, beef in the city, did observe these circulars, but purchasers did not notice since they bought their meats from their local vendors, who were supplied by Deonar, but always had extra stock stored. The abattoir has a total of 18 public holidays, of which 4 fall within the *Paryushan* period, closing its operations entirely; the small scale butchers and meat vendors adjusted accordingly by stocking up and freeze storing extra batches of meat so that regular customers were not inconvenienced.<sup>81</sup> The discrepancy between everyday perception and sudden public hype seemed largely to do with the specific timing in which the incident emerged, that is, in the atmosphere of “beef ban”, and it can be said that the controversy was largely kicked off by media reports which coined the term “meat ban” after it, the first ones appearing on the 7<sup>th</sup> of September, one week after the circular was passed onto the BMC.<sup>82</sup>

While the cause of the public interest could be traced to a few news articles, its development and resolution was nothing short of the viscerally political, resulting in various new layers of communal and electoral politics emerging over the issue of vegetarianism and meat. First, it came to the fore that the original motion for the meat ban was set forth by the Ahimsa Sangh Vishwamaitri Trust, a Mumbai based Jain trust, which demanded that their “religious sentiments” be respected by other communities.<sup>83</sup> These comments were informed by the 2008 *Hinsa Virodhak Sangh vs. Mirzapur Moti Kuresh Jamat & Ors* case in Gujarat, whereby the Supreme court favoured the former, Ahmedabad-based Jain trust’s demands that slaughterhouses be closed during *Paryushan*, on the grounds of protecting their religious sentiments. While the court agreed with the petitioners, the Muslim butcher interest groups, that

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<sup>81</sup> Johari A. (2015 Sep 12). Meat ban irony: How a Congress-imposed order was cut to size during BJP rule. *Scroll India*. Retrieved 28 Sep 2017 from <https://scroll.in/article/755111/meat-ban-irony-how-a-congress-imposed-order-was-cut-to-size-during-bjp-rule>

<sup>82</sup> Looking up the word “meat ban” in Google trends reveals that the search was non-existent prior to the first week of September 2015. Data Retrieved 28 Sep 2017 from <https://trends.google.com/trends/explore?date=today%205-y&q=meat%20ban>

<sup>83</sup> “Jainism is based on the principle of non-violence. There are not only a lot of Jains in Mumbai but a lot of Jain monks will also be visiting the city during the period...we request you to co-operate during the rituals,” the letter [by the trust] states.

(2015 Sep 08). ‘Sale of meat in civic markets banned, slaughterhouse to remain shut for four days’.

*Indian Express*. Retrieved 28 Sep 2017 from <http://indianexpress.com/article/cities/mumbai/sale-of-meat-in-civic-markets-banned-slaughterhouse-to-remain-shut-for-four-days/>

such closure may be harmful for their businesses, these were not for a “considerable period of time,” and as such was not an unreasonable restriction, especially when it is in “the public interest objective to preserve mutual respect and tolerance between India’s diverse communities.”<sup>84</sup> In Mumbai, the Bombay Mutton Dealer’s Association, a group representing the interests of the largely Muslim butcher and meat vendors operating in the city, filed a petition against the Maharashtra government and the BMC, challenging the ban as an infringement on their right to profession, and that it goes against the “secular fabric of the constitution”. The motion was taken up to the High Court, where the court scathingly struck down the extended 4-day ban as “unconstitutional”. The court maintained that “Mumbai city is cosmopolitan and multi-faceted, where there is no sizeable amount of population from one sect. In a city like Mumbai, there cannot be such bans.” They also questioned the rationale behind allowing the sale of fish, seafood, and eggs, asking why these were excluded from “slaughter”<sup>85</sup>; the seemingly random nature of how the days for the ban were chosen was also put to scrutiny. Having heard the verdict, the BMC told the court it will withdraw the ban, with N V Walawalkar, Senior council of BMC, saying that “Keeping public interest and the sentiments of Mumbaikars, in mind it has been decided to withdraw the circular.”<sup>86</sup>

Two things emerge from this legal dialogue: the enactment of Mumbai’s cosmopolitanism as a way to resolve the issue of communal compassion; and the distinct temporality and imaginary of bio-moral purity that is enacted through the claims of Jains that slaughter should be abstained during *Paryushan*. What many Mumbaikars uncomfortably felt during the beef ban row, that the city’s cosmopolitanism was being encroached on, was directly taken up by the court with the same vigour, and with more success. The significant difference with the beef ban was that in the case of the MAPA bill, what was pitted against the Muslim right to profession and religion was the entire *nation*, and not a particular community

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<sup>84</sup> Goitom, H. (2015 Nov 10). "FALQs: Beef Bans in India". Retrieved 2 Dec 2017 from <https://blogs.loc.gov/law/2015/11/falqs-beef-bans-in-india/>

<sup>85</sup> “To this, Advocate General [for the Maharashtra government] Anil Singh said, “fish dies the moment it is taken out of water. Hence, there is no death due to slaughter.”” (2015 Sep 11). Fish dies when out of water, no death due to slaughter: Govt. *India Today*. Retrieved 28 Sep 2017 from <http://indiatoday.intoday.in/story/fish-dies-when-out-of-water-no-death-due-to-slaughter-govt/1/471558.html>

<sup>86</sup> (2015 Sep 11). Mumbai civic body withdraws meat sale ban order. *The Hindu* (italics). Retrieved 2 Dec 2017 from <http://www.thehindu.com/news/cities/mumbai/mumbai-civic-body-withdraws-ban-on-slaughter-and-sale-of-meat/article7642180.ece>



(Hindus); in the case of the meat ban, the issue was understood to be largely between two communities, Jains and Muslims, two categories of comparable scale. The Jains are an affluent, but minority community in Mumbai, comprising about 4% of the entire population, against 20% of the Muslims. The court, and many of my informants, enacted the larger scale of the *city* to resolve the tension between the two communities. Such politics of scale was also utilized during the 2008 Gujarat bill - the only difference was which community was pushed to make a small sacrifice to live in harmony with his peers. The Supreme court in Gujarat 2008 favoured the Jains, and ordered the Muslim butchers to give up their jobs for (only) 4 days; the High court in Mumbai 2015 favoured the Muslims, and the “cosmopolitanism of the city”, saying that “What is the idea of having the ban on some days and allowing slaughter and sale of meat on other days? Is it that there is no sentiment on one day and the next day you are filled with sentiment?”<sup>87</sup> In both cases, the short time frame of the ban informed the verdict, rendering the issue as much less severe than the totalizing and eternal decree of the beef ban.

To compare the blanket beef ban and the temporary meat ban is to look at how technologies of purity operate in different temporal regimes. If the beef ban bill enacted a vision for a bovine nation, the claims onto the world that the meat ban brought to the fore were much more fragmented - and in its fragmentation, between the spaces of such multiple publics, communal anxieties and populist politics played out. The substance of the pro meat ban argument stems from the idea that not only should one abstain from slaughter, but a demand that, ideally, *the entire world* should abstain from it too - a simultaneous attempt to purify the city, alongside purifying ones own body, or rather, an establishment of a visceral link between body and city (Alter 2000; Ecks 2003). Dinesh Jain, a Bharatiya Janata Party corporator from Mira-Bhayander district, who was instrumental in forming the meat ban circular, summarizes: “This ban is not about eating non-vegetarian food. If you don't get meat in Mira-Bhayander, it doesn't mean you will not step out of the area to eat. Here there are over 200 Jain mandirs and you have chicken and mutton hanging in shops. Sadhus and sants cross these shops. Paryushan is our biggest fasting period. They do tapasaya (live in austerity) and therefore feel no life should taken. We don't want to hurt

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<sup>87</sup> (2015 Sep 11). High Court Forces Mumbai Civic Body to Eat Cow, Withdraw Meat Ban Circular. *The Wire*. Retrieved 28 Sep 2017 from <https://thewire.in/10566/high-court-forces-mumbai-civic-body-to-eat-cow-withdraw-meat-ban-circular/>

sentiments. With folded hands, I request everyone to support our sentiments.”<sup>88</sup> In these comments, one acknowledges that the Jain “sentiments” enacted here spatio-temporarily extend into the *public* sphere - it is not enough to close down a butcher next to where you live, but it is the visceral imaginary that there are unseen, unknown butchers lurking in the city, shedding blood on the city’s soil, which defiles and must be dealt with. The self-imposed limitation of Mira-Bhayander district tells more about the extent of his political influence, and does not undermine his aspirations to alleviate the entirety of Mumbai from the sin of slaughter.

The dismissive reaction towards such a position is none other than the disjuncture between different claims that are made unto the spatio-temporal milieu of the bio-moral purity of Mumbai. For those who live by the cosmopolitan ethos of Mumbai, the anti-slaughter purifying imaginary was nothing short of an absurd claim set forth by a minority who is trying to claim the entire city for themselves - even avid Jain vegetarian Viral dismissed the series of events as a “waste of time”, “politics for politicians” - their “public” was too partial to garner wider sympathy. While slaughtering cows and eating beef were successfully marginalized, Muslims scapegoated as the sole proprietors of these acts, the practice of “eating of meat in general” contained far too many categories of citizens to make the ban widely acceptable - including Hindu Marathas who claim nativity to Mumbai - even if it did exclude the extremely popular fish from its restrictions. Such claims on the public sphere on the basis of food have a distinct context, where, over the past decade or so, vegetarianism has become a major force in rewriting and redefining cityscapes and urban citizenship in Mumbai. It is commonplace to be denied tenancy in housing societies and flats on the basis of ones’ diet - meat eating not only indexes the danger of discomforting ones’ vegetarian neighbours through the potential leakage of smell from cooking meat, but also indexes undesirable personal qualities in the tenant himself. As such, all those smoking, drinking, and meat eating bachelors - all things opposed to a settled, respectable householder - have a rather difficult time upholding their social credibility. Certain affluent areas such as Marine Drive, where many wealthy vegetarian Jain and Marwari businessmen reside, are de facto “vegetarian zones”, with the first “pure veg” outlets of Pizza hut and Starbucks (serving egg free

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<sup>88</sup> (2015 Sep 08). The man who inspired the meat ban in Mumbai. *Rediff*. Retrieved 28 Sep 2017 from <http://www.rediff.com/news/interview/the-man-who-inspired-the-meat-ban-in-mumbai/20150908.htm>

cakes) opening in this area. From the level of planning, developers have reserved certain apartment blocks as completely vegetarian, in the hope to attract purity conscious and rich vegetarians as tenants. Although these exclusionary politics are still confined to relatively wealthy areas, recent research has shown that such tendencies to enforce vegetarian lifestyles are increasingly seen in chawls, or lower-middle class tenements (Holwitt 2017). Violence is becoming more visible, as shown by several incidents in 2015, where Maharashtran families were heavily harassed for (allegedly) cooking non-vegetarian food in heavily vegetarian Gujarati and Marwari societies: “about 50 residents, mainly non-Maharashtrians, threw eggs at their flat door, kicked it and threatened the family. Some of the residents slapped his 12-year-old son in front of cops who had been called in”.<sup>89</sup> Using food to protest against unwanted food habits is a prime example of gastropolitics in action (Appadurai 1981).

Amidst these contexts and incidents, the most notable reaction to the “pure veg” Jain claim on the urban public came from the Shiv Sena, who’s followers are largely carnivorous, working class Hindu Marathas, playing into their anxiety of losing ground to these “outsiders”. Raj Thackeray, chief of their sister party Maharashtra Navnirman Sena (MNS), said bitterly: “Jain Mandirs [temples] are being deliberately constructed in housing societies, to disallow other communities from buying properties there. This is a way of creating a vote bank and a conspiracy to reduce the Marathi-speaking population”. The fiery Sena editorial *Samaana* cried out: “Until now, only fanatic Muslims used to bully people in the name of religion. If the Jains too are going on the path of Muslims, then God save them. During the 1992-93 Mumbai riots, Marathi’s had protected Jains, who were saved because violence had been answered by violence. At that time too ‘Paryushan’ was on. But Jains were at the forefront of supporting violence then. ... Jains will not decide what we should do in Maharashtra. They want to build Jain colonies. They don’t even allow vegetarian Maharashtrians in these buildings.”<sup>90</sup>

These comments gain gravitas in the context of an on-going cultural and electoral contestation between the Shiv Sena, and those communities which are

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<sup>89</sup> Mishal, A., and Narayan, V. (2015 Jul 18). *Times of India*. Retrieved 28 Sep 2017 from <http://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/city/mumbai/Marathi-family-attacked-for-cooking-non-veg-society-refutes-charge/articleshow/48118480.cms>

<sup>90</sup> Bhalerao, S., and Yerunkar, C. (2015 Sep 13). Meat ban in Mumbai: BJP chickens out, settles for two-day ban. *Hindustan Times*. Retrieved 28 Sep 2017 from <http://www.hindustantimes.com/mumbai/meat-ban-in-mumbai-bjp-chickens-out-settles-for-two-day-ban/story-qkHmynCziWfd2fV5QxtSBK.html>

considered “outsiders” by the party - while Chapter I and this Chapter has explored how the beef eating Muslim stood for the ultimate visceral Other for Hindus, the meat ban incident reintroduced vegetarian Jains and Marwari’s, who trace their lineages to Gujarat, as also irrevocably Other to meat eating “manoos” (“people” in Marathi language - colloquially, those native to Maharashtra and who speak Marathi as their first language). Between 1843 to 1936, current Maharashtra and Gujarat, as well as Konkan, Desh, Kandesh, northwest Karnataka, and parts of Sindh province in Pakistan, were jointly ruled as the Bombay presidency under British India; running up to 1960, when the linguistic states of Maharashtra and Gujarat were to be formed, there were major contestations between the two states as to how to divide the land, and importantly, which state would incorporate Bombay and its riches under its wing - these culminated in violent protests at Flora fountain in 1950, killing over 100 people. For the Shiv Sena, before Muslims and other “outsiders” were the Gujarati’s, their troublesome, affluent neighbours, who “were allegedly grabbing all the white-collar jobs which, Thackeray believed, should have gone to Maharashtrians, thus reducing them to peons, clerks and labourers in various mills and manufacturing houses across Bombay. Most of these private employers were Gujarati’s but their relative wealth and the exploitation of a largely immigrant Marathi-speaking labour force from the rural districts was not the only reason why the Shiv Sena hated the Gujarati’s and continues to do so even 50 years after its formation.”<sup>91</sup>

In contemporary Mumbai, these resentments have been complexly reintroduced through the nuances of electoral and visceral politics. While Mumbai was to be ruled by the BJP-Shiv Sena alliance following the assembly elections in 2014, the former counting Gujarati’s, Marwari’s, and Jains as their “vote bank” - bloc of voters from single communities - in March 2015, the Shiv Sena caused an agitation regarding the displacement of residents in the majorly Maharashtran Girgaum area, due to the construction of the Metro Railways, who spectacularly equated the eviction of their people with the threat of intrusion by outsiders, such as Gujarati’s, despite the Shiv Sena themselves promising its swift construction. Not only were Maharashtran residents threatened, but also, as local MNS leader Arvind Gawde stated, the “commercial structures here include authentic Maharashtran non-

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<sup>91</sup> Anandan, S. (2014 May 07). Pet hate: why Gujaratis are on Shiv Sena's radar again. *Hindustan Times*. Retrieved 28 Sep 2017 from <http://www.hindustantimes.com/columns/pet-hate-why-gujaratis-are-on-shiv-sena-s-radar-again/story-qGsRUWx1WRa7OtvzTdI3YP.html>

vegetarian restaurants and it also houses the Chira Bazar fish market. This area will slowly go to the vegetarian lobby which will never want any outlet serving non-vegetarian food or a fish or meat market to come up in the area again. This has been happening across the city. Non-vegetarian restaurants and markets have been done away with in areas dominated by Gujarati's, Marwari's and Jains."<sup>92</sup> The term "vegetarian lobby", here denoting the (majorly vegetarian) Gujarati vote bank for BJP, is a suggestive neologism which combines concerns over electoral politics, as well as a visceral rhetoric which feeds into the anxiety of loss of land to outsiders, and by bio-moral association, the loss of Marathi masculinity and power.

The ingeniousness of such rhetoric owed to the Shiv Sena and the MNS freely traversing among the different scales of city, community, home, and gut - playing with the scales of various "parallel publics" (Dewey 2009). Uddav Thackeray, chief of Shiv Sena party, made it clear that "people of all faiths — Hindus, Muslims, Christians and Jains — must observe their religion within the limits of their homes. Nobody must enforce their religious tenets on the people of other faiths and keep it to the confines of their respective homes." Introducing the domestic in order to critique the Jains' claims unto the urban public may be considered flaccid, given Sena's notoriety of their spectacular and violent displays of religiosity in the urban public sphere (Hansen 2001). Yet, such rhetoric is effective precisely because it has the versatility to go from the home to the city, and back again, penetrating the visceral interior of their followers: Thackeray continues on that the Jains are "entering our kitchen", telling "our women what to cook and children what to eat". Such visceral politics, which intimately creates an (imagined) violation of one's sacred domestic, seeks to topple the Jain claim on the urban public not by clashing head on, contesting it with their own claims on the city, but by dislocating it through entering the intimate scale of the interior - food, by virtue of embodying both public-communal and personal qualities, prove to be a potent political tool for such scalar movements. In the end, these anxieties of intimate intrusion *were* publicly sublimated through spectacular "meat festival" protests in front of a Jain Mandir, by cooking and selling meat, and openly slaughtering chickens, to much dismay for Jain monks and temple

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<sup>92</sup> Singh, D. (2015 Mar 19). Marathi vs Gujarati debate heats up as people take to streets in Girgaum bandh. *Indian Express*. Retrieved 28 Sep 2017 from <http://indianexpress.com/article/cities/mumbai/marathi-vs-gujarati-debate-heats-up-as-people-take-to-streets-in-girgaum-bandh/>

goers in the area.<sup>93</sup> Here, the piercing sight and smell of meat not only crystalized Maratha virility, but viscerally kept in check vegetarian communities and zones, displacing (what is imagined to be) their unwarranted claims unto Mumbai. The “meat ban” shows how, what was an agitation between Jains and Muslims, over spatio-temporal claims on the purity and scope of the city, were taken up by the Shiv Sena and its sister Maratha-centric parties for achieving their ends of viscerally recapturing communal identity and party masculinity.

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<sup>93</sup>(2015 Sep 11). Mumbai meat ban: Defiant Shiv Sena, MNS sell meat on streets. *Indian Express*. Retrieved 28 Sep 2017 from <http://indianexpress.com/article/india/maharashtra/meat-ban-defiant-shiv-sena-mns-sell-meat-on-mumbai-streets/>

## **Chapter IV: The visceral politics of *ghar-ka-khana* (homemade food) in urban Mumbai**

This chapter will continue to explore how vital boundaries are consolidated through the visceral politics of food in contemporary Mumbai, by looking at a pertinent boundary that operates within India, a schema which stands in between the self and Other, which I explored in Chapter I: *ghar*, or home, and *bahar*, the outside world. Taking food as an immediate example, for the contemporary Hindi speaker, the word “*ghar-ka-khana*”, or homemade food, evokes many emotions, indexing particular ideas about health, hygiene, purity, comfort, familiarity, nostalgia, motherhood, and identity, which its English translation, homemade food, doesn't fully convey. The importance of *ghar-ka-khana* was undisputed by my middle and lower-middle class housewife and commuter informants, as the most trustworthy, pure, and healthy food one can eat in Mumbai. There was a simple but sound formulation to back this claim up: Mumbai (India) is diverse; everyone has their own dietary requirements, informed by religion, region, community, caste, medical condition, and personal taste; eating according to these proscriptions ensured mental and physical health for the individual; home food, by virtue of being cooked by someone of the same background, is the safest way to source this community-body specific substance. As I alluded in Chapter I, given the complex dietary regimes which people go in and out of everyday, week, month, and season, *ghar-ka-khana* addressed these individual vicissitudes with much more versatility and trustworthiness than commercial foods designed for the general public.

While the association of the domestic hearth with comforting subsistence may well be a universal of cultures around the world, and the connection between home cooked food, commensality, and the production of personhood and community have been widely explored in ethnographic works of other regions (Adapon 2008; Carsten 1997; Counihan 2009; Valentine 1999), the Indian context is unique in two regards. First, as I explored in Chapter I, India has a long history whereby the distinction between *ghar* and *bahar* has worked as a schema in which its world of porous substance and individual selves come to be dealt with by setting up vital boundaries, what I call “technologies of purity”. The contemporary fascination and positive value of *ghar-ka-khana* is a manifestation of this particular form of boundary making in

action, an intervention to secure a sacred and knowable interior amidst the chaos of the outside world. This dangerous exterior is where *bahar-ka-khana*, literally “outside food”, is found, which indexes the opposite qualities of unhealthy, dirty, dangerous, spicy and oily, indulgence, and novelty eating - a mix of anxiety, fear, and fascination with the unsanctioned and the unknown, a mode of visceral transgression itself (Ecks 2003; Ghassem-Fachandi 2012).

Yet, and interconnected to this is the second point, the boundaries between ghar and bahar are itself temporal and porous, and the two realms have constantly been contested and politicized, owing to the temporary nature of the technology of purity in purifying the domestic from outside influences (Banerji 2000; Bear 2007; Chatterjee 1993; Dickey 2000; Kaviraj 1997). In contemporary India, the conflation of ghar and bahar can be seen by not only the emergence of a public dining culture in urban cities (Appadurai and Breckenridge 1995; Conlon 1995; Dewey 2012; Liechty 2003), which became aggravated within the historical epoch of post-economic liberalization since 1991, where a multitude of “foreign” goods and foods proliferated and entered the domestic home, reconfiguring the conventional associations between ghar-ka-khana and comfort (Caplan 2008; Donner 2008; Ecks 2003; Janeja 2010). It also meant that ghar-ka-khana proliferated in various media *outside* the domestic sphere, within cookbooks and cooking shows, advertisements for cooking ingredients, utensils, and packaged foods, and forms of marketing such as menus and styles adopted by restaurants and catering services (Appadurai 1988; Srinivas 2007). Here, ghar-ka-khana becomes a discursive substance whereby domestic intimacy and comfort become commoditized within the urban public. This chapter will examine the various interventions that Mumbaikars engage with in post-liberalization Mumbai to maintain the vital boundaries between self and Other, and of identity, health, and wellbeing through the contested rubric of ghar and bahar.

### **1. *Ghar-ka-khana* (home food) and *bahar-ka-khana* (outside food) in contemporary Mumbai**

The Angal family is a loyal fan of ghar-ka-khana. Being a Deshastha Brahmin, a prominent sub-caste of the high-caste Maharashtra Brahmins, means that all family members observe pure lacto-vegetarianism in order to maintain “health and purity”, and “to keep ones’ mind clear”. Food preparation and consumption must be carefully regulated, and so they don’t often eat outside, and always prefer food made at home;



when they did go out, on weekends for a change of scene, it is always at a “pure vegetarian”, South Indian Udipi restaurant near their home, famous for its hygiene, cleanliness, and quality of food - such bio-moral austerity is comparable to the Jains. Although root vegetables are consumed, onions and garlic are strictly abstained from due to its “heating” properties. The two brothers, Manoj and Srinivas, started work in a government office in the 1960s, in their early 20s. Initially they ate simple roadside snacks for lunch, but their mother protested that one should take a “full-proper meal” (*pura-khana*), and if they are too lazy to carry it themselves, given the 1 hour long train commute, they shall have a Dabbawala (Chapter V), a lunchbox delivery man, deliver for them. Since then, for 50 years until retirement, the two brothers, and now their 35-year-old son Satya, have relied on their wives and mothers’ ghar-ka-khana as their main source of daily sustenance while working in the city.

The backbone of ghar-ka-khana is *mutual trust* and *knowledge*. Although every household’s ghar-ka-khana is different, shaped by the particularities of community, caste, class, religion and region, down to the neighbourhood and individuality of the household, it maintains a common denominator: the relationship between cook and eater is intimately structured within kinship and family. From a culinary and nutritional point of view, the Punjabi *rajma-chawal* (kidney beans and rice) is starkly different to the South Indian *tahir-sadam* (yoghurt rice), but they induce the same comfort for those who grew up on it, when both the cook and eater share a certain amount of knowledge about the precise provisioning’s of the food. In this sense, ghar-ka-khana is less about an inherent, essential quality, than a set of shared practices and information between the two parties - the eater knows who (and more or less how) the food is prepared, for what reason and occasion; the cook knows where the food is going to, and has the techniques and tools to prepare and serve it. As Khare (1976) notes for the Hindu hearth, this mutual knowledge is paramount to regulate social relationships within and outside the domestic home, which is segregated on lines of differing intimacy between cook and eater, spanning from deities, family, servants, and guests. Kinship and family relations provide the basis of such mutual understanding - ghar-ka-khana is mostly produced by female kin, a reflection of a prevalent patriarchy in Indian society (Banerji 2000; Chatterjee 1993) - making it a highly gendered substance, epitomized by the ethical relationship of a

mother feeding ones' child.<sup>94</sup> As I pointed out in Chapter II, this ethical pull of ghar-ka-khana was instrumental in familiarizing myself with my informants, especially the women of the home who fed me, (literally and viscerally) making family through sharing and eating ghar-ka-khana, rendering it not only an object of study, but also a distinct fieldwork method.

The importance of being able to locate how food was produced, and minimizing any risks which may make the substance medically or ritually tainted is expressed by the distinction between ghar-ka-khana and bahar-ka-khana. The latter, which entails diverse commercial eateries, such as street vendor foods, fast food chains, and five-star restaurants, although differing in terms of hygiene, the food offered, social function, and pricing, are all united in its opposition to ghar-ka-khana, owing to their inability to be considered an everyday food option. These distinctions were most starkly on display during work-lunch options, where commuters would be away from home, and had to choose between bringing ghar-ka-khana from home in the form of a *tiffin* (Chapter V), or to eat bahar-ka-khana. For the lower-middle and middle classes, dining out in restaurants, although having become much more common, are still an occasional indulgence for lifecycle celebrations - the cost and the social pleasure of "going out" make it an out-of-the-ordinary experience (Conlon 1995). In contrast, the food offered by street vendors and fast food chains are popular, common, and inexpensive, taken in between meals, or on-the-go while commuting or on your way home to boost ones' energy levels, but is largely discouraged to be taken everyday - they are merely snacks, and although supplements the day-to-day commuter food regime in important ways, it never substitutes the ghar-ka-khana cooked by ones' kin. Although different in their outlook, these institutions entail a similar structure when considering the distance between provider and eater, which is much more set apart than in ghar-ka-khana. As I will explore in section 3, Satya, vibrant and outgoing, often liked to eat bahar-ka-khana with his colleagues, despite his reluctant mother who wished he only ate her and her daughter-in-laws' food, at home, but accepted it as part of work life - a widespread approach in Mumbai to balance purity of the home with cosmopolitan pleasure in the city. This contrasted

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<sup>94</sup> I will explore the configuration and commodification of this ethical relationship through home-based tiffin services, in Chapter VIII. These businesses addressed desires to forge intimate relationships between cook and eater within the urban public sphere, through feeding familiar and familial substance, also invoking communal identity and memory, at an affordable price.

with Viral's full-blown transgression, where his nightly carnivorous excursions were buried in the dark, far away from family life; Satya's was a form of acceptable transgression, which many young Mumbaikars engaged with through calculatedly ingesting bahar-ka-khana.

While I will explore ghar-ka-khana commensality in the office canteen in Chapter VII, instrumental in reproducing selfhood and social distinction in cosmopolitan Mumbai, here I point out how the "normality" (Janeja 2010) of ghar-ka-khana as a work-lunch option was reaffirmed through its distinction with bahar-ka-khana in *khau-gallis*, or "food lanes" (Chapter II). The foods at khau-gallis were considered unfit for everyday consumption because restaurant foods were too "rich" and "heavy", while street vendor foods were unhealthy because they use and reuse cheap oil, and put too much masalas and salt to cover up the bad quality of ingredients. The fact that these are commercial enterprises suggested to consumers that short cuts are made, and the quality of food naturally compromised. On the other hand, people invoked the fact that "No one would cheat ones' family", attesting to how, in this context, health and trust were two sides of the same coin.<sup>95</sup> For a health conscious commuter, eating a *vada pav* (Mumbai's iconic potato burger) after work was certainly not the healthiest of acts, but was an accepted form of a single dose of guilty pleasure, since it was made peripheral to the normal rhythm of ghar-ka-khana. Everyone knew that vendors selling deep fried products re-used oil - as I noted in Chapter II, a vada pav vendor outside Bandra station which I frequented had kept on adding more and more oil to the same pan for many years, because, surely, "the heat kills germs". The Indian hot/cold classification of foods masked biomedical ideas of toxins, and were difficult to digest for a delicate stomach such as mine, or pure vegetarians who were accustomed to "fresh" oil. Seasonality aggravated these concerns, where monsoons were considered the most dangerous time of year, since "humidity multiplied germs", and so street foods were more often neglected during this period among the health conscious.

Such dangerous yet alluring, spicy and oily excess, epitomized by the sensation of *chatpata*, an instantly gratifying kick on the tongue, was enjoyable but left a burning sensation in the throat and stomach if taken often, and induced

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<sup>95</sup> This argument was frequently invoked by home caterers, which I will explore in Chapter VIII, in order to guarantee their products as healthy and trustworthy, while distinguishing their business from commercial eateries serving bahar-ka-khana.

sluggishness in the long term. Yet, at times, such indulgence and transgression was in fact a prerequisite of such pleasure. The popular joke goes that a *chaat* (roadside snack) made by a street vendor tastes much better compared to one that is prepared in a hygienic hotel buffet, because of the road side pollution and the arm hair of the vendor going in the *puri* when he dips his hand in the pot to scoop it out. Such excess added a tinge of spice to the comforting, but often predictable and boring, everydayness of ghar-ka-khana. As I will explore in section 3, boredom with ghar-ka-khana is an especially common ailment among the youth, who prefer eating spicy and exciting meals outside the home, putting their mothers in a difficult position to negotiate health and pleasure within the domestic sphere.

Those adhering to strict vegetarianism, such as Jains and high caste Hindus, were especially against bahar-ka-khana. This was to do with not knowing whether the cook/eatery will actually cater to the required dietary needs, being a commercial enterprise. The prominence of “Jain” menus in many Indian, and increasingly Continental restaurants, were symptomatic of this inclination to cater to bio-morally conscious consumers. The strictest of Jains remained forever suspicious of such institutions, which only mimicked the purity of home - as with my Jain informant who went into the kitchen of a “pure-veg” restaurant (Chapter III), asking whether separate cutting boards were used to prepare Jain and non-Jain dishes, the issue of guaranteeing bio-moral trust and knowledge is the most important criteria for these consumers to choose whether an eatery is fit for their body.

However, health and purity was not entirely alien from the outside world. My health conscious informants instead frequented buttermilk<sup>96</sup> stalls, fresh fruit and juice stalls, and chai stalls in khau-gallis to supplement their daily food regime of eating ghar-ka-khana. These were less harmful snacks and beverages consumed after ones proper meal, with the added bonus of a short stroll around the block to “aid digestion and clear ones mind”. It is indicative that bananas were an especially popular street snack, not only for labourers, as it was inexpensive and filling, one piece costing a mere 10 rupees<sup>97</sup>, but also for such bio-morally conscious commuters - its thick layer of skin acted as a natural technology of purity, which shielded potential contamination from both the vendor’s handling and the dust of the streets - more safe and commonly

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<sup>96</sup> An affordable, yoghurt based “cooler” drink, which is popularly consumed as a snack, or to aid digestion after a meal.

<sup>97</sup> At the time of fieldwork, in early 2016.

consumed than the vada pav, it was undeniably Mumbai's uncrowned "street food". In line with these trends, some vendors strived to market their products as hygienic, using only bottled "Bisleri" brand bottled waters, disclosing the process of how the food was put together. Indeed, most native Mumbaikars had at least one favourite *vada pav* stall, most frequenting them during their childhood or college days, developing friendly ties with the vendors. But, however much one is intimate with the vendor, nor however "hygienic" these foods may be, these never passed as *ghar-ka-khana*, simply because these foods were eaten in a public space amidst strangers. On the other hand, a lovingly made *paratha* laden with copious amounts of *ghee* by one's mother is, for a Punjabi, the epitome of comforting *ghar-ka-khana*; yet, in terms of overall health and cholesterol levels, it would certainly lose out to a health conscious street vendor serving Bisleri chaat. For a substance to pass as *ghar-ka-khana*, neither criteria of biomedical and calorific health, were enough: the ethics of the *familial* was key.<sup>98</sup> The following section will examine this ethics through a popular advert, which embodies this quality of *ghar-ka-khana* as familial intimacy between cook and eater; moreover, it is this ethics which is reconfigured in the related work-lunch economies of the Dabbawalas (Chapter V, VI) and home caterers (Chapter VIII).

## **2. Dadi's dal (grandmothers' lentils) - deciphering the "Indian meal"**

A 2014 advert of Fortune Edible Oils and Foods, one of India's most widely consumed edible oil brands, depicts an elderly grandmother, visiting her hospitalized grandson day after day trying to feed him her homemade *dal* - a staple lentil dish throughout India, often served with rice - only to be sent back each time by an angry nurse who says "*Dadi, bahar-ka-khana allowed nahin hai!* Grandma, outside food is not allowed!", referring to hospital regulations of carefully regulating patient food intakes. The distraught Dadi (paternal grandmother), adamantly replies back, "*Lekin ye ghar-ka hai!* But this is home food!" After numerous battles, finally the nurse gives in when she tries the dal herself, being able to taste the tender care embodied in the food; she allows Dadi to feed her grandson, who, at that moment, miraculously wakes up from his coma. The advert ends with a close up shot of a bottle of Fortune cooking oils, with the phrase "*Ghar-ka-khana, ghar-ka-khana hota hai.* Home cooked food is home cooked food after all." The battle for hegemony over his stomach arises because he is simultaneously patient and grandson, modes of being embedded in different

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<sup>98</sup> See Chapter VII for a "feminist" critique of such familial labour, by everyday Mumbaikars.

textures and scales of the appropriate “interior”, and the scope of what it deems as “exterior” to it. The hospital, working within biomedical notions of calorific nutrition, finds Dadi’s dal an excessive intruder, as the nurse retorts to serve the same dish, but visibly paler, diluted in its hospital food version; on the other hand, Dadi, who works from the warmth of her domestic hearth, takes this thin, pale concoction as an aberration, and believes her ghar-ka-khana to be the best medicine for her grandson, its rich yellow colour indexing an abundance of lentils and love. In the end, the latter, thick substance trumps the watery hospital dal, and warms the “cold” nurse from inside, melting her professionalism away.

In the last section, I pointed to a lowest common denominator that distinguishes ghar-ka-khana from bahar-ka-khana: the familiar and familial intimacy between cook and eater. While the advert thoroughly embodies this relationship, the particular substance on display, the “dal”, cannot be ignored as merely a superficial representation *of* this relationship. Topologically, home made rajma-chawal for a Punjabi, and tahir-sadam for a Tamil, may be envisaged as identical; yet, materially and experientially, for the cooks and the eaters themselves, the specific form, texture, and taste of the food in question is the most significant aspect of the meal event of feeding, and it is only through this gastronomic level that comfort and love, that is, a sociological relationship, is mediated and transmitted. Dal, for many of my informants, *best* embodied such a relationship, and had the advert used another type of food, it would not have generated the same effect of warmth and comfort in the viewers as it did with it - the symbolic synergy between grandmothers’ cooking and this yellow or brown pulp was much more intense compared to, say, a grandmothers’ sandwich, which many *did* eat during their childhood, but did not equally evoke the intimate memories of feeding and nourishment as with dal.

For dal and sandwiches had directly opposing textures, and thus different bio-moral implications within India. As Bloch (1999) has pointed out for the Zafimaniry of Madagascar, sharing cooked rice required much more provisioning than sharing popcorn, since the former was an essential substance that constituted the core of their personhood. This is a tendency shared among other rice cultivating cultures such as Japan (Ohnuki-Tierney 1993), and, as I discussed in Chapter I, in village India, boiled rice is handled with more care and regulations than rice fried in ghee, as the former “uncooked” (*kaccha*) rise “absorbs” the qualities of the cook, thereby being more susceptible to transmit ritual and medical pollution (Meyer 1960). In contemporary

Mumbai, the prime distinction was the *viscosity* of food, and how *sociable* different foods were according its viscosity. Dal, as well as rice, *chapatti* (flatbread), *sukha subzi* (dry vegetable dishes), and *gila subzi* (wet vegetable dishes), the standard structure of the Indian meal which I will now turn to, were all readily separable into smaller portions, and hence facilitated commensality.<sup>99</sup> Importantly, the propensity of certain foods to facilitate commensality or not was itself used as a definition for its social healthiness - sandwiches, burgers, vada pav and the like were not considered proper meals precisely because of it being non-viscous and was not a food to share. Janeja (2010: 93) talks of a sarcastic remark by a Bengali Brahmin chef, that nowadays ham sandwich passes as *ghar-ka-khana* - although she ascribes this to the reason that pork is outside of the middle class Bengali “normal” foodscape, a polluting meat which doesn't require cooking skill, undermining domestic purity and respectability - a bio-moral perspective would hold that this is also because a ham sandwich is *less porous* than dal, and thus the love and intimacy of the cook will also pass less onto it. Aarushi, from the Maratha community and mother of two who cooks *ghar-ka-khana* for her family everyday before she leaves to work, says that there are occasional “cheat days”, when she is “too tired to cook, so just puts together a sandwich for tiffin.” However, she “doesn’t repeat sandwiches for more than a few times a month; my husband loves dal, and I also don't feel like I’ve cooked properly for my family with a sandwich. Dal and subzi takes time and effort. It is good food, loving food.” While boiled rice maybe the most porous substance in traditional India, it is less a *dish* than dal, the former only absorbing the quality of the cook, but the latter also absorbing her distinct *technique*, a food which carries with it the idiosyncratic mark of the female cook. Within India, individual dal is a much more potent signifier-substance for domestic intimacy than the individual sandwich.

As Arjun Appadurai (1988) notes, the discrepancy between the general sociology of the bio-moral, of *who*, *where*, and *how*, the food was handled, and the *what*, the specific culinary and gastronomic forms and textures of those foods, is itself endemic within the Hindu tradition. While the former considerations of purity and hierarchy were explored in Sanskrit texts and proscriptions, there is comparatively

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<sup>99</sup> These considerations were important within the office canteen, which I will explore in Chapter VII. Moreover, as I will outline in Chapter V, the Indian lunchbox (tiffin) evolved so as to keep intact this viscosity of each individual dish, in accordance with the etiquette of mixing foods only at the point of consumption.

less on techniques of cookery and recipes in these texts, which instead were disseminated through oral transmission. Such underrepresentation largely owed to the fact that “the producers, distributors, and guardians of the major textual traditions, the Brahmans, did not particularly care (from a religious point of view) about the culinary or gastronomic side of food” (ibid: 12), and only with the acceleration of printing techniques and the emergence of colonial and nationalist movements, did the medical and the moral gave way to the pleasurable and palatable. It follows that cookbooks in contemporary India are a technology that “allows women from one group to explore the tastes of another, just as [they] allow women from one group to be represented to another,” in which a “post-industrial and postcolonial middle class is constructing a particular sort of polyglot culture,” (ibid: 5-6). This not only constructs new categories such as “regional”, “national”, and “international” cuisines, but also gives rise to a comparative platform by which these middle class consumers with “multi ethnic, multicasite, polyglot, and westernized tastes” (ibid: 6) are able to access, codify, publicize, remix, and disseminate various stereotyped “traditional” or “contemporary” cuisines - in short, setting up a middle class cosmopolitan “intimate public” (Berlant 2009) around food. “Eating and being Indian”, through such cosmopolitanisms, are invariably imagined as projects of celebrating national diversity (Roy 2007).

If contemporary cookbooks are constitutive of such secular nationalisms, engendering middle class sensibilities of experimenting with and consuming the (stereotyped) Other, the dal, the epitome of simple and nourishing home cooking, is so ingrained in the everyday food regimes of Indians that it doesn’t show up in cookbooks, and instead is reproduced orally, diligently passed down from mother to daughter. One does not consult a cookbook to cook ones’ dal - to experiment with dal is to play with that domestic sanctuary which has nurtured and comforted a family for generations - such tampering, which may be celebrated for less staple dishes, when done with dal, is proof that culinary education is lacking in the cook. Dal altogether entails a different type of diversity - not as one dish *among* others, but *within* it, its simplicity affording diversity through subtle modifications to suit the variegated tastes afforded by region, community, family, and individual. Dal is very often coupled with *chawal* (rice), and is considered the staple source of protein, light on the stomach but at the same time filling, enjoyed by all from the rich to the poor, Hindu or Muslim, vegetarian or not. The simplicity of the cooking procedure, which consists of mixing



the slow-cooked lentils with tempered spices and herbs (*tadka*), invites much creativity and skill, where the use of spices and additional ingredients for the *tadka* reflecting the cook's culinary and regional background. Western coastal communities such as Konkanis added spoonful's of coconut and spice paste to their dal, calling it *dali-varn*. The Maharashtran Brahmins specially called theirs *amti-bhat*, who liked to sweeten their dal with jaggery, and their signature sweet and nutty *goda masala*. It is often said that, much like the omelette in the West, if you want to taste the worth of a cook, let them cook their version of *dal-chawal*.

However, the dal is not only a window to regional diversity, but also of *class hierarchy*, and it is in this regard which Appadurai's narrow focus on middle class technologies of representation fail to grapple with a wider concept of a national cuisine, open to various social positions - if "regional culinary diversity" is a middle class gastronomic game, the diversity of dal vertically cut through this. For dal, while a staple ingredient, is not available to all in equal amounts - the retail prices of pulses and lentils have been soaring over the past few years, depriving the urban and rural poor of their key source of protein.<sup>100</sup> Destitute families, thus, dilute their dal with extra water, using only the minimum amount of pulses for it to just pass as dal. However watery it may be, eating dal gave a sense of comfort and unity within the family. For Sangharsh, my Dalit friend and informant, who was brought up on this "*patla patla* (thin)" concoction, the sweet and thick Maharashtran Brahmin dal was a sign of their material abundance and social privilege. In this way, dal not only entailed variety of culinary style, but also social distinction on lines of social and economic capital. Such material difference not only existed within the dal, but also fed back onto the habitus of the eaters. When I visited an affluent, high-caste Panjabi home with Sangharsh for dinner, he barely could finish his portion of their thick dal full of *ghee*, a royal treatment which he later said was sickening for it reminded him of his impoverished childhood, which inculcated him to prefer watery dal. "For me, dal is something to drink, and not to eat." These body techniques and tastes are what reproduces social hierarchy on an everyday, somatic level, corresponding to the richness and consistency of dal (Bourdieu 1984).

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<sup>100</sup> Vyas, S. (2016 Jun 28). Why pulses rates skyrocketed. *The Hindu*. Retrieved 28 Sep 2017 from <http://www.thehindu.com/news/cities/mumbai/news/Why-pulses-rates-skyrocketed/article14406461.ece>

In the spirit of Mary Douglas (1972), dal-chawal is an elementary component of the Indian meal structure, and looking at what a person adds or subtracts from this basic unit tells much. The *thali* (plate in Hindi, Fig. 7) is the full expression of the ideal Indian meal, consisting of a variety of *subzi* (cooked vegetables), *chapatti* (flat bread), and other condiments (pickles, salad, curd, fruit, sweets, etc.) alongside the *dal* and *chawal*. The dishes are laid onto the table all at once, to which each participant takes suitable portions onto their *katoris* (small containers) to construct their own *thali*. Savouring a variety of tastes, colours, and textures is the epitome of Indian culinary indulgence. Such a banquet is a dream upon a dream for the toiling classes, whose lunches and dinners often consisted only of a plate of rice with a few bites of other readily available condiments, such as onion, salt, green chillies, and lemon. But if you ask what they would add to their meal had they been able to afford it, it would invariably be dal, and having subzi on top of that would be reserved on very special occasions.<sup>101</sup> On the other end of spectrum are the middle and upper classes who entirely neglect dal chawal, or at least the rice, for the sake of “cutting down on carbs”, who may exercise their social distinction through seasonal vegetables, larger quantities of meats, or the inclusion of “Western” dishes.

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<sup>101</sup> One can still go downwards in this scale. Janeja (2009) notes how during the great Bengal famine of 1943-44, which killed 6 million people, “people begged for *phen*, or the water in which rice is boiled, to assuage their hunger” (ibid: 60). While among middle class families, boiled rice water is set aside to use for starching clothes, in times of absolute destitution it is excavated as the most stripped down source of energy, literally on the margins between food and water.



Figure 7 - An elegant and affluent *thali* lunch in an office canteen: 2 *dals*, 2 *subzis*, *chapatti*, and salad. Photo by author.

To tabulate:

1. Rice + condiments
2. Rice + watery *dal*
3. Rice + *dal* + condiments (+ *chapatti*)
4. *Thali* = Rice + *dal* (with *tadka*) + *subzi* + *chapatti* + condiments
5. Any amount of elaboration from 4., including meat and Western dishes.

Conscious restraining and subtraction marks refinement.

This scale is a rule of thumb to assess the socio-economic purchasing power and tastes of Indians as seen through everyday meals taken at home. All aspects of this everyday meal structure is lacto-vegetarian, and a common way to “boost” the meal is to add cooked meat as a main or a side condiment, attesting to the prevalence of vegetarian values within India, and the place of meat as excessive indulgence. There are also foods which fall out of this category of everyday, normal foods. Most important is the *khichdi*, a homogenous pulp made by cooking dal and chawal together. An important proscription in Indian (especially Hindu, Jain, and Buddhist) food habits is to mix ones food only right before eating it - that is, each element must be differentiated prior to consumption. This sees its highest expression in the elegant compartmentalization of the thali, but importantly, is carried down to the most

deprived and humble meals of the poor, for this not only concerns table manners, but also of cosmology: distinction on the plate corresponds to the social distinction of the eater, who must maintain essential boundaries of one's individual personhood within a porous world. Khichdi is not a proper food for sociable adults to be eating, and is never a food taken with guests, friends, or even family, but instead is the food for children, the elderly, pregnant women, and those recovering from sicknesses. It is indicative that these liminal beings, united in their state for being outside "normal" bio-moral status, feed on the amorphous deformation of dal chawal.

Social distinction through food is further expressed through the distinction between fresh versus stale foods. In Hindu and Jain India, leftover foods, or *jutha*, are ritually and medically impure, as it implies bio-moral contact with the previous handler (Janeja 2010; Malamoud and White 1996). Yet *jutha* is only a term used when such leftover foods are passed between people - leftover foods offered to deities through *pujas*, sacrificial offerings, are *prasad*, or blessed remainders of the offering, touched by the deities. In this sense, *jutha* is a view from above, from high caste/purity to lower; while *prasad* is a view from below, from people (usually high castes) to the deities, comprising social distinction on lines of bio-moral contact. The Hindu *sadhu* (ascetic) who goes around the neighborhood to collect alms using a single pot, where all the *jutha* are violently lumped together, are the only socially sanctioned beings who can transvaluate such impure substance into positivity through ascetic practice (Clough 2015). *Jutha* are bio-morally dangerous for a person not only because of the way it absorbs the qualities of (lowly) Others, but is physically unappealing as it implies loss of taste and nourishment. While bio-moral purity lingers on in *jutha*, taste is temporal, and is gradually lost during the course of time. From an economic standpoint, being able to eat freshly cooked food everyday is itself a prime marker of socio-material affluence, whereas it is common practice among the working classes to eat leftover rice from a few days back, left out in the open. It is in this regard that the work of Dabbawalas (Chapter VI), who deliver *ghar-ka-khana* from home to office, incessantly work to spatio-temporarily maintain its purity and hygiene standards - the technologies of purity of their labour must not only protect the meal from outside pollution and contact, but preserve its freshness within a limited timeframe of a few hours, before it becomes stale.

Returning to the advertisement, it becomes clear as to why an inert yellow pulp for someone not accustomed to Indian culture, is something which has deep

moral and material significance for those who have been inculcated to appreciate and live by these, through intimate practices of feeding, eating, tasting, and digesting. The “Indian-ness” that is enacted here is more tactile than the sober cataloguing and display of stereotyped regional diversity which Appadurai (1988) talks about, for the unit of association is not a reified “region” or “culture”, but real families and rooted experiences. Yet, this “family” is reified and narrow in scope in its own way. “Dadi’s dal” is not only reflective of a patriarchal conservatism whereby a female kin is necessarily constructed as a home cook, but the advert especially becomes an effective emotive trigger for those who lived with a decent level of material affluence, within a functioning family, a Dadi who is both inclined and equipped to feed her grandson. Among my informants, the advert was most appreciated by middle and upper middle class families, especially those who have experienced upward-mobility related migration of one sort or another, for example leaving home to study or work abroad for better prospects. This class of urban, “global Indians” (Mazzarella 2003) enjoyed their new found material wealth and Westernised tastes, whilst trying to establish meaningful connections to their “families”, “roots”, “homelands”, and “tradition” - Dadi’s dal and ghar-ka-khana are intimately marketed towards these anxieties, yet through a commoditized circuit, as I will explore in section 4. In contrast, the advert did not induce the stomach tickling warmth that it did with these classes with working class, dalit Sangharsh - he bitterly said: “For me, my dal is not comfort, but a remembrance of our struggle”, aligning his experiences to the causes of Ambedkarite (anti-Brahmanical) activism. *His* pale, watery dal indexed the populist, vernacular spirit of the toiling classes of Maharashtra, as well as the struggles of his family, which bio-morally contrasted with the rich, yellow abundance of Dadi’s dal depicted in the advert. Such dissonances are testimony to the salience of dal in India as a food which absorbs, through the quality of the cook, not only regional diversity or familial intimacy, but also of anchored markers of social distinction.

### **3. Post-liberalization era experiments and anxieties between *ghar* and *bahar***

Before examining specific cases in contemporary Mumbai where selfhood, social distinction, sense of pleasure, and wellbeing among everyday urban commuters are viscerally reproduced through regulating the flow and intake of ghar-ka-khana in its diverse forms, I address an essential structural, economic, and cultural backdrop behind these negotiations: the liberalization of India’s economy in 1991, which

caused a massive influx of foreign goods, people, wealth and ideas, as well as novel desires and tastes fermented by global capitalism. Since then, hype over a newly emergent middle class with a global consumerist ethic became part of popular, business, and nationalistic discourses, as it replaced the view of the middle classes under the traditional Nehruvian eye as reliable civil servant, with those with a dynamic and entrepreneurial ethos, fuelling India's ever-growing economy with material wealth and conspicuous consumption (cf. Mazarella 2005). In terms of foodways, liberalization did not only introduce foreign cuisines and recipes, but also new spaces of consumption and commensality such as restaurants and food courts in malls, which caused a change in not only what one ate, but how, when, and with whom one ate with - in other words, fostering a public dining culture. Here, eating food is not only a matter of satisfying ones stomach, but is an occasion, a leisurely and performative act, whereby one buys into a certain lifestyle purported by the brand embodied by the food and the eatery (cf. Liechty 2003). In this way you are what you eat, not only through incorporating the qualities of the food you consume, but by (consciously or unconsciously) signalling to Others that you are part of a particular culture and class, a member of a particular public (Warner 2002).

Since British India, Bombay was conceived as a colonial trading hub connecting merchants across continents, and then evolving into a sophisticated manufacturing, financial, and entertainment hub attracting labourers from all over India, proclaiming itself as India's utmost cosmopolitan city, its name synonymous with luxury and opportunity (Dwyer and Pinney 2002; Patel and Thorner 1995). Yet, as historian Frank Conlon (1995) notes, the city never boasted a vibrant public dining culture until the 1960s and 70s, and public dining as leisurely social meeting place was reserved for the colonial elite frequenting exclusive private clubs, or *gymkhanas*. Simple eateries called *khanawalis*, or meal houses, were popular with migrant rural labourers, feeding those working in the bustling cotton mill industry throughout the 20<sup>th</sup> century, which were simple eateries with a utilitarian outlook. As I will describe in chapter V and VIII, these traditional *khanawalis*, and its modern variants, the home based caterers, are closer to being extensions of the home rather than public spaces. Only the Irani and Parsi cafes, popularly described as the "poor mans parlour", idiosyncratic institutions that reached prominence in the 1950s, bred a culture of modest indulgence, its ethos of public conviviality preceding and eventually giving

way to modern restaurants.<sup>102</sup> Dining out for pleasure was too costly for most people, and those eateries which people could afford did not bring about pleasure or health past utility. The domestic hearth, if one had one, was always understood to be the cheaper, safer, and cleaner source of food and conviviality. Those who did not have this, relied on the ubiquitous tiffin services which served home-style food at an affordable price (Chapter V, VIII).

Conlon was writing in 1995, and thus only briefly touches upon trends in the post-liberalization era, where people more often indulged to “go out”, to celebrate lifecycle events, and to seek new experiences. The foodscape of millennial Mumbai that Dewey (2012) depicts is more complex, both in terms of diversity of culinary choices and price ranges, as well as forms of power and status surrounding public commensality, based on what she calls “regimes of exclusion”. On the one hand, Mumbai has seen a steady increase in per capita restaurants, opening its doors to evermore Mumbaikars who seek out novel tastes and cuisines, while on the other, certain restaurants have emerged as insulated pockets where the rich protect themselves from the chaos of the streets and its unwanted sensory intrusions (Appadurai 2000). Membership to private gymkhanas is currently evermore sought after, as the status achieved with being part of such elite member-only clubs, colonial in origin, is reconfigured through acquiring novel economic and cultural capital, with not only the display of wealth, but also the ability to exclude and carve out exclusive social spaces, has become synonymous with money and power. Discourses surrounding such spaces is what is popularly known as “Page Three” culture, referring to the gossip and celebrity section of the popular English-language newspaper, *The Bombay Times*: restaurants are places “to be seen”, and to see film stars, elite businessmen and celebrities. Added to such authoritative media, the “food porn” culture of Instagram has digitized and democratized the sensory experience of going out, furthermore circulating glamour and exclusivity through affective media circuits. This combination of hyper-visibility and social exclusivity makes contemporary public dining in Mumbai an arena where social status is negotiated, tastes tested and cultivated, and new forms of social distinction produced.

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<sup>102</sup> Currently, only a handful of Irani and Parsi cafes exist in Mumbai, and they have been steadily gentrified. While its food has not fully been commoditized, its century long history has become a popular tourist destination. It has also been an inspiration for new concept restaurants and bars, which serve traditional Irani café menus for expensive prices, in an aesthetically sanitized environment.

The proliferation of such novel public foodways were, on the one hand, steeped in the language of cosmopolitan pleasure and mingling, often entailing culinary transgressions, while on the way causing tensions within the domestic home. 18-year-old Rahul, brought up in a strict vegetarian Marwari family, was proud that he is “modern”, who, against his family’s will, exerted this by his excursions to malls to eat MacDonald’s’ chicken burger. As in Fig. 3 (Chapter I), the sharp rise of per capita chicken consumption in urban areas is significant, and is concordant to the phenomenon where even born vegetarians, especially the youth, now commonly eat chicken, as the most acceptable and inert of meats for them to take part in “Westernized” culinary culture, which meat consumption has steadily being associated with in rapidly urbanizing continents such as India (Staples and Klein 2016). In Mumbai, these middle class “cosmopolitans”, steeped in the aesthetics of global youth culture, find eating a non-veg Big Mac or a slice of Pepperoni pizza in a food court mall liberating from the drudgery of “customs” imposed by the older generation (Liechty 2003). Rahul passionately talked about the newest outlets in the city, as well as annoyance towards “boring” vegetarian ghar-ka-khana which his mother cooked, which he reluctantly took to college everyday. He found the beef ban “ridiculous”, for people should eat what they like, as he was doing so rebelliously. I told him about Viral (Chapter III), and Rahul was horrified at the prospect of eating beef in such a place. That was visceral meat, unlike the desensitized brown patty devoid of the smell and history of blood, which doesn't invoke the violent moment of butchering which roadside butchers and slaughter houses evoke on a daily basis in many parts of the city - it is meat devoid of the meatiness of meat (Ghassem-Fachandi 2012: 154-184). Rahul’s experimentation with Other ways being stopped at the level of eating a Big Mac in a food court, a daylight “fix” for the vegetarian youth to be “cool”. These transgressions were milder versions of Viral’s night-time carnivorousness.

Satya Angal’s experiments with bahar-ka-khana, also born into a strict vegetarian family of Maharashtran Brahmins, were still milder, and pointed towards a certain equilibrium between alluring public dining and comforting domestic ghar-ka-khana. Satya, now 35 with an infant son, working in a reputable IT firm, secretly admitted that when he first went to college in Chennai, often indulged in beef - for many Indian youths, college is a liminal space to experiment with “forbidden” fruits of sex, alcohol, drugs, and *meat* - but now prefers ghar-ka-khana which his wife and



mother jointly make for his family everyday, since it is “less oily” and “less burdensome on the stomach”. Although he quit smoking few years back, and rarely ate any type of meat - except for the occasional fast-food shawarma, which, like Rahul, was understood to be more approachable than meat dishes in dingy meat-liquor restaurants - does enjoy outings with friends and colleagues at a local pub, where he would have a casual drink with some “veg snacks”, such as fries and nachos. The cosmopolitan environment of his workplace, he says, “gives it a *bindaas* (open minded) feel”, and explains that these outings are important for him to maintain rapport with colleagues, as well as letting steam off, for it would be “too boring to go back and forth between home and work; we all need an escape.” This escape initially worried his mother, who lives in the same house, fearing that he would be badly influenced by the outside environment: “*Daru, cigarette, bahar-ka-khana, ye sub non-veg chakkar bilkul bimari hai*. Alcohol, cigarettes, meat, these non-veg<sup>103</sup> [immoral] riff raff is unhealthy.”

Satya is no longer a teenager, but a householder, and does not wish to burden his parents - and thus makes sure that he cuts his outings shortly, and always returns home for family dinner. Such balanced transgression hinged on an important proscription: that outside foods, especially meats, were strictly kept outside, and they should never enter the sanctity of the home. Echoing Dadi in the advert, Satya’s mother says proudly: “*Hum logon ka khana bilkul shakahari hai. Bahar-ka-khana to ghar main nahin ka sakta hai*. Our food is totally vegetarian. Outside food can’t be eaten within our home.” Bahar-ka-khana, pleasurable as it was for Satya, was considered a peripheral indulgence by him and his family, never being absorbed into ones core, while vegetarian ghar-ka-khana digested its way into ones’ essence. The technology of purity between ghar and bahar corresponded to the technology of purity *within* the body - making outside meat occasional and peripheral to the “normal” (Janeja 2010) diet of vegetarian ghar-ka-khana, was paramount to alleviate the body from excessive indulgence, whilst sufficiently taking part in cosmopolitan pleasure. Osella and Osella (1999) note how middle class Keralites distinguish between “central” and “peripheral” consumption, where food, especially rice, which comprise the core of the Keralite personhood, are much more favoured to be sourced locally, whilst more “transient” goods such as fashionable clothing, were preferred to come

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<sup>103</sup> See Novetzke (2017) for the use “non-veg” as a blanket term for all things immoral.

from outside the country - the distinctions of centre/periphery and domestic/foreign, are effects of permanent-substance/transient-decoration, which is experienced somatically as viscera/skin-surface - here, techniques of consumption are ways to negotiate the vital boundaries of self and world, through the multiple scales of region, home, and body. In Mumbai, such selective digestive tracts were, in most cases, granted to men, and not women. A useful comparison are the young, urban middleclass housewives of Bengal studied by Donner (2008), who tactically adopt vegetarianism and fasting to perform chastity, domesticity, and motherhood, faced by the moral dangers of Calcutta's ever more mass consumption-oriented environment. Indeed, Satya's wife and mother, both housewives, never ate any *bahar-ka-khana*, except for occasional sweets, or at Udipi restaurants with family - this was to "remain healthy", an indicator of self-discipline, which ultimately translates into good mothering. Among middle class families, carnivorous-cosmopolitan husbands and vigil-vegetarian wives are a prominent urban solution to balance domestic purity with urban pleasure, at the family level.

The bio-moral anxieties of keeping the *bahar* out of the *ghar* are a salient issue within contemporary India. As I explored in Chapter I, in modern day Calcutta, talk of the "belly" (*pet*) and "digestion" is ubiquitous, found in various medical contexts, from everyday "folk" understandings of balancing the bodily humours, to the professionalized discourses and practices of homeopathic, Ayurvedic, and modern allopathic medicine, as an important consideration to achieve mental and bodily health and wellbeing, through the careful provisioning of "eating" medicine and ingesting proper food (Ecks 2003). This "bowel obsession" is in fact so salient that it is used beyond individual bio-moral transactions and worries, and as a reflexive meta-commentary on the ills of a rapidly transforming Calcutta, and "the unwanted consequences of modernity, such as environmental pollution, rapid urbanization, increasing work pressures, "stress", changing dietary habits" (ibid: 225). The ills of post-liberalization India - "modernity" in Ecks' context - largely stem from the uncontrollable proliferation of *foreign* goods, and the ethics of global consumerism. For many Indians, especially the youth, this ethics symbolizes prosperity and stirs up aspirations (Liechty 2003). On the other hand, it is becoming clear for many that the promises of economic liberalization and modernity are increasingly not met, where aspirations and pleasure give way to new forms of inequality, as well as to anxieties regarding an uncertain and uncontrollable world. As Donner (2008a; 2008b; 2011)

notes, while much has been written on India's emergent public culture (Appadurai and Breckenridge 1995), she sees the domestic sphere as an ample site to explore these emergent anxieties, as a space where the production of intimacy is contested with the disrupting logic of consumer culture.

Janeja (2010) looks at everyday food practices in middle class Bengali households, and presents a picture of the Bengali foodscape as, following Latour (1993), a complex network comprising of a variety of human and non-human actors, from cooks and eaters, ingredients, domestic servants, smells and tastes, utensils, dining and cooking spaces, and *desh*, an embodied sense of belonging to a homeland, all of which form an assemblage to produce "normality" on an everyday basis. Her ethnography points to an important observation that notions of purity/impurity, clean/dirty, edible/inedible, pleasure/distaste, and so on, are constantly produced and reconfigured through the bio-moral transactions of these various actors within this network - for instance, the refrigerator, an essential item in a modernized, middle class Bengali household, despite its obviously positive effect on the domestic economy in allowing for storage of a vast variety of goods, actually induces anxieties regarding over-preserving, by freezing, something which should be fluid, within food proscriptions of orthodox high-caste ideals: "in *holding* the bloody goat's meat, and other foods, *together in the same place*, then violates such forms of purity and impurity, lawfulness and unlawfulness [halal and haram]" (ibid:80, emphasis in original).

More so than modern technologies of domestic economy, foods themselves pose problems for the contemporary, urban middle-class home. This is most directly expressed as transforming diets, as in the case with Rahul. Takeaway foods and prepared meals are increasingly making their way into weekly menus, for reasons of convenience and pleasure, especially to satisfy husbands and children (Caplan 2008: 134). Although the hegemony of homemade food is very much established as the quintessential healthy food, mothers and wives have to accommodate her children and husband's changing tastes, where deciding menus is a constant battle between satisfying their unhealthy and undesirable appetite nurtured by *bahar-ka-khana*, with her ideals of healthy eating, which is not only a medical concern, but also very much an issue of identity and belonging. For middle class Bengali households, this is to maintain *desh*, or "homeland", an important condition for reproducing family values - and yet it is now unavoidable to introduce variation by adopting *bidesh*, or foreign,

foods and practices, to avoid complaints of boredom and blandness (Janeja 2010: 23-5). Industrially produced foods such as “Maggi” noodles became domesticated, each household having its own recipe, the brand evoking not so much of global consumerism, but of particular variants of “my mom’s Maggi”. Western dishes like pasta and “snack foods” like Chinese chow-mien, as well as richer North-Indian foods, all make its way into daily menus - “all of which mothers try to represent as snacks (*jholkabar*) rather than full ‘Bengali’ meals” (Donner 2010: 164) - at the very least, producing these *bidesh* foods at home is better than allowing them to actually eat outside.

From the point of view of a Hindu orthodox mother, these instances show a degenerate world where people’s anchoring, indexed by an adherence to vegetarian ideals, is slowly becoming eroded. Amidst these changes, these negotiations are at once a source of intense anxiety, as well as the chance for her to perform what she deems as good, respectable motherhood (Donner 2010). Many working women in Mumbai found it extremely important to cook for their family everyday, while also pursuing her career and contributing her earnings. Cooking was a duty, but also a source of pleasure, pride, and agency - when I attended several cooking classes in the city, many students were married working professionals, and were learning tips for improving home economics, as well as increasing their repertoire of dishes. Mrs Iyer, a South Indian manager said: “I came to class to learn more about Punjabi food; my 7 year old son loves it. He always wants to go out to have *paneer makhani* (butter paneer), so thought it would be better if I learn how to make it properly - its cheaper, and obviously healthier if I make it at home.” In an environment where obtaining cheap (but not so healthy and/or hygienic) commercial food is ever more easier, the value of *ghar-ka-khana*, which was labour intensive, requiring time, skills, and resource, but much more rewarding than outside food, is increasing - although it is “everyday” food, its matter-of-fact-ness masks the meticulous efforts to churn it out everyday.

#### **4.1. Marketing the home - tech savvy food start-ups and luxury home chefs in the age of post-liberalization**

Beyond compartmentalizing and drawing visceral boundaries between the ghar and bahar to protect the former, or the efforts to domesticize the bahar by incorporating its allure and novelty through techniques of cooking and diversifying the menu, these negotiations between Mumbai's emergent public foodways and domestic aspirations to maintain purity, health, and communal identity, meant that the value of ghar-ka-khana and place of home eating were reconfigured, at times rendered as boring conventionality, overshadowed by the glamour of public dining, while at others emerging as a potent symbol for all things that public dining did not account for, namely, homely comfort and communal identity, producing adverts such as Dadi's dal. For those experiencing displacement through migration and diaspora, "home" and "tradition" becomes a nostalgic signifier, which anchors ones self to an affectively imagined origin. Upadhyaya (2008) researched young IT and software professionals and couples in Bangalore and the US, who, on the one hand, enjoy a significant amount of material wealth compared to their friends back home, but on the other, find their intensifying work schedule undermining their "core" values of "family" and "Indian tradition". Importantly, these values, often invoked so as to be an antidote to an alluring but "empty" consumerist ethics, were equally steeped in the global cultural economy (Mazzarella 2003). Food is also an extremely potent media where authenticity, tradition, and nostalgia are invoked, invented, and consumed, for transnational Indians to retrieve their "Indian-ness": cookbooks, and more recently cooking shows and online web platforms, are technologies for preserving menus and tastes (Appadurai 1988), while packaged masalas, or frozen *idlis* and chaat, and microwaveable *mattur paneers*, provide an opportunity to re-enact an "authentic" Indian dinner, for those who find it too cumbersome to do so, or have altogether forgotten how to. Srinivas (2007) identifies two modes of consumption for contemporary middle class Bangaloreans in and outside of India: "gastro-adventure", the cosmopolitan consumption of a stereotyped "Other", and "gastro-nostalgia", a still yet cosmopolitan assertion of ones' ethnic and community roots. While the former marks one as having "taste" (Bourdieu 1984), participating in a global aesthetics and ethics of being "chic", the latter also marks ones' participation in an imagined

nationalistic community of “being Indian”, an India which encompasses diverse communities and cultures (cf. Roy 2007).

A type of gastro-nostalgia that is gaining prominence within Mumbai is what I call “tech savvy food start-ups” - monthly subscription based food delivery services run by a new class of entrepreneurs, who innovatively engage with social media marketing and technology, and large scale production processes with a keen eye for quality and hygiene control. Currently, there are approximately 20 to 30 such catering services active online, and the numbers are growing to target what these entrepreneurs see as an emerging market of hungry, middle and upper-middle class urban professionals. As I will explore in Chapter VIII, traditional *khanawalis* and home based caterers, more frequented by lower-middle class commuters, commoditized the familial relationship between cook and eater. These businesses were more “sticky” than tech tiffin start-ups, and had a more personalized feel to its food and relationship with the cook, who was invariably a woman who cooked *ghar-ka-khana* in her own home, who treated her customers “just like a child or a parent.”

On the other hand, the commoditization of the “ghar” with food start-ups were largely steeped in the post-liberalization logic of global consumerism and brand marketing, having a “shiny-surface” aesthetic, where the “ghar” acquires novel meaning which is not reduced to sticky domesticity, but always attests to comfort, health and hygiene in its aspirations - the link between “ghar” and comfort was conceptual-discursive, as opposed to somatic-embedded. Luxury home chefs, also an emerging trend for the middle class urban youth to experiment with novelty as well as comforting domesticity, were a hybrid of both modes of commoditization - in as much as one was invited to one’s home to eat, it hinged on the personalized relationship between cook and eater made into purchasable commodity; yet, the connection between cook and eater in these expensive events were not everyday-subsistence, but were fleeting-experimental, a “gastro-adventure” embarked in someone’s home. These were forms of cosmopolitan pleasure and experimentation with the Other without visceral stickiness, which were purified by the logic of market transactions, and the consumption of stereotyped (regional and international) diversity (Appadurai 1988).

#### 4.2. The case of SpiceDabba

I am standing with Pravin at his central kitchen in an industrial estate in Andheri East, where he and his partner Gurmeet have been operating the now highly successful *SpiceDabba* tiffin services in Mumbai since 2011. He had invited me over on a Saturday, a half-day for offices, where the number of outgoing tiffins is also roughly half of the total number. “We wouldn’t want you on a week day; it’s a war zone. We pump out about 700 *dabbas* [lunchboxes] out in a matter of hours,” he smiles. His 14 kitchen workers also seem to be relatively relaxed, but still the sight of hundreds of empty lunchboxes, all in slick *SpiceDabba* paper packaging, laid out waiting to be churned out into the city. The most eye-catching aspect about the kitchen was how they were experimenting with automating the packing process: they have now fully switched to plastic disposable containers from the usual stainless steel tiffins, as packing packets of water, subzi, and dal on their conveyor belt machine turned out to be more cost effective. They are now looking into automating the preparation stage to make cutting and chopping much more efficient. The cooking of the food, however, needs to be done by “skilled chefs” - that is what makes *SpiceDabba* tiffins different, that they do not compromise on the quality of the raw materials, nor the recipes and chefs who put it together - “for everything else we find a short cut.”

On their website, the first thing they advertise is: “Ghar-ka-khana - Delicious Home Style food with minimal oil/masalas”. In fact, it is not only *SpiceDabba* who adheres to *ghar-ka-khana*, and reference to it and its health benefits abound in the tech tiffin industry. A closer look at the way these branding techniques are used reveals an important aspect about the trope of “ghar” in the food industry in contemporary Mumbai. It does not mean that it is produced in someone’s home, or in fact any particular place/space for that matter; rather, it is a “style” of cooking, indicating “minimal oil and masalas”, and also makes claims about a healthy life-“style” which the consumer should also buy into and follow. In as much as everyday food is understood to emanate from the home, appealing to “ghar-ness” through modifying the taste of the food is a useful tactic to sell products to customers looking for everyday sustenance. They also advertise that “no meal is repeated in one month”, a subtle but important way in which the “ghar” is in fact *improved*. *SpiceDabba*

resolves the problem of domestic conventionality and predictability, so abhorred by youths such as Rahul, by calculating a thorough monthly menu beforehand, which includes a mix of traditional thali style foods from different regions throughout India, as well as occasional Western and Chinese dishes, but cooked with less oil and spices, coupled with salads to make the entire meal healthier than its khau-galli variants.

Apoorva, a 31 year old journalist working for an fashion magazine, who recently transferred to their Mumbai office from Bangalore, has been a loyal customer for over 1 year, and was drawn by this appeal of mixing variety with comfort: “I’ve tried a few other tiffin services, including ones operating from peoples homes, but I wasn’t satisfied with the taste, or if I was, I’d quickly get bored because they would make the same style of foods all the time, with the same home masalas. [SpiceDabba is] cheap, menus change everyday, new styles are incorporated... I don’t think a housewife can cook Chettinad Chicken one day and Chicken lollipop the other. Even if she makes the best dal, can’t be eating that everyday. I certainly don’t have the time or energy to cook that kind of variety everyday.” This class of urban commuters, who have come to Mumbai for increased job and salary prospects, are predominantly unmarried, busy pursuing their careers, are allured by the lifestyle of “being healthy”, while being fully part of urban youth culture, but rejecting its unhealthy variant of multinational food chains. This class is less fussy about the visceral politics of vegetarianism and meat, while the tastes of youths such as Rahul’s fascination with fast food is seen as a marker of immaturity and tackiness, while Satya’s conventionalism with his daily intake of vegetarian ghar-ka-khana too bio-morally stringent. The steady growth of businesses such as SpiceDabba shows that hip home style cooking seems to strike the balance between urban sophistication and homely comfort for this emergent class of global minded, upwardly mobile urban professionals.

As with ghar-ka-khana from your home, what was of utmost importance in upholding the food as “ghar” was the transparency of its production and preparation process - the relationship between cook and eater had to be made explicit. Any appeal to “ghar” without making that intimate connection are empty words; and so tech savvy food start-ups take on a different tactic with intimacy, by having a strong social media presence, marketing and advertising their products with appealing visuals, and constructing a narrative where consumers can sympathize with their business ethos. SpiceDabba has had success with these strategies. Facebook, Twitter, and Instagram



play a central part in telling the “SpiceDabba story”, from updating (potential) customers of new menus, deals, and any other PR related news, such as an interview article of the founders regarding their accomplishments of “Over 1 million meals delivered”, or re-tweeting direct voices of actual customers. Visuals are central in making strong connections with consumers, and aesthetically pleasing, but not overtly edited or filtered photos, give a sense of what the food “really” is like. Customers share this ethos: Aditya, a 28 year old media professional, says “The packaging and food décor is cute too, its definitely more *Instagrammable*, than other food services out there”, who, through his avid engagement with social media, is at once a customer and a deliverer of the SpiceDabba message and aesthetic.

The “origin myth” of SpiceDabba is itself a way to brand their product: Gurmeet, the founding father of SpiceDabba, had quit his “high paying finance job” to move into the food start-up scene because he was fed up with the unhealthy food options when he was working in the city - he is now on a quest to provide healthy, home style meals to busy Mumbaikars. This ethical success story familiarizes customers with the person behind the brand and the company, and it gives moral weight and social cause to their entrepreneurship, which strive to put “customers first”. The Dabbawalas also have come to be utilized to achieve this ethical end, not only by aspiring businesses such as SpiceDabba, but also by governments and NGO’s for their wide-reaching fame nationally and internationally as brand ambassadors of hygiene, cleanliness, and diligent work (Chapter VI). A significant advantage of any tiffin service/food delivery start-up operating in Mumbai is the presence of the Dabbawalas - most, if not all, tech savvy caterers use the Dabbawalas as their delivery vehicles, as delivery costs are inexpensive, and in most cases they are passed onto the customer to bear, so it is easier for companies with small initial capital to get their business running. But they do not merely deliver the finished product, as food start-ups also seek to take advantage of their strong reputation they enjoy in and out of Mumbai: “Having your product delivered by the Dabbawalas is like free PR”, says Adip, CEO of *Foodyum*, a mid sized tiffin service.

#### **4.3. Home chefs: transferring charisma to everyday home cooking**

I am at Ben’s flat in the hipster Bandra West, where he is chopping up garlic, baby leaf lettuce, carrots, and beansprouts, while his brother Andy is sautéing minced buffalo in a large wok with some sesame oil. “Its really tragic with the beef ban. I’m

sure Ill be able to get beef if I tried, but too much hassle. Guess it's got to be buffalo.” The brothers, who have jobs in the IT and the real estate sector, but Ben quitting soon to be “pro”, are preparing 20 meals of “Bens’ homemade buffalo bibimbab”, selling at 500 rupees per lunchbox, through *ChefCurate*, an online aggregator platform which curates and connects home chefs with diners. The pricing is significantly more expensive than any other tiffin service, both informal and organized, which are usually priced anywhere between 50 and 150 rupees. ChefCurate takes a cut, but Ben doesn't have to worry about advertising, getting customers, and delivery - “I’m real interested in becoming a professional chef, it’s always been my dream. These home-chef events are an amazing way to test new recipes and get feedback from well-fed customers. I also get a bit of pocket money too.”

Couple days later Ben is making Lamb Shank Pie, then Assamese style chilli Pork curry, and then Zucchini stuffed Chicken roulade, until he gets back to Korea. His customers, mainly urban professionals who work in multinationals in BKC or Lower Parel, enjoy a trip around the world for 500 rupees, and as much as the taste is key, it is this experience of transportation that is alluring. And there is a difference between getting food from Ben and going to an authentic Korean restaurant or having pie in a hip Irish pub. Other than the convenience of having such varied foods delivered right at your doorstep, customers eat Ben’s food because Ben is cooking. He is a talented chef, and his skills naturally transfer onto the food which people love. However, there is a strong sense in which Ben’s personality and charisma, not only as a chef but also as a person, soaks into the food. As one customer passionately says, “it’s like having this cool, Northeast Indian guy as your personal chef.” Ben went on to be a personal chef to 3 people, organizing and preparing special nutritional “gym” menus three times a day as per their dietary requirements - he gets paid 30,000 rupees per month in total, which is “enough to cover my overheads and get a steady income going. I’m doing two to three lunches a week, one Ramen night in the weekends over at my place, and a barbeque night twice a month. That's a good schedule for now, before I move on to bigger things.”

Home chefs like Ben, preparing luxury meals for lunch and dinner for epicurean customers, are the new generation of home caterers, and share much with their more modest contemporaries, which I will explore in Chapter VIII: they operate from their own kitchen, they eat the food they cook, and many are doing it for side income, although their economic standings are starkly different. The role of social

media platforms is significant, but they also largely work by word of mouth, just like traditional caterers, albeit through rating systems and reviews. What is perhaps most different is the way in which the product is visualized and advertised. With traditional home caterers there is very little information given out about the food except for vague categories (Maharashtran, Punjabi etc.) and praises (its fresh, low masala, etc.) - try it out once and you will see for your self. Entering the kitchen of the chef is out of the question, and customers are not interested in visualizing the site of production either - once familiarity is established between the cook and eater, no more questions are asked. On the other hand, with home chefs on ChefCurate, both cooks and eaters take the pains to tell and know about each other empathetically. The point is not to quickly establish familiarity and forget about it, but to enjoy the very process of getting to know each other, about a foreign culture and cuisine, of pleasurable experimenting with the unknown.

Ben's Saturday "Ramen Reverie" lunches had anywhere between 5 and 20 people, who gathered at his flat to enjoy a bowl of Tonkotsu (pork broth) ramen and numerous other starters for 1900 rupees. This was expensive for Mumbai's standard dinner fare, and everyone, especially those joining for the first time seemed nervous, but as everyone sipped on his or her favourite drinks, and food started being served with Ben's commentary, people fully immersed themselves in jovial conviviality. Some were frequent diners, at Ben's house, and others' houses too. Gaya, an advertising executive in her 30s, tells me that she joins these home dining experiences first and foremost because she is a "foodie" who's "all up for food I've never had before. It's not cheap, but its like going to the movies. Its an experience." And while the food is the main protagonist, the sense of adventure she gets from entering a neighborhood she's always known of and walked passed by but never had the chance to actually go in, is thrilling. As with Ben's lunch customers, but much more so with his dinner visits, the home chef platform allows small experiments of sociality which people do not usually engage with in their everyday rhythm of life and work. Casual meet ups happen at bars and clubs as well, but the fact that there is a common topic, food, which is also a conversation catalyser, helps people get to know each other, viscerally. Here, the "home" is not so much a place for one to be entirely immersed in normality and comfort, but an object and space of the Other - of discovering something you did not know, as well as taking part in the pleasure of slowly familiarizing ones' self with this unknown, a form of self-transformation, without the

transgressional catharsis, but its hefty price nevertheless making it an occasional indulgence.

The home chef experience is a growing trend in Mumbai and other urban cities in India and beyond - but its outlook is rather different to tiffin services. Although the commodification of the home and intimacy play a central feature in all of these enterprises, tiffin services strive for, and their customers look for, a long term commitment, that is, the food is more tended toward “normality” (Janeja 2010) - the food, and the act of eating it, is structured in the social life of the eater repetitiously. While there are long term fans of Ben and other home chefs, on the whole the relationship between a home chef and a “foodie” is one-shot, because as one “foodie” confessed, “we get bored of the same food easily”. Moreover, instead of expecting the cook to change the menu everyday, there already was a platform where they could easily seek a new cook every meal. “If you like the meal, you obviously keep that in mind, and will order again - but maybe next month, and not next week. If you’re lucky you hit it off well and become friends - and that’s another story.” The opposition between choice and repetition is pertinent - while a class of people steeped in the pleasures of gastro-adventure - such as unmarried under 30s who enjoy going out and trying out new things - enjoy the choices available and feel empowered with their agency and economic capital for achieving their aspirations and desires, other are past that stage, and find that choice and abundance burdensome, such as Satya, who returns to his family’s ghar-ka-khana.

The way in which chefs and diners are being connected - or more precisely, how the everyday, fleeting desires of “I want to cook” and “I have to eat”<sup>104</sup> across the city are aligned - also pose important questions. For modern home chefs in Mumbai, online aggregators like ChefCurate, curate these desires - these platforms suggest alternative ways to monetize cooking, such that home chefs that enjoy (or require to do) cooking for friends and family can extend their skills to other guests, or semi-professional chefs like Ben can try out their skills, or professional chefs can break away from the limitation of their employers’ restaurant menu and can experiment. For eaters, they are presented with a market place experience where they

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<sup>104</sup> Sloan, R. (2015 Nov 06). Why I Quit Ordering From Uber-for-Food Start-Ups. *The Atlantic*. Retrieved 28 Sep 2017 from <https://www.theatlantic.com/technology/archive/2015/11/the-food-delivery-start-up-you-havent-heard-of/414540/>

not only shop for the food but also for the chefs themselves, where the chefs' profile page are marketing tools which adds value to the product. While these services have just taken off in India, start-ups in the US and Europe have developed more sophisticated business models, and these innovations have been likened to the Uber (delivery) and AirBnB (hosting) of food. The Mumbai food start-ups market has a long way to go when compared to the scene in San Francisco or London, in terms of delivery and production logistics. However, the parallels that can be made between what has been called the "sharing economy", and the informal networks that have been connecting cooks and eaters in Mumbai much before the advent of the internet, are pertinent: a bio-moral-economic market that I will turn to in Chapter VIII.

This chapter has examined how the opposition between *ghar-ka-khana* and *bahar-ka-khana* in contemporary Mumbai operates as a schema by which urban Mumbaikars come to negotiate their sense of selfhood, social distinction, and aspirations of health and wellbeing in the city. Economic liberalization since the early 1990s brought upon a vibrant public dining culture and its related modes of pleasure and experimentation, as well as new forms of anxieties regarding the porous boundaries of home and outside; these were dealt with in a variety of ways, from setting up visceral boundaries between the two realms, to embracing and domesticating "outside" foods, filtering its adulterations through loving, home cooking. Moreover, amidst such developments, *ghar-ka-khana* becomes a marketing device, which addresses these anxieties of balancing urban pleasure with domestic comfort in contemporary Mumbai. In the following two chapters, I will examine both the Indian *tiffin*, or lunchbox, and the Mumbai Dabbawalas, an idiosyncratic business community who has operated within the city for the past 125 years, delivering homemade tiffins. Whilst always taking part in the bio-moral work of reproducing domestic intimacy in the urban public, acting as a "technology of purity" for their commuter customers to exercise social distinction and wellbeing in their everyday lives through ingesting *ghar-ka-khana*, the Dabbawalas, like the emergent *ghar-ka-khana* industries of tech savvy food start-ups and luxury home chefs, have started to acquire novel associations of cleanliness, hygiene, and hard work, which itself reflects cotemporary anxieties of Mumbaikars over an ever congested and chaotic city.

## **Chapter V. The bio-moral history of the Indian tiffin (lunchbox) and the Mumbai Dabbawalas (lunchbox delivery men): from late 19<sup>th</sup> century Bombay to millennial Mumbai**

### **1. Technologies of purity on three scales**

For the 7 million Mumbaikars who commute to work and schools everyday, the lunchtime meal is one that is eagerly awaited, replenishing mind and body, preparing one for the afternoon.<sup>105</sup> As I explored in Chapter IV, *ghar-ka-khana* embodies rich social, medical, and ethical significance in India, which is contrasted with *bahar-ka-khana* - eating outside was not fit for long-term eating regimes, where restaurants were too expensive and were an occasional treat “to go out” with colleagues, while street foods were considered to be unhygienic snacks inducing guilty pleasure, and hence an occasional indulgence. Yet, the main issue with eating *ghar-ka-khana* in urban cities such as Mumbai was to figure out how to secure it during the day, away from home. Indeed, lunch, for most commuters, is eaten outside the home, except for those lucky few that work close enough home to go back and grab a meal. Thus, it is very common for commuters, especially who live with family, to carry a packed lunch called a *tiffin* or *dabba* to work cooked by female kin. There are also 200,000 others who outsource this need to carry tiffin, to a particular organization which carries out tiffin delivery services throughout the city - the Mumbai Dabbawala organization. Covering roughly 3% of the entire commuter force in the city, the *Dabbawala* network - literally “lunchbox delivery men” - is an idiosyncratic yet exemplary case in which the visceral politics of food are carried out on an everyday basis. It is exemplary for the way it shows the ubiquitous obsession among Mumbaikars for maintaining boundaries and protecting vital substance - an everyday technology of purity within the city. This chapter and the next, which focuses on the history and morality of the tiffin and its distribution networks, will explore the specific bio-moral risks, considerations, and aspirations that spring from

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<sup>105</sup> Geetam Tiwari (2007) estimates in the 2007 survey: “Urban India: Understanding the Maximum City”, that nearly 6.5 million people out of 18 million residents, or one third of the entire population, use public transport on a daily basis to commute to work.

this need to secure ghar-ka-khana in the city during the day, through the interconnected scales of tiffin, Dabbawala, and the Dabbawala organization.<sup>106</sup>

The prime function of lunchboxes is to contain, carry, and preserve food safely across a distance. It's particular form, material, and contents, however, changes with history and culture, ultimately changing the scope of its social significance.<sup>107</sup> This chapter will begin by examining the history of the Indian tiffin, which developed out of the industrialization of work in Indian cities, and its ergonomic and material form evolving so as to adapt to a medically and ritually porous environment (Chapter I). I attest to how the stainless steel materiality of the Indian tiffin, popularly called “ever-silver”, acquires bio-moral significance in India, as a technology of purity to protect vital substance in the urban public. In section 4 and 5, I will examine the history of the Mumbai Dabbawalas, who's labour of carrying tiffin throughout the city of Mumbai since the late 19<sup>th</sup> century, was intimately structured within the reproductive economy of the urban masses who laboured in the city's bustling cotton mill industry. This link continued on until the 1980s, when the cotton mills collapsed, a transitional phase for both the organization and the city at large, its manufacturing base giving way to a de-industrialized, service sector based economy (Chandavarkar 2009; Patel and Thorner 1995). Post-economic liberalization in the early 90s shifted the Dabbawala client base from blue-collar mill workers to white-collar office commuters. Whereas the former engaged with the Dabbawalas as a means to secure community-body specific meals provided by *khanawalis*, institutions which provided inexpensive food and lodging to toiling migrants, the latter relied on the Dabbawalas to mitigate their bio-moral anxieties, and to exercise social distinction, within the urban public, at an affordable price.

This historicity will serve as a means to contextualize their current work and network in contemporary Mumbai, which I will explore in the next Chapter VI, as a bio-moral infrastructure of vital substance that runs throughout the city. If the Indian tiffin comprises a technology of purity to protect vital substance across a distance, the

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<sup>106</sup> As I will explore in Chapter VII, commensality in the office was an essential social technology for people to come together and develop intimate connections with each other, as well as being an occasion where visceral boundaries were drawn, undermining the cosmopolitan ethos of mingling. For those who do not have anyone at home to cook for them, “tiffin services” and canteens were utilized to secure an inexpensive source of commercially prepared homemade food, an enterprise that I discuss in detail in Chapter VIII.

<sup>107</sup> See, for instance, Noguchi (1994) for “ekiben”, or “train lunches” consumed on high-speed bullet trains in contemporary Japan.

Dabbawalas also glossed their service and appearance as those fit to carry such a vital substance. Such visceral-ethical self management, which is represented and upheld by the Dabbawala work ethic, uniform, and religiosity, comprises a technology of purity on the scale of the individual Dabbawala embedded in the bio-moral network of flowing tiffins, navigating the risks of the city through this vast network. Ghar-ka-khana, protected by the stainless steel tiffin, further carried by the Dabbawalas' expert knowledge and bio-moral capital to navigate the city, comprise a symbiotic relationship (Janeja 2010), which was instrumental for middle, and lower-middle class urban commuters to negotiate social distinction within the city, who relied on ingesting ghar-ka-khana in the workplace to maintain purity, health, and communal identity. These everyday negotiations were further upheld by the bio-moral capital, which the entire Dabbawala organization itself started to accumulate over the past 20 years of their 125-year history. The Dabbawalas, beyond their everyday work of carrying tiffin, are increasingly collaborating with governments, corporations, NGOs, and various media organizations, as brand ambassadors of cleanliness, efficiency, and hard work, promoting health and hygiene related products and enterprises. This construction feeds back into their reputation as a business community most fit to carry the charged substance of ghar-ka-khana within the city. The emergence of this representation is itself symptomatic of a larger anxiety regarding mixing and boundary making that urban dwellers of post-liberalization Mumbai grapple with, on a day-to-day basis. These interconnected technologies of purity over three scales - the tiffin, the Dabbawala, and the organization - are the everyday visceral technologies of boundary making, to protect vital substance within the chaotic and congested city of Mumbai.

## **2. The history of the Indian tiffin**

According to the Anglo-Indian dictionary *Hobson-Jobson*, the word *tiffin* is said to derive from the late 18th century English colloquial verb *tiffing*, meaning, "eating or drinking out of meal times; a light snack; tea, or tea-time". By the early 19th century, its substantive form *tiffin* started to acquire the meaning of a "light luncheon", as in "Many persons are in the habit of sitting down to a repast at 1 'o' clock, which is called tiffin, and is in fact an early dinner", in James Cordiner's *A Description of Ceylon* (1807). While the colonial British were accustomed to consume a grand and elaborate mid-day meal, they could not get themselves to do the same in



India's hot and humid climate; breakfast and supper became heavier, while luncheon less hearty - as such, it started to denote a "light mid-day meal." By the late 19th century, the concept of a *tiffin carrier* emerged, and it was common practice for colonial officers to have brought their *tiffin* to office. The practice soon grew among local businessmen and officers, and the founding father of the Dabbawalas, Mahadeo Havaji Bachche, started his first lunch delivery work by delivering tiffin to a Parsee banker in the 1890s.

This was a time when the industrial revolution and the emergence of the modern factory started to transform the work and eating habits of the working class. The separation of home and work brought upon a commuting culture, where workers would go back and forth, within a day, between home and work. As factory owners realized the importance of a mid-day meal in increasing productivity, they encouraged ways for the workers to quickly recharge without leaving the shop floor, such as setting up canteens or having them bring food from home. Miners, factory workers, dockhands, and other labourers used dinner pails, or metallic buckets, to hold and carry hardy fare, perhaps the most famous of industrial portable food of this time being Cornish pasty's, of which its hard edge served as a portable handle which could be discarded after consumption.<sup>108</sup> In colonial Bombay, this was brought upon by the booming of the cotton textile industry, starting from the mid 19th century, where at its peak it employed around 20% of Bombay's working population (Chandavarkar 2009). Workers used to work 3 shifts, which produced a proliferation of *khanawalis*, or informal lodging and catering houses, where many thousands of tiffins were delivered to the cotton mills on a daily basis - I will explore this bio-moral network between *khanawalis*, mills, and Dabbawalas, in the following section. By the early 20th century, tiffin seems to have acquired a household name: the Times of India mentions them in 1910, among lost articles in the Mahalaxmi horse races ("a gent's straw hat, articles of native clothing, gold locket set photo, small bag, scissors, knives, a lady's cape, a tiffin carrier, a fox terrier..."), and they appeared in the Times' commodities price reports in 1932: "Tiffin carrier (Bombay fashion)" was 13 Indian rupees, while "Tiffin carrier (Bangalore fashion)" was 14 rupees.<sup>109</sup> One can also find news

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<sup>108</sup> Smithsonian National Museum of American History. Retrieved 28 Sep 2017 from <http://americanhistory.si.edu/lunchboxes/>

<sup>109</sup> Doctor, V. (2013 Oct 09). The Lunchbox: Testament to work of housewives and dabbawallas of Mumbai. The Economic Times. Retrieved 28 Sep 2017 from

fragments which mention the tiffin, such as crime reports with “stolen tiffins”, as it was common practice to send money with the lunch.

Currently, the word tiffin, or dabba in various Indian languages such as Hindi and Marathi, meaning box, is widely used throughout India to denote a cooked lunch to be eaten at office or school. As I explored in Chapter IV, in Mumbai, a typical lunchtime meal for office workers would consist of any combination of dal, rice, subzi, and roti, with sides such as salad, pickles, fruit, and yoghurt. If all of these were present, it was often called a *pura khana*, or a full meal, and is typically eaten on a plate called *thali*, with all the different dishes laid onto the table horizontally, and one could pick and match onto their thali as they wish. One can conceive of the tiffin as a portable form of the thali, which took the form of a vertical box with multiple separate containers stacked onto each other, tightly sealed with an outer clamp so as to prevent spillage (Fig. 8). It came in many sizes, but those with three to four containers were most common, as it could carry a variety of separate dishes, including the “pura khana” setup. The nature of the food informs the development of the form and the social scope of the tiffin. Food had to be “cooked” to be considered a proper meal - it had to be warm (at one point at least), its ingredients tempered and transformed into edible food, with seasoning and human labour. Moreover, food had to be made freshly every morning, and leftovers for the previous night were discouraged, as per traditional ritual proscriptions rendering leftovers as polluting - the value of “freshness” was predicated on the daily movement between home and work, where each meal was consumed within that day.

Importantly, these cooked dishes were all *viscous*, making it easily separable and distributable, and people made distinctions between these types of communal food, compared to sandwiches, burgers, pizzas, and so on, which were considered individualistic food, food that did not allow creative mixing and matching. (I explore the significance of commensality in the office canteen as a site to negotiate cosmopolitan mingling and visceral politics in Chapter VII.) In India, it is an important proscription to only mix foods right before eating it, hence the tiffin took its form as a vertical container, with each compartment tightly sealed being of utmost importance - viscous foods easily seep into each other if not carefully sealed and compartmentalized. Thus, although horizontal plastic Tupperware containers were



Figure 8 - The standard 4-story stainless steel tiffin. (Photo by author).

popular among commuters, due to their lightness and compactness, they had one drawback - only a limited combination of dry dishes could be packed, with the aid of a tin foil separating it, and wet dishes were out of the question. It was rare for commuters using public transportation to carry multiple story tiffins, and mostly brought small size, 1 or 2 story tiffins, or horizontal plastic Tupperware. The vertical tiffins were bulky, and often too large to fit in ones bag, thus making transportation difficult, especially so when having to commute during the rush hours between the north and north-eastern suburbs to the central and southern central business districts. In a city where the average commuting time is around 1 hour, carrying a 20cm tall object weighing close to 1kg by hand is not only cumbersome but also stirs up anxieties over spillage and contamination. The Mumbai Dabbawalas were used to outsource this stressful process of carrying ones tiffin, as I will detail in Chapter VI.

The sheer everydayness of tiffin is a source of inspiration for contemporary artists such as Subodh Gupta, who uses a variety of stainless steel crockery, including tiffin, to create startling installations, such as a large metal bucket pouring out a fountain of stainless steel cooking pots, or a gigantic skull made of utensils - taking on the “readymade” tradition of modern art, he takes everyday objects out of its ordinary

usage to address issues such as globalization, materiality, tradition, and social change. For instance, in *Only One Tiffin* (Fig. 9), a large container is stuffed with stainless steel crockery, with one tiffin covered in a piece of cloth, which is a common practice in day to day usage, barely visible on the bottom, crushed by the shiny mass. The alluring, but empty containers are juxtaposed with the lone, packed container with food in it - an allegory of modernity, in the way it stirs up glittering aspirations, while keeping its substantial promises only for a lucky few. Yet another piece is titled *Faith Matters*, (Fig. 10), where the Indian tiffin flows on a foreign (Japanese) circuit of the sushi belt – something as rooted as the tiffin gets reinterpreted in the global age, albeit becoming clean, shiny, and purified, acquiring novel meanings. In both works, what is highlighted is the evermore shiny qualities of stainless steel - fondly called “ever-silver” in India - a quality which I will explore in the following section 3.

Figure 9 - Subodh Gupta, *Only One Tiffin*.

(Stainless steel utensils; fabric. PinchukArtCentre 2010. © artist Accessed 28 September, 2017.)

(This image has been removed as the copyright is owned by another organisation.)

Figure 10 - Subodh Gupta, *Faith Matters*.

(Sushi belt, motor, steel, stainless steel, aluminium and brass utensils. PinchukArtCentre. 2010 © artist. Accessed 28 September, 2017.)

(This image has been removed as the copyright is owned by another organisation.)

### 3. “Ever-silver”: the bio-morality of stainless steel tiffin

Tiffin, in its most popularized and immortalized form in India, are those silver, shiny 4 story carriers made from stainless steel. The material was invented by Harry Brearley, a self-taught metallurgist from Sheffield, around 1913-14 on the advent of World War 1, originally to improve gun barrels used at the time, which eroded fast. As he was experimenting with alloys which did not erode easily, he found that a relatively high chromium content produced desired results - and being from Sheffield, the centre of the British cutlery industry at that time, gave him the idea of applying the technology to cutlery and cookware, obtaining his first patent in these fields. Stainless steel crockery was first introduced to India in the 1940s, which became

much popularized in the 1960s and 70s, as more manufacturers had turned to producing it. From the 1950s, there were many important inventions such as the pressure cooker, the gas stove, the refrigerator, and electric grinders which transformed the domestic economy, but stainless steel utensils, in its glitter and comparative ease to acquire compared to such other technologies of domestic mechanization, captured the imagination and aspiration of a growing number of middle class households in India - what Maheshwari Kalpagam (2003) calls “stainless steel modernity.”

First and foremost, stainless steel revolutionized issues of preservation and storage. It was not so useful as cooking pots, since it did not conduct heat as well as copper or iron, nor did it retain heat as well as brass; traditional cooks were aware of this, and always kept a various selection of pots and pans as per needed. However, they excelled in terms of not reacting with the food stored in it, as well as the ease to clean and maintain it. The interiors of traditional copper, iron, and brass pots had to be lined with more inert tin, especially when storing acidic ingredients such as tamarind, yoghurt, and lime, and it was a tremendously tedious task for servants and daughter-in-laws to constantly check up and care for the utensils. Stainless steel significantly reduced such worries, and saved a lot of time - cleaning and managing cooking utensils play a large part in the totality of the food event. The tiffin, which requires a strong, light, inert, and easy to clean container, embraced the stainless steel. Moreover, the utility of stainless steel produced a whole informal economy around it. As Kalpagam (2003: 163-5) notes, when it was first introduced to India, it was so rare and prized that it was carefully managed by mothers to build their daughters' dowries. Utensils were seldom purchased upfront, (except during times of desperation for gifts and dowries), and thus there were many utensil *chits*, a type of recurring monthly deposit account, where at the end of the term one could receive any utensil of one's choice - there were also monthly lucky draws to draw-in customers. These *chits* also offered a platform where housewives socialized, gossiped, and took an active role in matchmaking of each other's children. Vendors came to each household, not to sell but exchange the utensils with old brass pots and saris, which contained little linings of rare metals which they could retrieve (Norris 2010). This economy of recycling appealed to the agency and pride of frugal housewives to bargain and build up their daughters' dowries.

As such, “ever-silver”, as it was fondly called back then, was more than mere utensil - it was a social and cultural capital, to be transacted, accumulated, and displayed. It was synonymous with an urban way of life, a class marker for those embracing modernity (which disrupted and abridged some parts of traditional domestic chores), but at the same time still adhering to the traditional role of housewife, in its unmistakably domestic usage. It is significant that in Kalpagam’s bio-moral history of stainless steel in South India, Brahmins and high-castes embraced stainless steel with most fervour. Their meticulousness regarding hygiene, cleanliness, and purity, had to be strenuously negotiated with the changing times - previously, they would have employed lower-caste servants to do the maintaining of such utensils, but as urbanization took a toll and rendered some high caste households to difficult financial times, making it difficult to employ servants, they had to retort to more cost effective ways to maintain purity. Stainless steel was thus first and foremost a middle class substance, for those negotiating modernity with tradition within their financial and class-status limits.

There is a strong sense in which this is a modernity of the past. Nowadays, plastic, ceramic, and “non-stick” materials are starting to take over the kitchen, and stainless steel lost its allure, as production costs decreased, making it a much more common and mundane material. However, stainless steel still retains its fetishistic qualities for a generation who lived the domestic economy of the past several decades. Isha, 52, originally from the north-western state of Rajasthan who runs a “pure-veg Vaishnav” catering business, swears by its purifying qualities: “Steel tiffins last a long time, and if you pack food in the morning, it still remains fresh in the evening. Plastic is flimsy, and gets coloured easily.” For Isha, stainless steel tiffins are prized for its anti-porousness, its ability to contain vital and vulnerable substance, and protect it from the outer world. Here, the ergonomics and materiality of the tiffin informs folk ideas of medical and ritual substance interaction, and act as an antidote technology of purity amidst an inherently porous world. As Santosh Desai (2012) recalls in one of his vignettes on everyday life in modern India: “The stainless steel shine was ... akin to a face radiating health - to an extent where we could see ourselves in it. ... The family ate in stainless-steel thalis and used stainless-steel tumblers; guests were served in glass and those regarded as help in utensils made of ‘lesser’ substances - maybe plastic or aluminium” (Desai in Doctor 2013: 1). Aesthetics and ethics come together to give rise to the bio-moral qualities of stainless steel.

Lucy Norris' (2010) ethnography of the economics and ethics of recycling second hand saris in North India is testimony to the value and allure of stainless steel. Norris' ethnography captures how, in contemporary India, different types of clothing become transvaluated through entering various regimes and networks of exchange, barter, or gift: for instance, some old saris are rendered not only useless for the owner but as polluted *jhutan* (leftovers), which only then can be given to her servants and maids, those lower on the social ladder - identical to the way leftover foods travel down the hierarchy. As I explored in the Introduction, clothing is "sticky" - it retains the quality of the wearer - hence, this act of bio-moral divestment is necessary for the giver to let go of a part of her to be received by a lower Other, and to transfer value across self and Other. Crucially, Norris stresses that, within such transactions, "garments do not cross pre-existing boundaries of purity and pollution *but create those boundaries* as they are exchanged through mundane daily transactions" (ibid: 134, my emphasis) - recycling emerges as a visceral politics which interpellates the boundaries of high class and low class, pure and impure.

Apart from gifting *jutha* clothing's to servants, middle class Delhi housewives often barter these with shiny metal pots and pans, or *bartan*, with the lower caste Waghri women who make a living out of this exchange, who are after the little threads of gold woven in the saris. Bartering sticky, old clothing with new shiny pots requires a distinct mode of bio-moral divestment on the part of the sari owner, and is linked to the materiality of the two objects bartered. Sticky saris which retain the memory and warmth of the wearer are not to beget more clothing's, since to do so would only reinforce the frailty of the sari, what Norris calls an embodiment of a "relational self" - instead, "[p]ots replace a disintegrating image of the relational self with a more durable aesthetic representation that is usually paired with cloth in dowries; value has passed from the register of cloth to that of metal pots, which are also used to cook and prepare food for the family in the most sacred space in the home," (ibid: 138). In other words, the *bartan* barter is a condition of renewal, of restoring vital boundaries of respectability, cleanliness, and auspiciousness of the domestic sphere. The slipperiness and shininess of *bartan*, one that resists "stick", function as a technology of purity which divests the politically sticky relationship between the disintegrating and ageing self and the domestic home which she must continually purify and take care of.

#### **4. Khanawalis, Dabbawalas, and Cotton Mills - bio-moral networks of the Bombay working classes from the late 19<sup>th</sup> century**

When Mumbai was Bombay, during most of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, small-scale eateries and canteens were popularly called *khanawalis*, a generic term in Marathi and Hindi meaning “a place to eat”, and the people who ran such an eatery [-i is a feminine suffix, as opposed to -a, which is masculine]. These humble institutions occupy an important, yet often untold, place in the socio-economic history and development of Bombay, in so far as mainstream historical accounts only focus on the economic activity, the “production” and “growth”, of Bombay, while not paying sufficient attention to how working bodies were reproduced in a day-to-day basis to perform such productive labour - *khanawalis* commercially nurtured the toiling masses who helped build Bombay into an industrial metropolis. The single most important industry in the history of Bombay is the textile mills, where the first cotton mills were built in the 1850s, which grew substantially in number and employment by the late 19<sup>th</sup> century. What supported this propelling of Bombay into industrial (and colonial) modernity, generating massive revenues for the East India Company as well as for Indian industrialists and the urban elite, were the cheap labour influx from the hinterlands of Maharashtra, especially from Ratnagiri. According to the 1921 census figures, the city’s population was just over a million, compared to 65,000 in 1872, of whom less than only one fifth of the population had been born in the city (Prakash 2010: 43). At 1927, the cotton mills had an average daily employment of 154,000, amassing to about 15% of the total population, while less than 20% of the mill hands being born in Bombay, mirroring population trends of the whole city (Morris David Morris 1965: 226). By the mid 20<sup>th</sup> century, although migrants from the rural Maharashtran areas of Konkan and Deccan still constituted the majority of the labour force, labourers from all over India arrived at the city, facilitated by growth in demand and improvements in travel, contributing to the cosmopolitanism of Bombay’s work and life.

This city of migrants, which experienced an exponential growth in population, also retained close ties with their native villages, as labourers remitted money back to their families, and yet more labourers came into Bombay looking for opportunities through tugging these connections in the city. This inseparable link between the urban and the rural created units of “neighbourhoods” around Mumbai, where the social life of labour migrants was interconnectedly organized along village, kin, and caste ties.



The *Girangaon* neighborhood, literally meaning “the village of the mills”, was the most prominent of such clusters of social networks. Spanning an area of 60 acres, and home to over 130 mills in its prime, it harboured a strong working class culture, which mingled with, and many times transcended, religion, native place, and caste. Issues of housing, security, credit, resolving tensions, finding and managing work, and exploring new business opportunities were taken forward through these dense social relationships and resources. Migrants lived in communal housing called *chawls*, often packed in single rooms at dozens at a time. Work and lodging were deliberately close to each other, where 90% of the mill workers lived 15 minutes walking distance to their workplaces (Chandavarkar 2009: 19). Living and working conditions were atrocious, but there were also occasions for recreation and rejuvenation, if the workers did not feel too worn out, on weekly days off and monthly gazetted holidays based on religious festivals - prostitution, gambling, fairs, wrestling matches, and *tamashas*, popular theatre, organized by *dadas*, local goons or “big men”, characterized Girangaon’s very much urban public culture (Massellos 1984: 42-3). Political rallies, meetings and strikes were often characterized as entertainment, pointing to how life in the neighborhood was performed through everyday spectacles (Chandavarkar 2009: 144).

Most labour migrants in these locales were male: “the mill owners preferred male workers due to restrictions on the hours of women’s work and their entitlement to maternity benefits. With limited employment opportunity in the mills, the women who migrated to the city because of desperate circumstances in the village, widowhood, or to escape family control in the country side were consigned to low-status and low paying casual jobs” (Prakash 2010: 207). The *khanavals* were one such line of work, emerging from these densely packed neighbourhoods, serving single male migrants living in shared accommodation without a domestic hearth. Dina Abbott (1993), in the only existing ethnographic survey of the *khanawalis*, recorded different life stories of *khanawali* cooks in the 1980s, showing how the profile of the cooks, their reasons and aspirations for starting up, and their success varied from enterprise to enterprise. But whether be a Hindu high caste widow, or a Muslim low caste housewife, an essential component for their survival was through utilizing the supportive networks of kin, friends, and neighborhood. Thus, while the women cooked the food, many of their male counterparts would support the business, helping out with loans, accounting, delivery, and resolving disputes. A common problem with

khanawalis was outstanding payments. Many places ran a credit system, to attract customers who were at a precarious financial situation - shared socio-linguistic categories, as well as knowledge of kin and family allowed for flexible payment contracts - and men helped track down outstanding payments, nudging customers through these known kinship and village ties, and if the need arises, intimidating with muscle.

Most importantly, being embedded in the neighborhood allowed access to potential customers. According to my informants who lived through the 50s and 60s, many khanawals were operated by the wives of the mill workers and Dabbawalas, a fact which certainly had an advantage when it came to persuading labourers to eat from their kitchen. There are no exact records as of what kind of food was circulated within this bio-moral network, nor what kind of attitudes towards pleasure and health the working classes of this period had. These were no doubt utilitarian, a matter of subsistence, where price necessarily played a more significant role than pleasure for the toiling masses - for the working and lower middle classes, there was very little of dining out, or dining for pleasure for that matter, until well into the 1960s (Conlon 1995). The same went for the cooks, where necessity more than passion drove their hands. It was exceptionally rare to find a khanawali who did not have massive debts, and commercial cooking was an opportunistic choice, since it was an matter of fact skill for adult women to have acquired over the course of her life - in times of male unemployment, in the face of the fluctuating daily wage labour market, khanawalis were a readily available survival tactic to feed the family and pay the bills (Abbott 1993: 131). It is not hard to imagine that real pleasure came when the workers returned to their villages for religious holidays, and reunited with their family and feasted - although time spent in villages did not always mean relaxing, as workers often helped out with ploughing and other tasks (Massellos 1984).

However, within the tough working and living conditions in the city, there would have been small pockets of satisfaction and victories; or so an anthropologist would like to think. It is unclear whether toilers would have “shopped” for different caterers based on the quality for food (overdoing it might hurt their reputation as disrespecting ones’ elders), but certainly they would have been recommended certain caterers through their kinship and caste connections, and as such would have been fed something familiar to their palette and stomach. Mulshi, an elder Dabbawala who started his line of work in the late 60s, recalls: “We all knew where our hotels

[eateries] were. I'm a Hindu Maratha [caste], and I knew khanavals from the same caste. The woman was from our village. We took both lunch and dinner from her - rice for lunch, and *bhakri* [flatbread] for dinner. We had chicken or fish 3 times a week too. At that time, there were many types of fish, cheap: *raja rani* [mackerel], *vam* [eel], *bombil* [Bombay duck]. We looked forward to these." Although financial constraints on the part of both cook and eater narrowed the menu, the capacity to appreciate and indulge weren't entirely put out in the face of these restrictions.

Khanawalis started to mushroom - at its peak, there were 650 khanavals in Girangaon alone (Chandavarkar 2009: 176) - as the migrant labour population grew and the neighbourhoods became more populous, but also as the work rhythms of the cotton mills became more intensified. Double shifts became normal as demand for cotton increased, and the introduction of night shifts from the 1930s onwards meant that many workers were spending most of their time at the factory floor. Initially, many khanawalis acted as boarding houses, offering not only food but also lodging to single migrant workers, as well as to the unemployed, on credit. Identification of caste and village were important, mainly because of security and traceability of debtors. Most khanavals that sprung up during this time of growth, however, mainly focused on providing food, largely to do with the difficulty of acquiring lodging space, which led to the division of labour between chawls and khanavals, lodging and subsistence. Still, khanavals provided workers with an important place to socialize and meet people from the same village. As Abbott (1993) notes, workers preferred eating at khanavals rather than taking a tiffin, since workers' could negotiate the portions or daily menus face to face, and build rapport with his peers, not to mention taking a momentarily escape from the pressures of the workplace (ibid: 135). Moreover, being served food directly at the place where it was prepared would have ensured freshness and warmth of the meals, which would have been lost if packed into a tiffin for delivery. The introduction of multiple shifts meant that workers could not even take sufficient amount of time to indulge in such occasions of conviviality.

The founding members of the Dabbawalas, who back then were not organized as such, and were doing coolie type jobs for various clients, seized this opportunity and started to deliver tiffins from the khanavals to the mills, for all three shifts, starting from Girangaon, but eventually expanding to all parts of the city. Many recall this as the "golden age" of the Dabbawalas, who subsequently created unions and charitable trusts, organizing themselves as a business community with a particular

focus on food delivery. Hailing from the outskirts of Pune, they were all well versed in the language and habitus of Girangaon, themselves living the migrant experience as with their clients. Their success had, just like the *khanavals*, much to do with their integration into the neighborhood and the socio-economy of the cotton mills. Not only did they connect the mills with the *khanavals*, they themselves ate from the same places, and lived side by side with ones' clients. Female kin of *Dabbawala* would seek work at a *khanaval*, or the wives of successful *Mukadams* (delivery team leaders), who established their own private housing and hearth, started her own business. Since the *Dabbawalas* are Hindu Marathas, it seemed to have been the case that they catered most to *khanawalis* and workers of similar creeds, but as many of my informants emphasized, "commerce came first": a combination of an ethic which denounced discrimination, derived from the ideals of the *Varkari Sampradaya* sect - a religious movement popular in rural Maharashtra, with origins in the anti-Brahmanical 13<sup>th</sup> century *bhakti* (worship) tradition, which I will explore in more detail in the next chapter - as well as an entrepreneurial spirit to expand their business. Still, like attracted like, and many *Dabbawalas* still feel most comfortable picking up tiffins from Hindu areas, and not Muslim quarters, since they could not connect with their clients. Within the *khanawali-dabbawala-mill* triangle, patron-client relationships were fluid, comprising a bio-moral network where food flowed through hands of shared substance, producing and reproducing bodies, neighbourhoods, and the city of mills.

## **5. From mills to malls, or Bombay to Mumbai: situating the *Dabbawala* work and network in millennial Mumbai**

The socio-economic fabric of Bombay which were weaved by the mills and its neighbourhoods were torn apart following the "Great Bombay Mill strikes" in 1982, led by Datta Samant, where some 250,000 mill hands from 50 mills took part, lasting for over 1 year, one of the longest recorded of such collective political action. The rising militancy and vigour of the union workers, and the mill capitalists' recognition of cheaper and less militant labour from the hinterlands of Maharashtra, made negotiations over wage raises and better working conditions difficult. The aftermath of this struggle was more damaging to the mills workers' and their working class culture nurtured over decades, with over 100,000 jobs lost, and Girangaon losing its political and cultural foothold in the city. This was a time of much political and

economic turmoil, and two interlinked processes marked the shift from Bombay as manufacturing hub, to post-Fordist Mumbai - the transformation of the mills into luxury commercial and residential complexes, and the intensification of regionalist, Hindu nationalistic politics. Mill owners collaborated with property developers, government officials, and mafia syndicates, taking advantage of archaic tenancy laws, a liberal reinterpretation of laws on floor space, and political influence through cash and muscle, to redevelop many of the cotton mills in central Mumbai into high-end malls, restaurants, and apartment blocks, a move which has increasingly encroached on many slums and tenements in areas of prime real estate (Menon and Adarkar 2004). Deindustrialization in Mumbai also meant a swelling of its population to serve its bustling service, financial, and entertainment sectors, where the politics of housing and personal space have caused a sharp contrast between those with privileged access to enclaves of official work, and those who flood the streets, making a living through informal work and connections to networks of slums, where over 60% of the population live in just under 15% of space.<sup>110</sup>

Meanwhile, the right wing, regionalist Shiv Sena party started to show great influence in mobilizing such urban poor and the youth, through their street-smart rhetoric and displays of public spectacles and violence, by enforcing its language chauvinism (of Marathi), regional essentialism (of the state of Maharashtra), and Hindutva (Hindu fundamentalism). Notable events in the following decade after the collapse of the mills were the Bombay anti-Muslim riots in 1993, and the changing of the name from Bombay to Mumbai in 1995 - Mumbai is the Marathi pronunciation of “Bombay”, which the Shiv Sena deemed it to be a colonial, thus corrupted, way to call the city, which was originally and rightly theirs (Maharashtrians) only (Hansen 1996; 2001). These spectacles were both largely instigated by the Shiv Sena, and one can say that in this period, there was a shift from working class neighborhood politics to heightened xenophobia and communal tension, especially between Hindus and Muslims. Xenophobic politics and property redevelopment are linked in their attempt to redefine and make claims on urban citizenship and imaginaries of public space. While the former identified and vilified an “Other” (Muslims) which are encroaching on “our soil”, temporary alleviating this tension through bursts of violence and public displays to cleanse the city into a sacred Hindu space, the latter registers itself in the

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<sup>110</sup> Urban India: Understanding the Maximum City, 2007.

elitist utopia of building a “world class city”, free of slums, congestion, and pollution, yet not attentive to the fact that such projects of redevelopment are undermining vital infrastructures such as access to tap water, now affecting even the well to do (Anjaria 2009; Bjorkman 2015; Roy 2011).

As the mills became defunct, so did most khanawalis, but the Dabbawalas managed to survive the changing times, as they were simultaneously catering to white-collar office workers at government offices and banks from the 1950s. At the time, the volume of delivery to offices and schools were much lower compared to the tiffins going to the mills, and while the total number of deliveries plummeted after 1982, this number slowly recovered since economic liberalization in 1991, accompanying the growth of offices and migrants seeking jobs in the city’s growing service sector. As I will explore in Chapter VI, current Dabbawala customers who have their lunches delivered from their home are remnants of a Bombay workforce of the 1960s and 70s, where clerical 9 to 5 jobs were a source of great respectability, in building a stable family and household, as well as upholding their aspirations of ritual and medical purity and health informed by their (predominantly) vegetarian upper caste status. This demographic is slowly changing now, as their customer base is shifting from delivering tiffins from each customers’ homes to their respective offices or schools, to delivering tiffin from canteens and catering companies to their clients. These customers do not take food from their own home, either because there are unmarried, or do not have the time and resources to cook for themselves. Instead, they rely on what I call tiffin services - institutions which I will explore in detail in Chapter VIII - to get their fix of ghar-ka-khana, an institution which have exponentially increased after the collapse of the mills, replacing the traditional khanawalis.

This has also altered the Dabbawala business, where according to Raghunath Medge, president of the Dabbawala charity trust, approximately 30% of the total number of tiffins is delivered from these commercial enterprises, while the rest come from each customers’ home, and the Dabbawala organization forecasts that this trend will continue on to the future. This signifies not only a shift from cotton mill workers to white collar office workers, but also a shift from long-time Dabbawala customers, who used the Dabbawalas as an extension of their own domestic hearth, to a new generation of office workers, students, and migrants, who have a more cosmopolitan outlook where they “shop” for caterers on the lines of region, culinary style, and branding. This is in some ways a return to the old khanawali-worker model, where

commercially produced intimate substance reproduces boundaries of class, community, and social distinction, albeit through the kinaesthetics of culinary diversity, choice, and affordability, and not through the shared substance of family and kinship. However, as I explore in Chapter VIII, there exist more “specialist” caterers who pass on community-body specific substance nurtured through generational cooking techniques and recipes to their customers, who reproduce communal memory, pleasure, and visceral social distinction through these pockets of commercially produced intimate substance. Having contextualized the bio-moral history of the Indian tiffin and Mumbai Dabbawalas with larger transformations of Bombay-Mumbai city, the next chapter will explore the technologies of purity of the Dabbawala work and network in contemporary Mumbai, beginning by an ethnographic account of a day in a life of a Dabbawala, and the journey of the tiffin.

## Chapter VI: The Dabbawala ethics, work, and network in contemporary Mumbai: technologies of purity within the city

### 1. The journey of the tiffin

It is 9:30 a.m. on a hot October Monday, and I am scorched in an *auto-rickshaw*<sup>111</sup> which hasn't moved an inch in the past 5 minutes. I underestimated the morning rush hour of Hill Road in Bandra West, a sprawling suburb in central Mumbai, where cars, autos, and motorcycles crawled and squeezed in every bit of space they can to get to their destinations. Mine is Bandra railway station, less than half a mile from where I live, and I regretted my choice of transportation since I'm already 10 minutes late for my appointment. When I finally reach the West side entrance, the main gateway into the station's red-tiled Victorian style canopy, which houses 2 train lines over 7 platforms, I dart towards a group of men dressed in white *topi-kurta*<sup>112</sup> uniforms rummaging through a sea of vertical metal cylinders splayed out on the ground. The sun glitters off the silver white and drab metal, radiating a distinctive aura, which timelessly stands out among the amoeba-like mass sucked into the station, like waves forming and crashing. Most of these people are southbound, making their excruciating daily commute towards South Mumbai central business district. Shankar spots me, and is extremely irritated: "You late! Sorting starting! I have 10 more. Come!" Shankar is a Dabbawala, one of the 5000 or so lunchbox deliverymen who deliver close to 200,000 tiffins, or lunchboxes, on a daily basis to commuters all around the city. The core of their business model, to deliver homemade food to labourers in Mumbai, has not changed over the past 125-years of their organizational history. The metal tiffins were being intensely scanned by the 15 or so Dabbawalas present, ranging from 22-year-old Shankar to those who could be his grandfather, hurriedly sorting and loading these onto wooden crates to be carried onto the luggage compartment of the train. More Dabbawalas are arriving with their batches of tiffin, hung beside their rusty bicycles or stacked on wooden pushcarts, whilst barking at pedestrians and *auto-wallas*<sup>113</sup> coming in their way.

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<sup>111</sup> Taxis.

<sup>112</sup> Topi-kurta is a common cap and upper-garment for (mostly) men, worn as a set in a variety of everyday and religious/ceremonial settings throughout India.

<sup>113</sup> Taxi drivers.



If space is squeezed in Mumbai, so is time. Each Dabbawala must deliver, on average, 40 tiffins to diverse clients in different locations, all within the crucial timeframe of lunchtime between 12pm and 1pm; moreover, the 200,000 tiffins all come from different points, the individual domestic hearths of clients as well as small-scale catering businesses, rendering the entire logistical ordeal, upheld by a meticulous sorting system and painstakingly coordinated teamwork, an immensely complex one. Risk and uncertainty is endemic to their work. These range from everyday congestion, transportation delays, and road blockages, to the frequent religious processions, political rallies, and devastating monsoon rains which temporarily destabilize the city. Since each tiffin goes through multiple hands, from pick up, sorting, to delivery, a single componential delay within this 60km longitudinal supply chain will cause a catastrophic butterfly effect on the entire system. I hear Ailu, 41 year old *mukadam*, or team leader of Shankar's group, angrily thrusting a tiffin onto a crate while shouting into his sturdy black Nokia phone, making a bone crushing thump. One of his team members hasn't appeared yet, and he is making arrangements with his colleagues in Grant Road station, the receivers of his tiffins. Thinking to myself, "*That's* why most tiffins are dented", and worrying about its contents, Shankar tugs on my arm, handing me a white topi. "He says, 10:39 [train] to Churchgate [station]. Last train. We miss, we are finish. *Boss*, lets go." Putting on the cap, half transforming myself to a Dabbawala, I get it through my head that a bewildered anthropologist is such an unexpected risk, which nevertheless must be accounted for.

The two of us rush up the stairs which connect to an overpass, leading to the East exit of the station. Eyeing the rows of colourful *chawls* adjacent to a defunct train track where children and women are conducting their daily chores, we arrive at the entrance of a large bazaar with many bystreets branching off of it, housing numerous tenements vertically stacked onto each other like an intricate anthill. The energy and the congestion feels assaulting, but the fact that people are in control of what they are doing gives me a sense of strange comfort. Shankar is walking with calm, steady long steps, sewing swiftly through the army of commuters marching against us trying to reach the station; I am running and panting behind him with my camera on record, almost tripping on a flurrying chicken which perhaps escaped from one of the local butchers. This is a largely Muslim locale, which is evident from the distinct skullcaps and headscarves which many of the men and women wear, as well as from the large

*masjid* at the entrance of the marketplace; but, like many slum areas, it is home to other communities, living and working side by side. There is a *koli* woman who set up shop on the pavement selling fish, angrily shooing off greedy cats and crows trying to snatch cut-up pieces of *surmai* and *bombil*, staples of coastal Maharashtrians. Vegetable vendors are voraciously haggling with housewives, and Shankar stops by one onion vendor, and introduces me to the man, whom he says is his “*gaon-wala* [country man], from Pune.” All Dabbawalas come from one of 52 villages in the same district in the outskirts of Pune, and identify as *Maratha* Hindus, and descendants of the legendary 17<sup>th</sup> century warrior Shivaji, like many other working class Maharashtran men (Hansen 2001). Many a Dabbawala have told me their warrior lineage is the source of their virility, which allows them to carry heavy loads of tiffins on their backs through the city, everyday. They are also followers of the *Varkari Sampradaya* sect, a religious movement which broke off from Hinduism in the 13<sup>th</sup> century, which puts supreme emphasis on unconditional *bhakti* [worship] to all beings in this world - their anti-Brahmanical philosophy of non-discrimination is the reason why many worshipped Varkari saints are women and lower-castes (Roncaglia 2013: 37 - 40). It is also why the Dabbawalas openly say that they serve everyone, from Hindus to Muslims to Christians without exception, since “work is worship”. These Varkari ideals were tested when a few young Muslim boys heckle Shankar, whistling and shouting “*Arre, superstar!*” pointing to his flashy-sunglasses-on-pilgrim-white-uniform-look, me and my camera’s presence fuelling the situation. The usually joyful Shankar bitterly says, “Muslims are bad, so, so dirty,” as he bites into his breakfast, a raw onion<sup>114</sup> which he snatched from his vendor friend.

As I glimpsed Shankar’s inner contradictions between warrior Maratha and compassionate Varkari<sup>115</sup>, he made a quick left turn into one of the tiny alleyways leading into the congested chawls, and I followed him past lines of laundry hung between the narrow buildings shrouding our path, up a pair of rusty steel ladders into one of the tenements, where an old lady of about 70 with a lively purple headscarf with thick spectacles greets us. There are two tiffins with a long piece of cloth on top of it placed nearby the entrance of this simple one-room tenement. Shankar explains,

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<sup>114</sup> Onions are yet another form of class distinction. As I explored in Chapter III, onions are “hot” foods, inducing virility. For the destitute classes, it is a common condiment eaten with rice; for the working classes, a cheap source of *chatpata* (kick). The middle classes and above avoided raw onions during the day for the fear of foul breath.

<sup>115</sup> I will explore this further in section 2.1.

“Her two sons, *daktar*<sup>116</sup>, at KEM hospital,” as he ties a tight knot with the thread, bundling the two tiffins together, making a large circle with enough space for him to carry the bundle on his shoulder. Shankar fills in the gaps for me: Mrs Sheikh, a Muslim lady who moved to Mumbai from Gujarat many years ago, is living here alone, but has been sending tiffins to her two children for the past 6 years through Shankar, who proudly calls her a “Very good customer”. The older one is a bachelor; the younger one is married, without children, but his wife is working in a printing office, and has no time to cook food for him. I ask, in Hindi, whether she sees her sons often; Mrs Sheikh, with a shy laugh, answers: “*Bilkul nahin! Wo bahut bahut busy hai ... public mein chutti nahin le sakta hai. Lekin, tiffin har roz khali vaapis aata hai.* [Absolutely not! They are very, very busy. You can’t get holidays in a public hospital. But, their tiffins always come back empty.]” Imagining her pleasure of seeing the cleanly licked off tiffins, its emptiness indexing a full stomach, I ask what is on the menu today. She had woken up at 7:30 am to start preparing the tiffin, a dozen pieces of chapatti, subzi, rice, dal, and salad. She rushes off to her kitchen, a simple amalgamation of a gas burner, a *tawa* [flat frying pan], chopping boards, and a modest collection of oils and spices, and scoops a portion of leftover subzi, which she says is her lunch. Holding the spoon out to me while opening her mouth, so as to sympathetically open mine also, I allow myself to be fed - the aroma and taste of *tendli* [Indian ivy gourd] cooked to perfection with *haldi* [turmeric] and *hing* [asafoetida] gently spreads through my mouth. My smile contagiously causes both Mrs Sheikh and Shankar to smile also, the moment feeling like an oasis amidst the bustle of the city. Shankar doesn't eat, but eagerly accepts a cool cup of *kokum sharbat* [kokum-berry juice] to rejuvenate. Mrs Sheikh, satisfied that her feeding is much appreciated, points to Shankar and says: “*Ye mera baccha hai.* [He is like my son.]” This exchange of affection contradicted Shankar’s earlier bitter remark towards Muslims - stereotypes are made in terms of generalized categories, which more often than not are betrayed by individual cases.

We hurried onto other homes, who were equally awaiting Shankar’s services. As the number of tiffins he dangles from his body grew from two, to three, to ten, not only its weight slowly pressures down on his shoulders, each tiffin weighing in at up to 1kg each, but also its long dimensions expands his body size to almost double,

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<sup>116</sup> A common Indian-English pronunciation of “doctor”.

making it more and more difficult for him to pave through the narrow streets. A reckless motorcycle runs past us from behind in a near-miss collision, thanks to Shankar's quick reflexes to hear out its beeping amidst the cacophony of the bazaar, tugging his left arm upward to avoid contact. Shankar is calm and confident; this is his turf. Each Dabbawala is assigned a *delivery line* when they first join, which is the specific route from pick up to final delivery, and usually sticks with it throughout their careers, notwithstanding sudden injuries and changes in demand - in Shankar's case, this was between picking up from two suburbs in Bandra East, and delivering to offices around Nariman Point in South Mumbai. Having serving this line for the past 9 years since he started out in his early teens, Shankar has developed expert knowledge of the nooks and crannies of this neighbourhood, from shortcuts to localized risks. He also has an audible boisterousness, making a distinct whistle, or occasionally a lively shout, which he uses to alert and shoo off inattentive passer-by's coming his way. In this sense, Shankar not only navigates the obstacles of the city, but also proactively carves his own spaces, the delivery line temporarily being erected and materialized as he makes his own path.

This final pick up journey was completed in 40 minutes, longer than usual on account of Shankar taking time to introduce me to his clients, but we managed to return to Bandra station, West side exit in time. At this point, all tiffins had been placed on the wooden crates in neat rows, with a few empty spaces here and there. Ailu, mukadam, spots us from afar and shouts inaudibly in Marathi; Shankar ignores this and swiftly places his tiffins onto the crates. There are 38 tiffins on Shankar's crate, weighing well over 40 kilograms. With the help of two other Dabbawalas, who pick up the two corners of the crate and thrust it at head height, Shankar balances this mammoth 2-meter long cargo on his head, tightly gripping the two sides with his hands. I cannot begin to imagine the weight exerted on Shankar's body, which is no more than 160cm. His veins are popping out from his temple, and a thick wave of sweat pours down his face and neck; he doesn't say a word, and starts climbing a flight of stairs to reach his train which is 3 platforms away from the entrance. He takes each step extremely carefully, and the commuters around him are visibly trying to avoid Shankar, as a turn or slip could be fatal. Shankar curses extremely loudly at an office commuter with geeky glasses coming down the stairs, ignoring rush-hour station rules of keeping to one side of the stairs: "*Tere gand me rocket hai kya?! Is there a rocket up your ass?!*", turning the office worker's face red with embarrassment,

redder than the pavement dweller with vitiligo lying on the ground who roars with laughter. We reach platform 3, where southbound “slow” trains (trains which stop at every station) on the Western line departs, and, again with the help of two idle Dabbawalas, carries off the cargo from his head onto the ground. It is 10:32, seven minutes to the 10:39 train - most Dabbawalas check their wristwatch or their phones to constantly keep their positions in check - and a relieved Shankar goes over to the station kiosk to hydrate.

We, a group of 7 Dabbawalas and many dozens of tiffins, are waiting in front of the luggage compartment, reserved for commuters with large cargo such as vendors and street hawkers carrying their products. Other Dabbawalas in the Bandra team have gone to platform 5, where the express “fast” trains depart - these stop at less stations, and are usually more crowded. As I outlined in Chapter II, the 12 or 15 carriages of Western line local trains are broken down into several categories, from first, second, women’s-only, and disabled classes, with different fares and etiquettes, but the two to three luggage compartments are, due to the limited space and the combined size of each passenger with his luggage, a particularly difficult one to manoeuvre during rush-hour. The clock hits 10:38, and the Dabbawalas start taking their positions. The punctual suburban trains are both lifeline and burden for Dabbawalas - without its reach and precision their network would not have expanded to this scale, while on the other hand, the moment of transition from platform to train is always one of grave danger. This is because the halting timeframe is less than 1 minute, and within this short window many hundreds of commuters go on and off individual carriages. During peak hour, people start reshuffling inside the carriages minutes before arrival, calling out to people in front of them whether they will be getting off next; if one fails to advance towards the exit doors in time, the flood of incoming passengers will push you back in an unstoppable force. The sensation here is floating, rather than riding. Although I have experienced this wave on the second-class carriage, it was the first time for me to get on the luggage compartment, where commuters have to battle for even less space with larger body size.

The 10:39 slow train was strategically chosen since it departs from Borivali station, a northern suburb, and is less crowded than trains departing from Virar, which is further north and carries with it even more commuters. Still, the Borivali-Churchgate train is no less a war-zone. As the numerous other vendors slowly crowd the area, Shankar, grabbing one end of his crate, warns me: “You ride when I say;

very very quick.” The train comes into the platform, and you can already hear shouts coming from both the incoming train and the platform; commuters start jumping off the open doors much before the train halts, carrying with them the velocity of the train, several of them almost running into people. A common sight, but equally frequent are slips and injuries. Shouts become louder and louder, and the Dabbawalas form a group in an effort to protect their ground and ward off the dozen or so commuters with large bags full of clothes, gadgets, and vegetables who are also struggling to get a foothold. As the luggage compartment arrives 10 seconds past 10:39, exactly at where the Dabbawalas have camped, the shouting and screeching peaks to almost a comic level, where it feels like the passengers on the platform are conducting a military drill as the passengers on the train, with a mild panic, load off their cargos. 20 seconds later, the passengers were off; now was the time to strike. The Dabbawalas shout: “*Pudhe chala!* Move forward!” as they drive the two crates and batches of tiffin into the half full compartment, swiftly sliding these onto the ground neatly against the wall so as to make enough space for other passengers to load in their luggage. Some Dabbawalas take up the much-coveted place next to the open doors, where the breeze can be fully felt, while others compactly place themselves on the ground. I sit with Shankar in such a manner, observing the vendors carrying in their cargos, figuring out how to place them most efficiently, like a game of Tetris. One vendor asks if he can put his immensely large bag full of coriander on top the tiffin crate, and a yawning Shankar answers in the affirmative - I think to myself, his customers have no idea what their tiffins are going through. The train departs, but there is no time to rest. As we approach Dadar station, Ailu suddenly stands up and picks 2 bundles of tiffin out, goes towards one end of the open exit, and passes it over to a Dabbawala across the train tracks, waiting in the platform at the luggage compartment spot. As Shankar explained to me, this improvised “tiffin exchange” was done because, since these two tiffins were going to Mumbai Central station, which both Fast and Slow trains pass through, Ailu calculated that it would reach the destination faster if he gave it to a Dabbawala waiting to catch the Fast train, which was coming in within 3 minutes, and for him to pass it on to one of his fellow Dabbawalas alighting at Mumbai Central. Total time saved would have been no more than 10 minutes, but these 600 seconds are gold within the Dabbawala supply chain. This is the work required of a mukadam: not only to know ones’ line inside out, but to

optimize the flow of tiffins across intersecting lines. Shankar proudly says, pointing to his head: “Inside topi, we have computer!”

As stations and people came and went, Shankar signals to me that we will be getting off soon, at Churchgate terminus. Loading off is made slightly easier here since there aren’t many passengers coming on the train, which will now make its relatively empty northbound journey, but it is still hard work carrying the tiffin crates off. Across the main entrance of the station are a dozen or so Dabbawalas sorting tiffins out, their white uniform visible from afar. The final sorting process is underway - the tiffins which Shankar collected from Bandra East are sorted and bundled according to destination, and, in turn, tiffins arriving from all over Mumbai are sorted according to their destination, Nariman Point, for Shankar to deliver them.<sup>117</sup> It is approaching 11:30, and Shankar has less than 30 minutes to make his delivery of around 30 tiffins, of which half or so are going to one, large office building. Shankar goes to pick up his bicycle in a nearby parking lot, ties all of these tiffins onto it, and directs me to catch an auto to follow him, since he does not have time to walk, nor a spare bicycle. He will first make smaller rounds to individual offices and shops, then go to the large office complex located in Nariman Point to deliver his last batch of 15 tiffins; he takes off, navigating through the traffic, the bundle of tiffins looking like a rocket-engine from behind. I reach Nariman Point in 10 minutes or so, which is an area of prime real estate, the southernmost point of the “Queens necklace” starting from Chowpatti beach, so called from the magnificent night-time illuminations overlooking the Arabian Sea. The office area, behind the famous Oberoi hotel, also infamous for being targeted during the 2008 Mumbai terrorist attacks, is home to iconic skyscrapers such as the Air India building, Express Towers, and major State banks. From the auto, I can spot several Dabbawalas on bikes and handcarts on their way to these large buildings; Shankar’s delivery point is past these, a large commercial office building on the Nariman Point *khau-galli* (food lane), full of street vendors, selling a variety of foods, drinks, and services, such as printing and photocopying, to cater to the commuter crowd. It is 11:45, and the streets are sparsely populated, but will soon be packed with office workers on lunch break.

Shortly, Shankar appears, and we make our way into one skyscraper, home to several dozen firms, its names listed on a handsome gold plate behind the reception

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<sup>117</sup> I will explore the tiffin coding system in section 2.1.

with two female receptionists, and two male guards next to them, guarding the 5 or so elevators. Our attire, Shankar's traditional *topi-kurta* and my mismatched topi, t-shirt, and shorts look, attract the curious gaze of formally dressed men in Western shirts and trousers, and women in colourful saris and blouses who are coming in and out of the building. One of the guards stop me, putting his hand close to my chest where my camera is, with an alarmed look: "*Aap kahaan ja rahe ho?* Where do you think you're going?" As I was about to explain, being used to lengthy authentication processes to get access to public spaces such as offices in India, Shankar butts in: "*Wo mere saat hai. Dabbewale ka PhD! He's with me. PhD on Dabbawalas!*" I was amazed that with this single sentence, my presence was guaranteed, no questions asked: the guard looks at my topi, and nods affirmatively. Shankar tells us: "*Hum log daily kaam karte na? Sub ko manta hai, so no problem, hai na?* We come here everyday, and we know everyone, so no issues, right?" The guard pushes the button for us with a smile, and let us on board.

We are to drop off the 15 tiffins to 7 firms across 4 floors, and we go to each tenant and leave the tiffins at their doorstep. Some firms have their doors open, and Shankar goes over to one female receptionist to directly hand over her tiffin; it is 11:58, and a young man with an open collar light-blue shirt comes out, looking for his tiffin. I ask this well-dressed Maharashtran gentleman of around 30 years of age, how long he has been using the Dabbawalas - he replies hurriedly, "*My wife* has been using them for 4 years now." He lets his wife manage all things domestic, and although he knew the famous logistics of the Dabbawalas, he did not know Shankar personally, nor has he ever conversed with him. There was a visible difference in terms of intimacy and appreciation between the Dabbawalas and his customers at the two ends. However, this lack of intimacy indexed something positive, as he continued: "I cannot think of a time when the dabba was late. It is there, on the doorstep, at 12pm on the dot. I never had a problem with him."

Now with all the tiffins delivered, the Dabbawalas can finally relax. Shankar carries his own small tiffin which he brought from home, made by his sister-in-law, and we go to the basement of the building where there is a communal space for peons, guards, and manual labourers working in and around the office, to relax and eat. There are a few men sitting on plastic chairs listening to music on their phones, relaxing before their afternoon shifts. Shankar's tiffin, which is 2-storeys and much more compact than the 4-storey tiffins he delivers, contains 4 pieces of chapatti, a



small piece of mango pickle wrapped in tin foil, and a *bindhi* (okra) subzi. I ask him if he is vegetarian, according to Varkari ideals: “No, no! We Marathas eat non-veg. We need energy for this job, no? Only some old Dabbawala eat veg. But we mostly eat non-veg on Friday, Sunday, night-time, when there is no work. *Har din kata hai to mainga hojaega, na*. Its too expensive to eat everyday, isn’t it?” His pickup rounds starts around 1pm. There are two systems to this: the 1 tiffin version, and the 2 tiffin version. In the former, the clients have 1 tiffin in circulation, thus the Dabbawalas carries the same empty tiffin back to the home on that day. In this case, the Dabbawalas have to ensure that the client places their empty tiffin for pick up before a certain time, in most cases 1pm, to ensure on-time return delivery. In the 2 tiffin system, clients have 2 tiffins in circulation - when the Dabbawalas deliver tiffin no. 1 containing the food, he simultaneously picks up tiffin no. 2, the empty tiffin eaten the previous day, back to the home. The housewife will use this tiffin no. 2 to send food the following day, and the cycle is repeated. This system is recommended by the Dabbawalas as the clients do not have to hastily eat their tiffins, and can eat it whenever they want to during the day, and are preferred by those who have unfixed lunchtimes; for the Dabbawalas, this is one less risk to worry about.

Shankar collects the empty tiffins leisurely, his body movements lighter and more relaxed compared to the morning on account of the lighter weight from the empty tiffins, and with much more time on his hands. He is much less strapped on time, since he does not have to beat the lunchtime clock, and housewives generally can receive the tiffin anytime during the afternoon. Shankar walks with me while pushing his bicycle back to Churchgate station; he stretches and yawns occasionally, satisfied with his successful day. The Dabbawalas who have gathered in the sorting area are much more relaxed compared to the morning journey. Most are talking to each other; some are listening to music with one ear; others are talking to a man with bundles of cotton white topis, a clothes vendor who supplies their indispensable headgear.

It was approaching 3pm, and we started making our way towards the northbound platform 1. The station is empty, and starkly contrasts with the menacing southbound platform in the morning. This station too will become jam-packed by 5pm, as commuters leave their workplaces and make their way toward the northern suburbs. But for those travelling now, it is an oasis amidst the city. Dabbawalas swing around the light tiffins in a joyful manner and enter the virtually empty luggage compartment.

The manner in which they sit is much more leisurely, and a round group forms; one Dabbawala gets a pack of cards out, and they start playing *teen patta* with 10 rupee notes. I try to take a photo, but they shake their head and stop me from doing so; gambling is unethical, and unfit for the Dabbawala image of carrying ghar-ka-khana. The train departs, and Shankar is sleeping next to the door, his worn out topi on his lap. Bala, who is 43 years old, looks over at the young Dabbawalas playing cards, and takes out a pocket sized calendar of the deity Vithoba, worshipped by Varkaris, shows it to me, and starts singing *bhajans* with his peers, clapping his hands. A few vegetable vendors come on at Marine Drive station, and sit between the gambling youths and the singing elders. Hypnotized by the minimalistic clapping, the serene melody, and the peaceful per-rush hour humming of the train, I nod off.

## **2. The ergonomics and ethics of the Mumbai Dabbawalas**

Stainless steel tiffins are strong, durable, and impenetrable, traits which are as significant for bio-morally conscious housewives, as with the Mumbai Dabbawalas, who only accept to deliver these vertical stainless tiffins. This has a logistical rationale, to standardize the dimensions of the parcel, making it easier to pack and bundle together; but it is also to do with the nature of their work, which require the Dabbawalas to be brash with the tiffins. The way this 125-year-old organization, employing 5000 plus deliverymen who deliver close to 200,000 tiffins on a daily basis, has come to cover such a large area, owes to the efficient execution of the “relay system”. It is never the case that one Dabbawala will deliver a tiffin throughout the journey, for it changes hands several times before it reaches its destination, which allows them to reach an area spanning 60km from north to south Mumbai - flimsy Tupperware will not be able to withstand the everyday pressures of going through multiple hands, for over 3 hours on the road, amidst the chaos of the city.

Two important technologies characterize the Dabbawala work regime: the coding system, and the Mumbai suburban railways. When the number of clients was small, delivery could be done without standardization, and much was done thorough memory and habit, where the relationship between Dabbawala and customer was akin to a coolie and employer. As clients and delivery area grew, a unified coding system came into need, for new deliverymen to adapt to new delivery lines, as well as to speed up the sorting and re-distribution process - initially, coloured threads were used, but this evolved into a more sophisticated and practical system comprised of

alphabets, numbers, and colours, implemented in the 1960s.<sup>118</sup> Each tiffin is marked by a unique combination of these elements on the top of the bag or carrier with oil paint, to denote 1. Final destination station (Number 3 for Churchgate station); 2. The sub-area code of the destination, (9 for Nariman point); 3. Building name and floor, (9 AI 12, for Air India Building, 12th floor); 4. Origin station, (VLP for Vile Parle); 5. Origin sub-area code, (E for Cooper Hospital area); and 6. A distinct colour, usually colouring the final destination station, for Dabbawala group (Green for group 2 or the Vile Parle - Churchgate line) (Fig. 11).

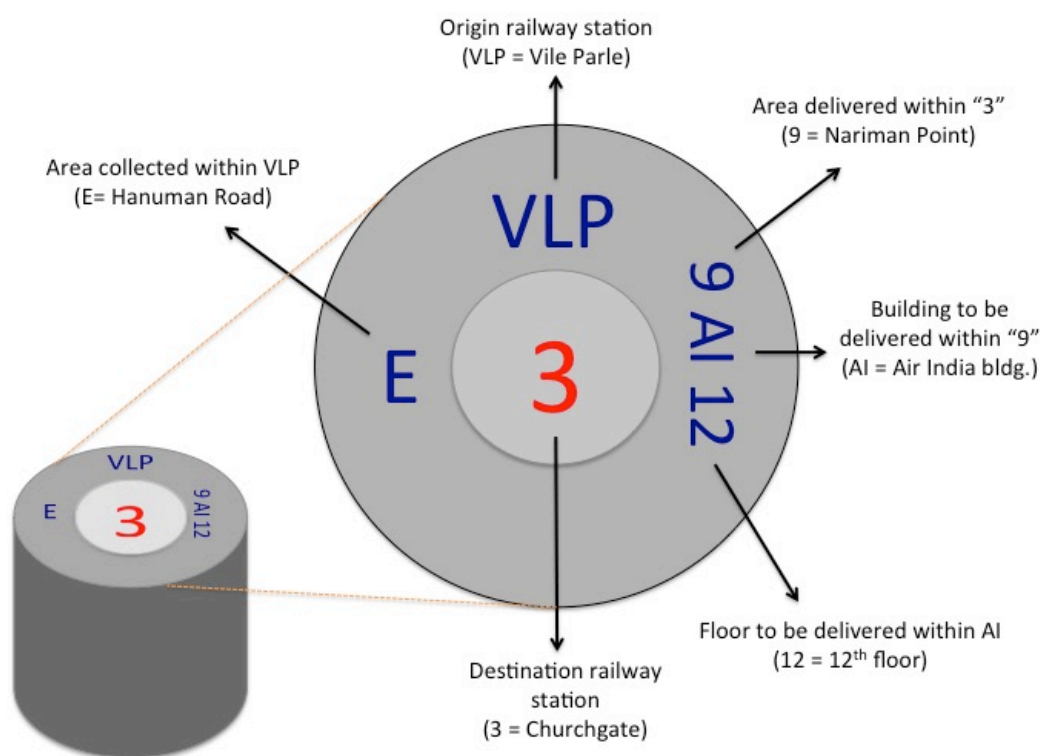


Figure 11 - The tiffin coding system.<sup>119</sup>

The importance is that this code is not linearly expressed like an address. This is not in the least because most Dabbawalas have not received higher education; only 5% have graduated from secondary school, while 16% are totally illiterate (Agrawal and Nandi 2009). But also importantly, this coding system is much more efficient when sorting out tiffins than reading off an address, because once the meanings are learnt

<sup>118</sup> This innovation was first implemented by Raghunath Medge, currently the head of the Nutan Mumbai Tiffin Box Association, a charitable trust managing the accounts and welfare of the Dabbawalas.

<sup>119</sup> Richard, K (2014). Supply chain of Dabba Walas, slide 10. Retrieved 28 Sep 2017 from <https://www.slideshare.net/rigelric3/supply-chain-of-dabba-walas>

and internalized, the colours and the numbers act as an immediate visual cue for the Dabbawalas to screen out dissimilar tiffins, while regrouping similar ones. This is done by focusing on different features of the code, which can be categorized by descending geographical scale. The large number/colour in the middle of the tiffin determines the overall destination station, thus the Dabbawalas solely focus on this in the first phase of sorting in order to narrow it down; then, among each grouped tiffin, they will focus on the sub-area code; followed by building name/floor code, and so on. Had the tiffins been inscribed by linear address, this narrowing down process would be impossible.

Secondly, the Mumbai suburban railways are an essential infrastructure for the Dabbawalas to operate at this scale with speed and accuracy. Since its inception in 1853, the railways played an important role in the development of Bombay, connecting the metropolis to the rural hinterland, and also transporting workers within the city itself. Their day to day work is very much dependent on the rhythm of the train, which come at regular intervals of every 3 to 4 minutes, so much so that they had long negotiations with the Bombay Municipal Corporation, to gain privileged access to one full luggage compartment on some of the morning trains, setting aside other wholesale vendors and hawkers. This is largely to do with their bargaining power as an organization, a position they have enjoyed since the late 1990s, when their business became internationally renowned thanks to a series of management studies featuring the Dabbawalas, an aspect of the organization which I explore in section 3.

Having described the formal aspects of their delivery ergonomics, I turn to their substantive work culture and ethic, through the case of Shankar Shinde, 22,<sup>120</sup> a 3<sup>rd</sup> generation Dabbawala, who was a close acquaintance and guide into their trade. Shankar has been serving his customers for the past 9 years, making him more experienced compared to his contemporaries, who usually start this line of work when they are around 18, leaving their rural homes to seek employment in the big city. He had no choice; his father, a well respected Dabbawala, succumbed to a fatal train accident in his prime when Shankar was only 13. Shankar's work not only requires the vigour and perseverance to carry batches of up to 40kgs on bicycles, crates, and handcarts, but also hard earned wisdom and agility to navigate the risks of this chaotic

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<sup>120</sup> At the time of 2014; I was 24 years of age.

city. Injuries are frequent, and one or two Dabbawalas get killed on the job every couple of years, most often by train accidents.

Despite the dangers, many say they entered the profession having had no other choice. With low levels of education and literacy, and a strong kinship-regional based employment structure, many Dabbawalas told me that next to farming, carrying tiffin in Mumbai is the simplest route that able-bodied men in their village take. This matter-of-fact-ness is in fact a remarkable thing. It points to just how far this clan of *Maratha* villagers from the outskirts of Pune has come over the past 125 years since the entrepreneurial founding father Mahadeo Havaji Bachche started delivering tiffins for a *Parsi* banker in 19<sup>th</sup> century colonial Bombay (Chapter V). But many are keen to break with this inherited line of work, and dream for their children to have office jobs like those of their middle class customers rather than take up the backbreaking work of delivering tiffins – and that without pension or healthcare. Dr. Pawan Agrawal (2009), who was born into a Dabbawala family, and started his career as one, is perhaps the first and most prolific Dabbawala who has climbed the social ladder - he received a PhD. on a logistical study of the network, and is now a successful motivational speaker and business consultant - I will explore these new dimensions of the Dabbawala work in section 3. Agrawal is certainly an exception - the oldest working Dabbawala I met was 67, vigilant but worn out, who toils in the city with his son to put as much bread on the table. Among these wise, hardworking men who know the microcosm of their designated delivery routes inside out, Shankar is an apprentice just starting out his career.

Although the Dabbawala life is tough, Shankar finds it rewarding as well: he often repeats the mantra, “work is worship”. This English phrase, popularly memorized by many Dabbawalas, a means to summarize their work to academics, tourists and documentarians, reflects their own view of their labour as profoundly ethical. The underlying morality of their work is intrinsically linked to their labour of connecting the home to the city: Dabbawalas don't merely porter an object - as Raghunath Medge, head of the Nutan Mumbai Tiffin Box Suppliers Association, articulates romantically, they “carry the love of the wife to the office.” That is, they carry a highly charged object, imbued with the familial and familiar values which bind the cook (usually a mother or a housewife) and eater (their husbands and children toiling in the city) together in intimate ways which commercial eateries never can. Such sentiments are expressed most by the female cooks of the house, who

consider the Dabbawalas an extension of their kitchen, co-producing ghar-ka-khana for their loved ones, as I will explore in the next section. As such, Dabbawala work is essential for customers like Mrs Sheikh, who lives afar from her children, yet wants to feed them her own ghar-ka-khana - when she was younger, she herself used to go to the cotton mills in Parel where her now deceased husband used to work to deliver tiffin with her own hands. Now, due to old age she cannot perform this task for her children, and the Dabbawalas take care of this desire to feed and care for ones' families' health and wellbeing whilst being afar.

For these long time customers, using the Dabbawalas was not so much a choice, but became a necessity, in as much as the source of ghar-ka-khana was always from ones' home. During times of pilgrimages where the Dabbawalas take 1 week off, their customers would always be quite annoyed, half jokingly nudging them that they are lucky to have such long holidays, and they have to think of ways to "survive" that week in which they were abandoned by the Dabbawalas. These statements were puzzling to me - why couldn't they just bring tiffins on their own, like most other commuters? According to the Angals, whom I introduced in Chapter IV, there were two main advantages to using the Dabbawalas, which make them an essential feature in their day-to-day routine of maintaining health: first, carrying a 4 story tiffin containing the essential thali structure was a difficult feat to do by ones self, in the crowded trains. When I pointed out that many commuters opted to bring smaller tiffins which fit easily in ones bag, Mrs Angal replied that having the combination of "*bhat* (rice), *bhaji* (subzi), *amti* (dal), *poli* (flatbread)", the Maharashtran Brahmin pura-khana, was essential to "feel at calm and be most productive for the afternoon." In the office canteen, I observed that many of those eating pura-khana from 4 story tiffins, especially vegetarians, were less likely to take part in commensality, and happily indulged in this self-sufficient full meal. This was not in the least because they felt that "everyone had their own taste" - for example, Maharashtran Brahmins are famous for their "sweet tooth", putting jaggery and sugar in their dishes, as well as using "goda masala", a sweet spice blend, which was specifically a Maharashtran Brahmin masala - but also to maintain aspirations to be bio-morally austere, to only ingest individually tailored ghar-ka-khana to achieve this.

The second advantage is that the Dabbawalas indirectly helped the housewives preparing the food in the morning. The Dabbawalas come pick up the food between 9 am and 10 am, meaning that the wife can start cooking around 8am to send it out in

time. In the case of the Angals, Satya leaves home by 7am, so if they opted not to use the Dabbawalas and have him carry the dabba himself, his wife would have to wake up at 5.30 and start cooking at 6. Which also means that the time between preparation and consumption is shorter when using the Dabbawalas, allowing the meal to be warmer and fresher when it reaches the office, retaining the comfort and purity of the home well into lunchtime in 1pm. Mrs Angal explains: “[By using the Dabbawalas] women don’t get hassled (*garbar*) as much. We can cook peacefully; it is convenient. Sometimes when you are making it in a hurry, you might forget salt, or put too much spices (*masala*), so you lose the balance. One can cook patiently (*araam se*), she doesn’t get angry (*chid chid*) due to this. My son gets fresh, and hot, and tasty food.” Thus the Dabbawalas indirectly helped the housewife prepare a “proper” meal by saving her time and energy. People in Mumbai are constantly “on the clock”. Everyone was conscious about time management to the minute, trying to save 15 minutes there and 30 minutes here, so as to balance work, family, and leisure. The average delivery charges were between 500 and 1000 Indian Rupees (£5 to £10) per month, depending on the distance required to travel. The Angals pay 800 rupees a month, covering Ghatkopar to Churchgate, where Satya works. If there were minimum 20 working days in a month, it cost 40 rupees per day, at most. For these customers, an extra two hours every morning for 40 rupees goes a long way.<sup>121</sup>

Out of my informants, the Angal family tops it out in terms of length and intimacy of acquaintance with the Dabbawalas, which spans over two generations and possibly the third. However, they are certainly not anomalies, as liaisons exceeding 10 years being very common among existing customers. In other words, those who commence with a Dabbawala contract, which was done by monthly cash instalments, did so with commitment, which demanded certain socio-economic conditions - most importantly, the presence of a cook, mostly ones female kin, to provide homemade food everyday. In this sense, the Dabbawalas were an extension attached to particular domestic relations of production and reproduction, where men commuted to work to earn income, while the women of the house took care of the production and provisioning of vital substance.

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<sup>121</sup> A vegetarian dabba from a caterer costs around 80 to 100 rupees; a meal in a hygienic restaurant will cost around 200 rupees; a banana costs 10 rupees; *vada pav* (common roadside snack) costs around 12 to 20 rupees. So, 40 rupees is not an amount to be taken too lightly, although is quite affordable.

The morality of being outsourced the feeding hand is concurrent with their faith, as members of the *Varkari Sampradaya* sect (“Varkari pilgrims”, in Marathi), a popular movement in Maharashtra since the 13th century, having roots in the spiritual *Bhakti* (worship) tradition of Hinduism. This monotheistic, anti-Brahmanical movement, which first took shape through the work of the mystic poet Dnyaneshwar (1275 - 1296), whose text *Jnaneshvari*, written in the 1290s, the Marathi commentary on the Bhagavad Gita<sup>122</sup>, preached that spiritual salvation and communion with the divine is open to all beings regardless of caste and creed. Dnyaneshwar, although born into a Brahmin family, was outcasted for such provocative anti-establishment teachings; Varkari *sants*<sup>123</sup> in the following centuries were also unanimous in celebrating the eternal and indiscriminate divine, which also produced saints who were out of the purview of traditional Brahmanical priesthood, such as the female saint Muktabai (1279 - 1297), sister of Dnyaneshwar, or saint Tukaram (1598 - 1650), from the labouring *Kunbi* (tilling service provider) caste. These out of the ordinary poet-saints sung for and worshipped the god *Vithoba*, popularly considered to be an incarnation of the Hindu deity Vishnu in West and South Western India, who is enshrined in the holy temples in Pandharpur, in southern Maharashtra, where Vakaris have pilgrimaged for centuries, to this day. These influences were clearly seen in everyday Dabbawala religiosity: they sung emotional *abhangs*, devotional bhakti bhajans, on trains, taking verses from Varkari poems, or simply repeating the names of saints, such as “Tukaram, Tukaram...” or “Namdeo, Namdeo...”; many carried small pictures of the God *Vithoba* or one of the saints in their chest pockets; had humble altars in their homes worshipping different Varkari saints, deities, and ancestors; and the bi-annual, week-long pilgrimages to Pandharpur and Alandi in Pune in the auspicious months of *Ekadashi*, that were always looked forward to, a time to reconnect with family, friends, and their spiritual selves.

As Roncaglia (2013) notes, food plays an important role in Varkari cosmology, like it does in Hindu and Jain beliefs in India, but with more emphasis of food as mediator of equality as opposed to hierarchy: Varkari “spiritual practice implies a collective experience of the divine banquet where all are welcome, no food is impure, everyone sits in a circle, nobody is untouchable and all are fed to satiety”;

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<sup>122</sup> As opposed to Sanskrit, the elite language of ritual priests and inaccessible for the common mass.

<sup>123</sup> A saint, in Hindu religious tradition.



moreover, the “*sants* may have chosen the food metaphor because it is more understandable to devotees who cannot read or write” (ibid: 40). Here, food not only is envisaged as an ideological force to challenge Brahmanical casteism, but as a popular communication device to transmit these messages in an easy to digest way to the masses, who were excluded from the elite religious sphere dominated by Sanskrit scriptures. Medge tells me with passion: “Serving food [*anna*] is like serving god. Work is our *puja* (prayer). God resides in everyone, and so, in serving people we serve God.” This indiscriminate Varkari ethos is clearly expressed by Roncaglia’s Dabbawala informant: “[I]n our work there’s no discrimination. All of us are Hindus but we bring tiffin to Muslims, Christians, Gujarat is, and any strangers. But we don’t discriminate a Hindu or a Muslim, or any other caste. ... Anyone can do a job for money, but tiffin work is different. You can’t discriminate or make caste and religious distinctions. Do your job, that’s it. ... In human relationships, delivering food to another is a kind of job that means you cannot discriminate” (ibid: 44).

Somewhat contrary to this ethos, and despite Shankar’s closeness to his Muslim client Mrs Sheikh, who regularly treats him his favourite *kokum* drink during his morning rounds, he also confided to me that every time he goes into the Muslim chawls, he feels uncomfortable, and prefers his Hindu Maharashtran customers. Besides adhering to Varkari religiosity, most Dabbawalas self identify as belonging to the *Maratha* caste, and descendants of the 17<sup>th</sup> century warrior prince, Shivaji Bonsle (1630 - 1680), who found the vast Maratha confederacy, after successfully defeating Mughal forces in the Deccan plateau ruled by Emperor Aurangzeb, with his tenacious guerrilla tactics. As Hansen (1999: 109-110) notes, the symbol of Shivaji started to acquire nationalist fervour in Maharashtra and beyond from the late 19<sup>th</sup> century, his efforts to unite Marathi speaking people and re-establish a Maratha *dharma* (spirit), being a source of inspiration for Hindu reformers such as M.G. Ranade (1842 - 1901) working amidst the anti-colonial nationalist movement. Ranade’s vision of a universalist Maratha ethos, as epitomized by his *Rise of Maratha Power* (1961), was interlinked with the strand of historiography which looks at Shivaji’s role as an anti-Brahmanical activist-warrior, who challenged local elite Brahmins by empowering low caste *Kunbis* (farmers) by granting them privileges to land and authority, who in turn pledged allegiance to Shivaji’s growing army (Hansen 2001: 26-27). Anti-caste reformer Jyotirao Phule (1827 -1890) praised Shivaji as the supreme “Shudra [lowest varna] King”, and this is where Shivaji’s legacy and the spirit of Varkaris intersect, as

anti-establishment plebianism, which dissolved caste distinctions by means of establishing a new social order based on a common language, region, and dharma. The political mythology of Shivaji in the 20<sup>th</sup> century, however, became layered with a different strand of ethno-linguistic nationalism, and found solace in identifying and attacking Shivaji's "archenemy", the Muslims. As I explored in Chapter I, the Shiv Sena party, literally "Shivaji's army", defined its politics through worshipping Shivaji's masculine militancy, what Hansen (1996) sees as a means to "recuperate" Hindu masculinity, by spectacularly attacking the Muslim Other who is hindering ethno-linguistic-cultural cohesion.

To identify as descendants of Shivaji thus takes on a political charge, which in many ways sheds light to why Shankar felt "uncomfortable" in a Muslim area, whilst openly developing intimacy with particular Muslim clients. For the Dabbawala identity and ethos cohabit these two Maharashtran plebeian movements: while, in "1674, during a traditional Hindu ceremony, [Shivaji] was crowned Chatrapati or "Lord of the Universe" by Ramdas, a *sant* of the Varkari tradition ... [and the] *dabbawalas* see themselves as bonded to Shivaji by a shared Hindu faith, a fierce sense of independence from any domination, and patriotism towards the State of Maharashtra" (Roncaglia 2013: 45), to follow Shivaji in 21<sup>st</sup> century Mumbai is inevitably to follow the ethos and aesthetics of the Shiv Sena, which combine Marathi ethno linguistic masculinity with urban charisma. Like many other young Maharashtrians, young Dabbawalas openly supported the party, some of them having tattoos of Shivaji on their arms, or sporting the Shiv Sena trademark Saffron tiger t-shirts to work. These were invariably rebellious acts, which drew much criticism from the management and elder Dabbawalas. As I will point out in the following section 3, dress codes were immensely important not only to maintain organizational cohesion, but as a means to accumulate bio-moral capital for the Dabbawalas to uphold their privileged status as handlers of ghar-ka-khana. In an immediate sense, the t-shirt and tattoo look challenged management authority; in the long run, these undermined the Varkari mission of serving everyone without discrimination, a difficult feat given the viscerally charged nature of these symbols. Importantly, these Dabbawalas did not serve Muslim areas and worked in heavily Maharashtran locales of Dadar and Parel, close to "home" - had Shankar been so visibly provocative in his Muslim area, he would surely attract unwanted attention. The Shiv Sena inspired side of Shankar made him express mild discomfort to heckling Muslims (it was not the *individual* who he

criticized, their category, *in general* - a stereotyping move which also allows for intimacy with an individual who is part of that group); the open-armed practicalities of his Varkari inspired work made him subdued in his reactions.

Ultimately, customers were customers, and never did a Dabbawala reject a subscription request based on religion or caste - contact with clients were limited, and moreover, they were not in an economically comfortable position to choose customers, with average wages not more than 15,000 rupees per month, just enough to get by in Mumbai. The grave responsibility of delivering each tiffin to the designated customer can not be overstated: as I have explored in the past chapters, the bio-moral potency of food in India means that ingesting the wrong type of ghar-ka-khana is more than an inconvenience, and can induce moral and medical catastrophe, destabilizing the bodily and mental humours through porous affect from within. Shankar, who equally serves meat eating Muslims and pure vegetarian Maharashtran Brahmins, warns me against such dangers - “What would happen if I deliver *sukha* [dry] mutton to a chaste Jain?” - one man’s meat is another’s poison. Not only misdelivery but also delivery *time* is a grave concern for customers, who not only require to receive the tiffin within the 1 hour lunch timeframe, but also while it is *hot* - housewives used the Dabbawalas to save a couple of crucial hours in the morning to prepare the tiffin, thereby being able to condense all that is homely, warm, and comforting in it. However, even with the bio-morally staunchly stainless steel protective layer, ghar-ka-khana has an expiration date, the heat and chaos of Mumbai slowly taking away vitality from it, putrefying it, making it both distasteful and impure. Late tiffin is stale tiffin, which not only undermines the efforts of the home cook, but also the Hindu gastronomic ideals of cooked food as pure food (Khare 1976).

The religiosity of the Dabbawalas not only confirms the gravity of ghar-ka-khana delivery in India, but also functions as a moral incentive to do so properly, for such religiosity are the conditions for organizational and work discipline, and of building lasting relationships and trust with their customers, who require a trustworthy carrier to carry out this gambit of letting loose ones vital substance out into the world. The Dabbawala network boasts “six-sigma certification”, an internationally recognized set of management and production standards which denotes “less than 3.4 defects out of one million operations” - a 0.00034 % failure rate within a supply chain - the source of fascination among the international management science community,

which I will explore in section 3. The accuracy of these statistics were dubious<sup>124</sup>; yet it was true that most Dabbawalas stated they never made mistakes, and perhaps more reliably, very few customers I spoke to complained of mistakes or late deliveries. Discipline and repetition were winning factors. Besides harbouring internal cohesion through shared faith, regional, and linguistic traits, facilitating smoother communication among themselves, since the Dabbawalas only exclusively recruit through their kinship, family, and regional networks, any risks and emergencies which may hinder day-to-day operations, such as internal disputes, unexpected injuries and illnesses, tardiness, holiday shifts, and so on, were dealt with swiftly through utilizing these kinship networks as leverage. Absenteeism is one of the cardinal Dabbawala sins, since each delivery line is allocated to an individual, and to not appear without informing would disrupt the entire supply chain; there are also strict rules regarding “No Alcohol Drinking / Smoking during business hours; Wearing White Cap during business hours; Carry Identity Card” (Agrawal and Nandi 2009).

These rules were all forms of self-discipline and self-management, of both internally cultivating the self and outwardly keeping up appearances as those fit to do tiffin delivery work, and what distinguished Dabbawalas from other labourers toiling in the city. For instance, alcohol/cigarettes would not only hinder day-to-day operations, but are signifiers charged with negative morality within India - they appear on matrimonials [non drinker/non smoker], or are frequently asked questions when interviewing tenants, a way to locate physical health, as well as moral faithfulness, respectability, and purity - and these rules equally applied to Dabbawalas who carefully cultivated their reputations. Unlike auto-wallas and other mobile labourers who regularly chewed *paan* on their jobs, the Dabbawalas worried that these negatively viewed activities would taint their relationship with clients who trusted the Dabbawalas with their vital substances - a man who reeks of cigarette smoke, or who wears dirty attire soiled with *paan* marks, is a man who is not responsible and trustworthy, besides being unclean. These rules inversely illuminate

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<sup>124</sup> Their 6 sigma “certification” sprung from an estimate of supposed delivery errors, made by Forbes magazine in 1998, where it was reported that there are approximately less than 10 delivery mistakes a month. The calculation is as follows: in any given month, there will be around 25 working days, where 200,000 tiffins are delivered each day, or 400,000 total transactions (delivery and pick-up). This makes 10 out of a total of  $25 \times 200,000 \times 2$  transactions per month = 1 in a million failure rate, which is less than 3.4 out of a million. The importance is that these numbers are estimates, and was not backed by statistical data, which the organization does not possess.

the bio-morality of tiffin delivery, as opposed to, say driving an auto - both certainly require mental aptitude and coordination in navigating the city, yet only the former must be careful with maintaining cleanliness.

These considerations were concurrent with Varkari ideals as well, which denounced these intoxicants as bio-morally corruptive and polluting, here largely agreeing with orthodox Hindu and Jain ideals. In the same line, strict Varkaris maintained a pure vegetarian diet, and some older Dabbawalas followed this. Yet, these ideals time and time again conflicted with the pull towards Shiv Sena influenced working class masculinity - most Dabbawalas ate chicken and fish regularly as a source of pleasure and energy, and it was very popular to take *gutka* [chewing tobacco] during work, or playing teen patta for money, and drinking alcohol quite regularly, albeit after working hours. Had orthodox, vegetarian Hindu and Jain Dabbawala customers knew these trains, they would be displeased; yet, they did not consciously seek these out, and as long as they didn't take much interest in the private lives of the Dabbawalas beyond working hours, they had nothing to complain over their services and appearance, which were spic and span accurate, punctual, and well presented, their uniforms white and clean, indexing moral cleanliness from within. As such, what really got on the nerves of the management was failure to appear to work with the *topi* on, the most visible marker of identification and respectability - and not the indulgences of *gutka*, which did not smell or stain like *paan*, or after-work alcohol, gambling, and meat, which were considered accepted deviations as long as they were *not visible* - to the point of being a punishable offence as severe as being intoxicated during work hours. Now, I will turn to this politics of fashion as an essential component of bio-moral self-management, to navigate the city and build rapport with their clients.



Figure 12 - Tiffin in the rain. (Photo by author).

### 3. The white-topi-kurta as cultural capital and technology of purity

As I outlined in Chapter I, within the bio-morally porous universe of India, everyday substances such as food and clothing function as mediators of the dividual qualities of personhood (Bayly 1986; Daniel 1984; Marriott 1989). I have also explored the importance of certain materials and technologies which function to intervene in this world, to set up vital boundaries in place, what I have called “technologies of purity”. The white topi-kurta uniform of the Dabbawalas, a popular type of clothing worn by Varkaris throughout Maharashtra, especially on auspicious days and pilgrimages, is one such technology of purity, a bio-moral-economical means of self-management, a tool to navigate the chaos of the city, and build trust with customers by upping ones’ purity and respectability quotient. Emma Tarlo (1996) examines the political and bio-moral history of the topi-kurta within colonial and contemporary India, its salience largely deriving from Gandhi’s sartorial politics, and his use of the topi-kurta attire within his nationalistic projects. Gandhi was an ardent experimenter of diet and celibacy, who maintained that the regulation of the bodily humours and desires are necessary conditions to gain control over the body

politic - the individual/somatic becomes scaled up to the national/political (Alter 2000) - and this bio-moral ethos-praxis was also carried on to his idiosyncratic engagement with clothing.

While Gandhi's vision of the topi-kurta made out of *khadi*, or locally hand-woven loincloth, was essential for his aspiration for *swadeshi*, self rule freed from foreign rulers, which garnered political mobilization through the anti-colonial struggle, in the post-independence era, his sartorial politics slowly came to be hollowed out of its political gravitas, and came to denote merely an outwardly style and a quick fix for politicians to stock up on purity and respectability as per needed during election stunts. While this tendency was visible even during Gandhi's campaign itself, it only became intensified after Gandhi's death. Gandhi's vision for a khadi clad nation spinning wheels clashed sharply with post-Independence ideals of modernization and development, epitomized by Nehru's (1889 - 1964) dislike of Gandhi's tendency to simplify everything sartorial, who instead wore a wide variety of Indian head garments beyond the Gandhi topi, in line with the secular ideals of tolerance and acceptance, of ethnic and regional diversity. And so it went with the general public too: "most urbanites ... quickly switched their affiliations back to mill-cloth [from khadi]. Men returned to trousers, and women were attracted to enticing new varieties of synthetics both from India and from abroad" (ibid: 323). Indeed, while the history and ethics of women's clothing in post-Independence India are complex (Banerjee and Miller 2003), urban Indian men seem to have entirely dropped the nuances of the topi-kurta attire, who instead sport the uniform Western shirt and trouser look in rather dull homogeneity compared to the colourful variety of urban women: "while broadening the category of Indian dress to accept European styles, Indian men have simultaneously down-graded indigenous forms of dress so drastically that it now becomes difficult for a professional man to wear a kurta pyjama, let alone a dhoti, to his place of work. ... To do so would seem too self-consciously Indian, suggesting the image of the hypocritical politician" (ibid: 331).<sup>125</sup>

The tackiness of the full topi, kurta, dhoti attire, so associated with the hypocritical politician, nevertheless reinforces the viscerally charged nature of these

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<sup>125</sup> "Exceptions are found among artists, photographers, and left-wing intellectuals who often wear khadi kurta pyjamas or kurtas with trouser to work. It is noticeable that these are usually made from flecked or coloured rather than white khadi, perhaps in a desire to deflect from possible association with the khadi-clad politician" (Tarlo 199: 331).

clothing: for it is not that these clothes are associated with negative cultural capital, but precisely because they signify something pure and positive, which crucially can be achieved with relative *affordability* and *ease*, that people have learnt to suspect the abuses of these clothes, and are keenly aware of its function as a technology of purity separating material appearance and moral interior, and the possible discrepancies between these two realms. Indeed, there are recent cases where the topi-kurta is making a revival, for Gandhian activists such as Anna Hazare, or Arvind Kejriwal's *Aam Aadmi* party championing the attire during the 2015 elections to much success - it shows that the legacy of the Gandhi cap is a rich reservoir for politicians to still yet charge their "purity" quotient.<sup>126</sup> Comparing national politics with the everyday sartorial is illuminating. For lower-middle class commuters in Mumbai to wear a kurta to their workplaces would be entirely inappropriate, for it was not "formal" work attire; but wearing some form of the topi and kurta was very common during visits to temples and auspicious occasions of puja, although to do so during the regular flow of life was too un-urban, a signifier of village backwardness unfit for the cosmopolitanism of Mumbai. It "is the long-term association with morality and patriotism that has enabled and indeed forced plain white khadi to remain in politics. No longer everyday dress, it is an obligatory appendage whenever the *public political self is most on show*" (ibid: 124, my emphasis), and this is indeed when and why these commuters wear the topi-kurta during out-of-the-ordinary timescapes that require a (temporary) transformation of the self.

Now, it is possible to examine why the Dabbawalas take the topi-kurta as their uniform, the way it garners bio-moral and cultural capital to navigate the city, and, how it's adoption helps build trust with their clients. For the Dabbawalas, the topi-kurta is a convenient and affordable means to stock up on quotients of purity and respectability, drawing connotations from this rich Gandhian history. Although the truly "proper" Dabbawala uniform was the full white topi-kurta look, which were always worn on special occasions such as during Ekadashi, or media events when the Dabbawalas appear on documentaries, political and corporate gatherings, and for show for tourists, many Dabbawalas regularly wore shirts and trousers instead, but never did they forget the white topi. The cap, since the time of Gandhi, remains the

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<sup>126</sup> Radical Objects: The Common Man's Gandhi Cap (2014 April 24). *The History Workshop*. Retrieved 28 Sep 2017 from <http://www.historyworkshop.org.uk/radical-object-the-common-mans-gandhi-cap/>



easiest way for bio-moral self-transformation, a fact which Gandhi started to oppose, but is a good enough approximation for the Dabbawalas who want to balance a distinct outward look with sartorial practicalities of doing work in the chaotic city. Indeed, running around the city will inevitably soil and taint fragile white cotton kurtas, and with the meagre time and resources of the Dabbawalas it is difficult to clean it everyday - but, if it is only the *topi*, this is much more doable. The innocuous white cap, easier to maintain it clean and white, is just the right amount of dose of respectability, combined with the rugged down toughness of coloured shirt/trousers which hide the traces of their hard labour.

Moreover, the *topi* exerts a surprising amount of authority within the city. The Dabbawalas, especially during the first three “war-zone” hours, were constantly on edge, stressed out with carrying heavy batches of tiffin with severe time restrictions also on their shoulders, and thus regularly shouted out warnings and curses to inattentive passer-by’s coming in their way. Initially, running around behind them, I had characterized the Dabbawalas as immensely agile men who cleverly sewed through the tiniest open spaces in front of him, the curses directed towards the obstacles which have caused the miscalculation in their spatial management, causing delays. However, as I listened to their howls and whistles, and observing the spaces and people in and around them, I realized that as much as *going through* empty space, they were actively *making* space. The Dabbawalas are certainly not the only commuters with large batches of cargo on their backs, although the large wooden pushcarts do stand out - but their white *topi*, when combined with the shiny tiffin they carry, immediately send out the message that a time-strapped, angry Dabbawala is passing by, amidst a sea of indistinguishable men wearing similar shirt and trousers. The presence of these 5000 *topi*-clad men who vigorously run around the city, have etched in the minds of Mumbaikars that they are not to be messed with, as “local” Marathas who have been feeding the city for the past 125 years. The special privilege they have in terms of access of tightly guarded semi-public spaces such as offices largely owed to this cultural capital, which were transferred *immediately* through the visual cue of the white *topi*, without the need of explanation or identity cards. The fact that this privilege also immediately passed onto me by association, by virtue of me being closely tagging behind the Dabbawala and also wearing a *topi* (thus the Dabbawalas have always directed me to wear the hat when accompanying them on deliveries), also point to the potency of the Dabbawala *topi*.

These forms of cultural capital, combined with their work ethic and accuracy, were instrumental in building trust with their clients. Housewives often told me that the Dabbawalas are different to *dudh-wallahs* (milkmen) and *dhobis* (clothes washers), who also come to their doorstep everyday to perform indispensable services for these families. “Dudh-walahs can’t be trusted these days because they dilute the milk with water,” says a Jain housewife, a Dabbawala client for 8 years; “but our Shankar is different. He has never failed us.” The Dabbawalas are considered to be extensions of the domestic home, who co-produce *ghar-ka-khana* with housewives. Because of this special status, unlike *dudh-wallahs* and *dhobis* who are *never* allowed inside the home, and do business on the threshold of the entrance of the home, the Dabbawalas were regularly invited indoors for a glass of water, or, if it were an auspicious day, to even share *prasad*. The Jain lady, who expressed the common anxiety of food adulteration in her daily milk, did not find that the Dabbawalas were capable of similar cheating. “Our tiffin is in safe hands. Besides, I know how they work ... they are so rushed, they don't want even think of doing something with the tiffins. Also, how can you cheat ones food? My husband has never complained!” The liquid homogeneity of the milk would mask dilution by water, but *ghar-ka-khana*, protected by the thick bio-moral layer of stainless steel, further protected by the time-strapped Dabbawala, is safe. Here, their utter commitment to their work - their dizzying business - not only signifies delivery accuracy, but also, in their engrossment, of an elimination of an ulterior motive. As with the topi-clad-hypocrite politician, the distance between external appearance and interior is a source of mistrust; the Dabbawalas more successfully utilize the technology of purity of the white topi-kurta, as a direct expression of an interior quality, as the diligent, hardworking common men of Mumbai. In this sense, they are heirs to Gandhi’s sartorial ideals, where the purity of the interior corresponds to the simple, clean, whiteness of the exterior.

Following Manpreet Janeja (2010), who takes seriously the collaborative effect produced by various actors and actants in the kitchen and the dining table to produce what she calls “normality”, a state in which everyday, normal substances are produced, distributed, and consumed, the stainless steel tiffin and Dabbawalas were technologies of purity which came to be instrumental in producing and distributing bio-moral substances in their desired state for these families. After interviewing many Dabbawala customers, a demographic emerged: most long time customers were *high*

*caste vegetarians*, but *lower middle class commuters*. These included Maharashtran Brahmins, high caste Gujarati Hindus, and pure vegetarian Jains, who not only expressed similar concerns for maintaining identity, health, wellbeing, and purity through their daily intake of food, who mostly worked stable 9 to 5 clerical jobs in government offices, state owned banks and enterprises. The problematic for these families was, how to produce such a state, within limited resources? Appadurai (2000) explicates the situation of millennial Mumbai: “the rich in these cities seek to gate as much of their lives as possible, travelling from guarded homes to darkened cars to air conditioned offices, moving always in an envelope of privilege through the heat of public poverty and the dust of dispossession” (ibid: 628). While it may be the rich who are successful in building stronger walls and shields, they are certainly not the only ones *aspiring* to do so. The problem for high caste, lower middle class commuters was that, although they had strong ideas regarding how to maintain their psycho-somatic health, the lived reality of their everyday lives put them in a position where they had to ride the trains to work for hours, and deal with the congested, unhygienic urban public sphere, when they were not in the office.

Generally, this class of commuters have *high* cultural capital, but *lower* economic capital<sup>127</sup>, and are trying their best, within their financial resources, to carve out a state of calm, peace, and purity as urban dwellers in Mumbai - the Dabbawalas become a form of *affordable visceral boundary making*. In this sense, the Dabbawala network is situated within particular spatial practices based on class - it is purity, particularity, and peace bought by 1000 rupees a month. If these commuters would move up in social rank, get a promotion or a pay raise, move into a new line of work, or start their own business, it is inevitable that they will explore other means of taking lunch, for the Dabbawalas are only one among the many different technologies of purity that can be utilized in Mumbai. An affluent Jain manager working in South Mumbai did not have to bother with Dabbawalas since he commuted to work by car, being able to carry the bulkiest of tiffins to and from work; a recently promoted and newly wed Gujarati office worker rented a house just 15 minutes walk from his office,

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<sup>127</sup> It must be stressed that the economic standing of the Dabbawala customers were much more advantageous than many of Mumbai’s residents, such as hawkers or slum dwellers, or indeed, the Dabbawalas themselves, who had to rely on unhygienic street food for their daily food intake, or skip entire meals. Being able to “bathe” was also an important distinction which divided the residents of Mumbai, where the working classes did not have access to bathing water everyday, while for these high caste commuters, it was unthinkable to not bathe and go to office (c.f. Bjorkman 2015).

nullifying the whole conundrum of commuting. Attitudes to foods and health also changed with income, position, and occupation, where the upwardly mobile increasingly took business lunches in restaurants and hotels, or employed personal chefs and dieticians who made specially tailored tiffins in close accordance with ones' dietary requirements. What was considered "value for money", where value meant purity and health, depended on the particular cultural and economic capital of that person, thus creating a certain hierarchy of technologies of purity that were available in Mumbai - with various price tags attached to it. For these higher earning commuters, using Dabbawalas was considered to be indicative of a lower economic standing - although the Dabbawalas maintained their appearances and precision through meticulous work ethic, and these were readily acknowledged, it still was a bio-moral gambit to hand over your tiffin to be delivered in the dust and bustle of Mumbai, an unappealing thought always raising anxieties of potential mix-ups and spillages. However, the aspirations and obsessions toward achieving purity were shared across lower-middle classes as well as upper middle class vegetarians alike - the Dabbawalas were an affordable technology of purity to cater to a particular class of commuters.



Figure 13 - Dabbawalas in uniform. (Photo by author).

#### **4. The Dabbawala organization on the global circuit: Management science, media, and tourism**

What complicates the Dabbawala work and network is the exceptional national and international fame the tribe has enjoyed since the late 1990's. In 1998, Forbes Magazine "classified" the Dabbawala network with "6-sigma" status, an international standard to assess the failure/defect rate of a production or supply-chain process. Since then, the Bombay Dabbawala has become synonymous with hard work and mind-boggling organizational efficiency. Conceptualized as 'ingenious illiterates', the Dabbawalas were hailed internationally with sensationalist accounts of "the common men of Mumbai who logistically debunk the likes of Amazon and FedEx." They soon became part of an international circuit of media moguls and management scientists. The Dabbawalas have an impressive resume, including a case study by Harvard Business School, a BBC documentary, a feature episode with Top Gear, and an invitation to Prince Charles' wedding in 2005.

These public relations successes did not, however, lead to any increase in the number of tiffins needing delivery. Indeed, the growth of the home-to-office tiffin market has been steady but slow, and wages – except for a select few in upper management who are commissioned to deliver lectures in IITs and IIMs – have not risen in-step with the rising cost of living in the city. But Shankar explains that their international fame had other effects: having internalized their "achievements," Dabbawalas have become adept in narrating their lives and work to any touristy looking person who might approach them. Middle class managerial types rejoiced when I mentioned I was in Mumbai to study *ghar-ka-khana*, repeating the same mantra of "Harvard and Prince Charles", counting them in with the bustling IT-industry as one of the many things India has to offer to the world. Notably, Four Seasons Hotel launched a "Lunch like a local" tour, which included a pick up from hotel with a plush BMW, escort to Churchgate station and observe how the tiffins are sorted, photo shoot with Dabbawala, and return to hotel for a "personalized dabba prepared by Four Seasons chefs", packed in the iconic stainless steel tiffin.<sup>128</sup> Only the other working class city dwellers seemed to be unperturbed by the rise of the Dabbawalas. A roadside vendor once told me "If you're going to study them, you might as well study rag pickers too." He certainly meant it sarcastically, but it

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<sup>128</sup> <http://www.fourseasons.com/magazine/taste/four-seasons-mumbai-dabbawala-experience>

succinctly put into perspective the inequalities of cultural capital and public representation at work among the labouring masses.

Tourist work was emerging to be a serious side-income route for many, including Shankar, who invited me over to his home for what he called a “business meeting”. The first thing that greeted me in his one-room chawl deep in *Dharavi*<sup>129</sup> was the innocent bustling of his two nephews, the young son and daughter of his older brother, who was lying in the corner of the room cocooned in a blanket staring into blank space. “He has been sick for a long time,” Shankar told me. In another corner his sister-in-law and his mother chopped vegetables. On seeing me, they made some space on the floor and politely asked me to sit down. On the wall hung a faded portrait of his deceased father, next to a simply adored altar with candles. Shankar set to work marinating the *surmai*<sup>130</sup> that he had purchased on the way to his flat in a bright green coriander-chilli paste. Soon he was sliding the pieces fish into an oiled *tawa*, perched atop a gas burner that was affixed to a small propane tank. The aroma of grilled spiced fish mixed with dusty smoke filled the room. It was *Diwali*<sup>131</sup>, and his neighbours – potters by profession – were busily shovelling earthenware candle cups in and out of a large smouldering kiln in their courtyard. The door to Shankar’s home did little to ward off the smoke that billowed from the kiln. The surmai was cooked exquisitely with an earthy touch impossible to get in restaurants. Shankar and I ate first while the other family members patiently watched, listening curiously to our awkward and slightly uncomfortable conversation. Shankar began with an unprompted reporting of his salary: 12,000 rupees in a good month. In my mouth, the surmai feast took on a distinctive flavour of guilt and gratitude as I swallowed the meagre earnings of this family of six’s sole breadwinner. How could reciprocate I wondered to myself; perhaps I could treat his family to a nice lunch the following week?

But Shankar had no interest in such formalities of reciprocity: “Let’s talk business,” Shankar he said, breaking my train of thought. He pulled out a fat photo album and a notebook, and flicked through a few pages, displaying the photos proudly. They were photos of Shankar standing alongside various foreigners: some of the photos were shot outdoors - on the street – alongside stacks of tiffins; others were

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<sup>129</sup> A prominent slum in central Mumbai.

<sup>130</sup> A widely consumed sea fish in Mumbai.

<sup>131</sup> Hindu festival of lights.

taken in this very same flat, eating the very same dish of tawa-fried surmai! “She is from Australia,” Shankar pointed to a photo in which he stood stoically, unsmiling next to a tall, redheaded woman; “that one is from America,” he continued briskly before pausing at an image of a handsome Caucasian couple dressed in the signature Dabbawala topi-kurta attire. He smiled broadly as he explained that the couple was a documentary filmmaking team from Paris who had taken a particular liking to him. They were working on getting him a visa to visit France, so that he could appear on a TV show. They are “big businessmen”, he emphasizes, while most of the others were just “tourists” that he took around the city for a “day tour.” These tours consisted of following Shankar for a full working day – from morning to evening – during which time the tourist was permitted to “click all the pictures and videos” he or she desired. I flicked through his impressive portfolio, dizzy by a full stomach and struggling to digest what he was proposing. Shankar scribbled a few numbers on his notebook and drew my attention towards it: “60,000” he had written. “In one month,” he declared, you will know everything about the Dabbawalas.” I glanced nervously towards the two kids who are playing with my iPhone, which is more or less the same price as the month of research assistance he was offering me. It was also equivalent to a half years’ of his salary as a Dabbawala.

My first feeling was of betrayal; the surmai was quite-literally bait, and I felt embarrassed at having gobbled it down so naïvely. I explained that there had been a misunderstanding: “I am a student, and I am in Mumbai for a year. I’m not a tourist, and I want to study about many things here, not only the Dabbawalas - about food, and politics, and life.” Shankar jumped up enthusiastically and smiled broadly: “Yes I know!” He continued; “You are studying culture right? That is very good. There is so much to our work that cannot be covered in one day. I will personally introduce you to my customers. One of my customers, very big man working in Air India office. You will take interview and photo with him, and many more. But you cannot do this alone. You need me.” Indeed, he had a point. In the wake of the 2008 Mumbai terrorist attacks, security for semi-public spaces such as offices, hotels, and malls had tightened, making it difficult for an outsider to just pop in. Shankar had access, and he was offering to share. He interpreted my silence as an invitation to continue, and went on to outline a provisional plan for how he would “teach” me about the world of the Dabbawalas. He instructed me not to tell any other Dabbawala of our “contract”,

as he put it, since this would be in violation of his team's rules. Moreover, he explained, others would be "jealous".

The only middle ground I could envisage was to pay a small fee per session/interview, as opposed to a one-time down payment for a "full tour". The openness of our deal gave sufficient room for me to develop informal ties with Shankar. The largest issue I encountered with Shankar was when I started to build ties with other Dabbawalas. This largely undermined the monopoly he had over insider knowledge, and I found it much easier tagging along with elder Dabbawalas, who were more open and willing to share their perspectives. I distinctly remember a time when an elder Dabbawala started to explain to me his life story and work ethic in the luggage compartment, to which younger Dabbawalas, vegetable vendors, and other travellers attentively listened, all hypnotized by his wise words and the peaceful per-rush hour humming of the train. There was great beauty in that moment, and the knowledge that was produced in the compartment did indeed contrast to what sometimes seemed an overt staginess of Shankar's insights. I got to thinking that he would have been great in any PR or advertising role. But his organization had not matured enough to reserve such a position, and as such these talents were only expressed through informal gigs that he himself orchestrated. Over time I grew increasingly dissatisfied with Shankar's performances, which I felt he was overcharging for; whilst he felt resentment that I was exploring other options to gather data. The brewing tension came to a head when I accompanied him on a weeklong trip to his home village for the occasion of *Ashadi Ekadashi*. I was finally able to experience the rural life that the Dabbawalas cherished so much - but not without being constantly pestered to donate money to the village. Our "business" relationship ended

## **5. Brand ambassadors of cleanliness, efficiency, and purity**

Over the last two decades, the Dabbawalas have become large political players, both in Mumbai, and on a national scale. When the Narendra Modi led BJP government inaugurated the *Swachh Bharat Abhiyan*, or Clean India Mission, in late 2014, the Dabbawalas were nominated as one of many brand ambassadors to represent the cause. Since then, numerous corporations, NGOs, and organizations have publicly associated themselves with the Dabbawalas, such as Indian online retail giant Flipkart on account of their efficient work ethic, and a project with chemical and



personal care manufacturer VVF to promote hand washing practice among Mumbaikars, by delivering 100,000 soap bars - "Every morning lakhs of homemakers make dabbas to protect their family members from falling sick by eating outside food. Mumbai Dabbawalas will partner with Bacter Shield to help inculcate in people the healthy habits at home and outside," Ashish Potdar, senior vice president and business head - Consumer Products at VVF India said.<sup>132</sup> These promotional engagements constantly reminded Mumbai that the Dabbawalas were perhaps the only business community in the city with such strong associations with cleanliness and efficiency, and which various organizations can associate themselves without offending anyone - the organization itself was a readily available fix of "respectable cleanliness" where various actors latched onto. Their "charity" work of cleaning the city, disseminating soaps, and organizing Roti Banks, etc., makes every delivery of ghar-ka-khana, or a glimpse of a stainless steel dabba and their white topi-kurta uniform, laden with an ethics of good deed and respectability.

Not all engagements were successful, while some were erected entirely on thin air - but this inversely showed the sheer brand power of the Dabbawalas. The "Share my Dabba" campaign, initiated by the NGO Happy Life Welfare society, a catchy 2 minute advert created by the advertising agency McCann Mumbai<sup>133</sup>, the video going viral over social media circa 2013, started as an initiative to redistribute leftover tiffin food to street children with the help of a red "Share my Dabba" sticker. The NGO distributed these red stickers, and all tiffins that have red stickers will be kept apart, its contents separated together to be passed on to children in need. Interested to know the developments of the initiative, I contacted Happy Life Welfare in October 2014, one year after the advert became viral, to sadly hear that the initiative had terminated due to irreconcilable differences between the NGO and the Dabbawala organization. Mrs Sulati at the NGO, now working on another project involving slum children, blamed the Dabbawalas for not being cooperative - they had started a pilot version in Matunga station, but most Dabbawalas refused to cross over one road where the NGOs would set up a distribution point. This, to me, was understandable, since the red sticker would have introduced another sorting layer, impacting the supply chain in

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<sup>132</sup> (2015 Aug 22). Dabbawalas to promote hand-washing practice among Mumbaikars. *DNA India*. Retrieved 28 Sep 2017 from <http://www.dnaindia.com/mumbai/report-dabbawalas-to-promote-hand-washing-practice-among-mumbaikars-2117231>

<sup>133</sup> Rushil Nadkarni. (2014). Share my Dabba. Retrieved 28 Sep 2017 from <http://rushilnadkarni.com/share-my-dabba>

a significant way - moreover, by being a charity initiative, they were not receiving any remuneration for this added delivery risk. There also seemed to be moral opposition to the initiative, about many customers reluctant to give leftovers - in accordance to Hindu food proscriptions as *jhutan* being polluting, but perhaps simply not wanting to do anything with slum children, especially involving ones' vital ghar-ka-khana - and so far only managed to feed 20 children or so, the results not showing for the amount of energy that went into it everyday. The true problem, however, was that the advert, which was beautifully edited, with easy to read statistics of the Dabbawala network and the number of hungry children who could (potentially) be fed through the initiative, and realistic, documentary style shots of children sticking their hands into dabbas with the largest smile on their face, with emotional piano music playing behind throughout, gave the impression that the initiative was up and running, with thousands of kids being fed, inducing a fuzzy, feel-good feeling on the part of the viewer, on the same lines to the Fortune Oil advert which I discussed in Chapter IV. The advert went on to win numerous awards, and many articles have been written in praise of the initiative, without any of these investigating the actual running of it on the ground. This was a case in point where the ethics of feeding ghar-ka-khana to a marginalized child was conjured up as a heart-warming story, with the Dabbawalas as the centrepiece, and messengers of this ethically charged enterprise.

The controversy over Indian born writer Rohinton Mistry's novel *Such a Long Journey* (1991), which, in 2010, was removed from the English literature syllabus of Mumbai University after Aditya Thackeray, head of the youth wing of Shiv Sena, complained it depicted the Shiv Sena in negative light, also became caught up with controversy over the Dabbawalas, who allegedly were notified by the Shiv Sena that the Dabbawalas were too depicted negatively: indeed, Mistry had one of his characters, Dinshawji, describe a Dabbawala as a "low-class, smelly pig, full of sweat and grime". Raghunath Medge, head of the Dabbawala association, said that, although the Sena has notified and backed them, this was "more a question of Marathi asmita (pride)", and that "We are from the warkari [Varkari] sect and hardly ever cross the line. But when it comes to self-respect we won't take an insult from anyone. We are vegetarians and have never discriminated against people of any religion and sect. We

do not hesitate to carry non-vegetarian food items and do it as our job."<sup>134</sup> The assertion of Marathi identity as well as Varkari ethics of non-discrimination notwithstanding, this controversy highlighted how important their brand image as a clean, pure, and compassionate organization is, traits which mark their distinction from other "mere" labourers such as milkmen or dhobis.

This chapter explored how the tiffin, the everyday labour of the Dabbawalas, and the Dabbawala organization itself, comprise a chain of technologies of purity to pack, carry, and disseminate vital substance throughout the urban public of Mumbai for a class of high caste commuters, at an affordable price. I have emphasized how the religiosity, teamwork, and sartoriality of the Dabbawalas are important components to produce a desired state of "normality" in this foodway, as well as ethnographically describing the arduous journey of the tiffin, attesting to the bio-moral gravitas of their labour of carrying ghar-ka-khana amidst the obstacles of the city. The following chapter traces the tiffin to its final destination - the semi-public space of office canteen, in order to fully explore how the gastropolitics of social distinction, cosmopolitan pleasure, and visceral disgust, is played out through commensality.

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<sup>134</sup> (2010 Oct 20). Dabbawalas join protest against Mistry book. *Indian Express*. Retrieved on 28 Sep 2017 from <http://archive.indianexpress.com/news/dabbawalas-join-protest-against-mistry-book/699883/>

## Chapter VII: Visceral politics of commensality in the office canteen: the ethics of cosmopolitanism, distinction, and disgust

### 1. The semi-public of the office canteen - mingling with ones known Others

For the many millions who survive the daily office commute in Mumbai, lunchtime is the most eagerly awaited moment of the working day. If train carriages are brutally levelling public spaces, where individuality and social distinction are reduced to absolute kinaesthetic assimilation, the office space, and the canteen in particular, are semi-public spaces where there is ample room to breathe, relax, secure ones' own personal space, and be sociable with ones' peers, upon feeling the caressing breeze of air conditioning, which most toilers in Mumbai do not have access to.<sup>135</sup> Unlike the peak-time train compartment, where strangers are pushed together in extreme proximity, sucking out the most minute breathing space available, the office canteen is where *known Others* come together, converse, and mingle - this chapter will explore how this surplus spatio-temporally opens up both cosmopolitan pleasure of experimenting with the Other, as well as elaborate forms of social distinction and boundary making, at times inducing distaste and disgust (Bourdieu 1984; Ghassem-Fachandi 2012; Hankins 2013; Lawler 2005; Rhys-Taylor 2013). Lunch is inserted in the middle of the day, separating mornings and afternoons, temporarily halting the flow of work, which were sites where social relationships within the workplace were negotiated. My middle- and lower-middle class informants, taking a variety of jobs and titles, were unanimous in valuing the therapeutic function of lunchtime, which not only ameliorated the chaos of the city, but also the stresses and rigid professionalism of the work hour which caused much *tenshun* [tension], a commonly experienced state of mental and somatic stress among urban toilers in India (Solomon 2016). In its best moments, it generated important revelations, a liminal time and space for re-evaluating thoughts and ideas built up during work; more mundanely, but not less

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<sup>135</sup> As I explored through the Dabbawala journey in Chapter VI, such levelling occurs during the peak-hours of commuting, the southbound trains from the suburbs to business districts in the mornings, and the northbound trains in the evening. During other times, such as off peak hours, or holidays, the train carriage changes its face into a pleasurable space of socialization, such as the popular phenomenon of having "train friends", as I alluded to in Chapter II.

importantly, it allowed for joking and gossip, a way to process and reinterpret information and stature within the workplace.<sup>136</sup>

The workplace canteen has garnered little attention within anthropological literature, regardless of the fact that it comprises an important site for social reproduction, distinction, and pleasure for the formal workforce in Indian megacities and smaller towns alike - Parry's (1999) study of caste and commensality in the Bhilai Steel Plant, and Caplan's (2008) brief survey of transforming commensal habits in contemporary Chennai being notable exceptions.<sup>137</sup> This is not unrelated to the fact that the majority of existing literature on consumption and food in contemporary India has focused on *either* the public sphere and its related spaces of consumption which has sprung up since the post-liberalization era (Appadurai and Breckenridge 1995; Conlon 1995; Dewey 2012), *or* the domestic sphere, and how it is undergoing change in the age of such an emergent consumption oriented ethics (Donner 2008, 2011; Janeja 2010; Ray and Baviskar 2011). As I detailed in Chapter V and VI, the Dabbawala network mediates and intermeshes these two realms with a distinct bio-moral-economic register, wherein the technology of purity of the tiffin and their labour protects vital substance and intimacy amidst the intrusions which the urban public sphere of Mumbai harbours. In this chapter, I argue that commensality plays a central role as a social technology, where the display, distribution, and shared ingestion of tiffin comes to be the centrepiece of the "gastropolitics" (Appadurai 1981) of negotiating ones' self with ones' known Others.

As I outlined in Chapter II, I based my fieldwork of office commensality in the historic business district of Fort in South Mumbai in two offices, which I call GLC and M&P. The diverse communal, class, and gender composition of these offices were fertile grounds to explore how social distinction, intimacy, and disgust, were negotiated in the semi-public of the canteen, where these diverse characters congregated through commensality. The office canteen had distinct forms of socializing, compared to other spaces of commensality in Mumbai. In the domestic

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<sup>136</sup> See Ghassem-Fachandi (2012) for the potency of gossip, especially through association with food and dietary habits, in enforcing and circulating stereotypes, in contemporary Gujarat.

<sup>137</sup> Though not focusing on the office canteen, Benei's (2008) ethnography of children's schooling and nationalism in Maharashtra touches upon the semi-public space of the school canteen, albeit putting more emphasis on how nationalistic bodies are nurtured by teachers, and less on social distinction *between* the participants, my main focus in this chapter. The film Stanley's Lunchbox (2011) explores such forms of social distinction through school lunches.

home, its partakers were tied through shared substances of family and kinship, and it was through this everyday, intimate idiom where the gastropolitics of familial distinction were expressed; the restaurant and the khau-galli (Chapter II, IV), on the other hand, were spaces where strangers congregated, or where groups, internally linked through family and friendship ties, co-habited the same space with other such small islands of intimacy, without much direct interaction, but organically forming class, caste, and ethnicity based social distinction and taste, generating cultural and economic capital in the urban public - spaces of novelty and experimentation (Dewey 2012). The canteen embodied both these qualities of everyday intimacy and fleeting experimentation, a “betwixt-and-between” (Turner 1964) space where social distinction and solidarity were played out through such a hybrid sociality. This was carried forward through the tiffin, a continuation of domestic ethics and family values *into* a public setting, which set up an amalgamation of intimacies - a common space where each participant’s “intimate” became portable, on display, circulated, and ingested among ones’ peers. Further, such socialization and objectification of ones’ domestic and familial essence within this space gave rise to a prevalent cosmopolitan ethics, which I call *performing intimacy*. This ethic largely rested on the shared language and etiquette of vegetarian tiffins, promoting egalitarian ideals of shared nourishment and pleasure, from which fluid associations, friendships, and experimentation, which both reinforced and challenged social distinction on the lines of seniority and community, came to be exercised in the office canteen.

However, these seemingly pleasurable re-imaginings of the social were challenged by the equally potent visceral politics of distaste (Lawler 2005; Rhys-Taylor 2013) and disgust (Ghassem-Fachandi 2012), crystalized as boundary challenging *smell* drifting about from cooked meat, on occasional “non-veg” tiffin days, catalysing social differentiation rather than identification. Here, the metaphor of digestion (cf. Ecks 2003) was a key component of the bio-moral interactions in the office canteen, since for purity conscious vegetarians, their *suddenly* carnivorous colleagues were, viscerally and sociologically, difficult to swallow. If the “beef ban” (Chapter III) was an absolute intervention into a fluid field of associations afforded by the city, one where even a pure-veg Jain could consume beef, the boundaries set up through the bi-weekly non-veg days were periodized, normalized forms of such technologies of purity, which no less triggered distaste and disgust among vegetarians - the beef ban and “non-veg” days differed in terms of temporality, but were

continuous with their effects of setting up visceral boundaries. Within these clashes between different regimes of understanding, accepting and digesting the Other, commensality became a double edged sword where excessive intimacy generated anxieties over contamination (cf. Bloch 1999), precisely because the semi-public space of the office canteen did not allow participants to betray the cosmopolitan ethos of inclusion and acceptance, expecting vegetarians to remain cordial with their meat eating colleagues. Such intimate anxiety was amplified since it was experienced towards someone *familiar* - ones colleagues - and as such produced an uncanny sense of Othering as *estrangement*, viscerally challenging the cosmopolitan ethics of inclusion and diversity which everyone aspired to, lending its way to incommensurability. Such cosmopolitanism became an ethical lock, which the vegetarians *knew in their minds* they had to obey, but *could not help but be* viscerally disgusted.

## **2. Performing (public) intimacy: cosmopolitan ethics in the office canteen at GLC**

This section will explore how work-lunch in the canteen harbours myriad ways for its participants to negotiate social distinction, intimacy, and cosmopolitan pleasure and experimentation with each other, which often reconfigured gender and rank in ways which the domestic sphere, and other spaces in the city did not. Unlike in government offices, where lunchtime was more or less fixed between 1pm and 2pm, corporates such as GLC had an undetermined timetable - although the ballpark figure was between these times, people would start or finish plus-or-minus 30 minutes, depending how much work was at hand. These fluctuations also owed to the fact that in shipping companies, one had to deal with clients abroad in different time zones, and attuning to those times were the priority. As such, it was rare to take an entire hour for lunch, most of the time taking between 10 to 30 minutes to be flexible with these rhythms of work. There was a sense in which taking too long for lunch did not look good - “face-saving” as such was a tactic to perform productivity (Goffman 1967). But no matter how squeezed one’s midday schedule was, lunch was never skipped, and people always ate *within* the office, sitting down in proximity with ones colleagues.<sup>138</sup> In GLC, two people in the firm had a Dabbawala deliver for them; a

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<sup>138</sup> As I explored in Chapter IV, *khau-gallis* were important supplements to this normal rhythm of taking work-lunch within the office, through homemade *ghar-ka-khana*.

handful of others subscribed to a tiffin service, which delivered directly to the office; and all others, including all members of the friendship group, carried theirs from home - these figures were more or less the same for the employees of M&P. The exceptions were the executives and blue-collar staff, who had their own separate eating areas from such “middle range” office workers. Nevertheless, instead of eating out, these members also ate within their quarters, such as Mr Gupta, CEO of GLC, who had a tailor-made lunch from a 5 star hotel directly delivered to him; and the guardsmen, drivers, and peons, brought simple tiffins from home, or occasionally brought an inexpensive parcel back from a nearby eatery, consisting of dal, and rice or chapatti.

The commensal group in the accounting department of GLC consisted of 6 women and 5 men, of various age, community, and rank, all self confessed “foodies” who came together whenever they could. On my first visit, everyone amicably invited me over to their table, although some of the women were “embarrassed” about their tiffins of the day, which, in their eyes, were not fit for a “guest” - this consisted of a simple combination of vegetable subzi and chapatti, saying that “these were made from leftover vegetables in the fridge”. Not only did this mildly transgressed the Hindu bio-moral impetus of serving “fresh foods” (Chapter III), it was a sign of frugality only permissible for close family. This sentiment pointed to the fact that tiffin was a substance of *public intimacy* - it came from ones home, condensing ones intimate, domestic, and familial qualities, only to be publicly displayed, distributed, and jointly ingested with Others, who do not share the same background with each other. Making ones private public through commensality was a double edged sword: it gave a dimension of *performing intimacy*, an opportunity to ethically connect with one’s peers, but also producing *performance anxiety*, a pressure to keep appearance and respectability. The materiality of tiffin was important in facilitating commensality - certain types of foods were considered more “sociable” than others - this was assessed by both its propensity to bio-morally absorb the qualities of the cook, and the readiness in which it is *separable/divisible* into smaller portions, for it to go around the table (Chapter IV).

As I explored in Chapter IV, while most commuters valued ghar-ka-khana, and eating tiffin in the office canteen as important ways to maintain health and be sociable, some people I interviewed had different sensibilities regarding healthy, acceptable eating. I struck up a conversation with two well-groomed office workers in



their 60s, in front of a fresh papaya vendor, regarding issues related to tiffins, street food, and health. Mr Saver and Mr Filip, two Mangalorean Catholics native to Mumbai, have been working in Fort for many decades, and they are “foodie friends” who have lunch together, who just came from a nearby Udipi (south Indian Brahmin) joint. They were fluent and confident in English, typical to the Christian community in India, but also much to do with their high level of education and cultural capital.

Ken: What do you think about tiffin? I’ve been talking to many office workers here [in khau-galli], and most say ghar-ka-khana is the healthiest option.

Saver: [shrugging], We *never* bring tiffin, right? Anything you eat hot, there’s no problem. If you want to know the truth, the roadside vendor food is the best. Because they serve it hot.

Ken: Is hygiene a problem?

Saver: People sometimes laugh at us when we go out, saying that bird shit will fall on you. But even that guy who provokes people, he comes and eats!

Ken: Do you think some particular people or communities are more health conscious, in that way? That they prefer home food only.

Filip: Brahmins, and Jains ... [towards Saver] there’s that Iyer no? From Kerala. They will only eat at pure veg restaurants. They are the ones bringing tiffin from home.

Saver: Ah, but when we were at Parel he had eaten with us, roadside *bhi kaya tha* [he ate street food too]. Maybe no one was looking so ... [laughs.] But they were getting that very good vada sambar and all that ... they have eaten.

Filip: See, it depends on your personality. Our parents did not tell us eat this or don’t eat this. We have our own mind. But in certain customs, like in the Hindu tradition, like the Sethi family, or the Ayer family, the Brahmins, they will specifically tell you, don’t eat this outside. Like Gujarati families.

Saver: When you get excellent food [outside] at a good price, why don’t you want to eat there? Why do you want to trouble your wife? That’s how I used to think, as a bachelor I said why do I want to trouble my mom? The Indian mentality is that the wife at home is like a servant. Women are there to cook, to take care of parents. But its slowly changing.

Filip: Maybe the reason that we are progressive is because we trust the person [vendor], as much as our wives! [laughs] We are basically very positive, we don't think negatively about these things.

This conversation revealed several important points. Firstly, their comments confirmed the widely accepted fact that high caste vegetarians (Hindu Brahmins such as the Iyers and Sethis, and Gujarati Brahmins and Jains) were most hypochondriac about bio-moral purity, and trusted ghar-ka-khana the most, yet occasionally transgressing into bahar-ka-khana; second, that despite denouncing street food, many of these commuters still consumed it once in a while, a form of mild transgressive pleasure; and third, a point about what it means to be “progressive”. This last point is a problematic that I will engage with throughout this chapter, for this put into contrast the cosmopolitan ethics of inclusion and acceptance, with the visceral politics of food. Mr Saver and Mr Filip thought of themselves as “progressive” for various reasons: they were open to new experiences (they liked savouring various cuisines), medically and purity-wise unfussy (were not bio-morally hypochondriac about who cooked the food and where it was eaten), and were affluent (they were in a comfortable position to afford restaurant food for the majority of the week). But they were also keenly aware of the *labour of making tiffin*. So far in my interviews with male commuters, such a “feminist” understanding of food was rarely expressed - tiffin was good and healthy, certainly from the point of view of the receiving end, but the dilemmas and efforts of putting it together every morning on the part of the wife or mother went, for the most part, unnoticed. This was an area which I was just beginning to ethnographically engage with, since, as a male researcher, interviewing women in their domestic spaces required much more trust than talking to their husbands in the urban public, where short term fleeting interactions were allowed. Mr Saver’s conscious choice of not wanting to trouble his wife and mother over such “chores” was certainly a rare position to take amidst this division of labour which permeates every aspect of Indian life.

What made the commensal group in GLC interesting was the presence of these working women, who did *both* type of labours in the home and city. Most female workers at GLC made tiffins, and all or some portion of the days’ dinner, for the whole family, early in the morning before commuting to work. Aarushi, a Maharashtran lady whom I became the closest to, also on account of Rahul, her 19

year old son who was studying in culinary school, often woke up at 5am in the morning, cooked and packed tiffin for the entire family, then left her home earlier than anyone else, from Dombivli, which took 2 hours door-to-door to her office. While it was clichéd to say that Mumbaikars were always on the clock, where every minute counts, this seemed to really characterize the lives of working women with families.

These women took full control over the domestic chores of sustenance, often in joint effort with in-laws or domestic servants, considering it as a pleasurable obligation, and their sense of agency and empowerment came through doing this care work - many said things like “the way to a man’s heart is through his stomach”, or “who rules the kitchen rules the family” (cf. Appadurai 1981).<sup>139</sup> However, these occasions were as much considered as burdensome chores and duties, which you had to perform no matter how tired or sleepless you are, for reasons of bio-moral and performance anxiety. For instance, the prevalent concern for leftover foods (Janeja 2010: 76-85) compel working women to cook fresh food everyday, for these are considered more bio-morally pure and healthy, retaining its nutrients and care than “stale” leftovers, but also because one had to perform “good mothering” - Aarushi says that there is pressure from her mother-in-law, who sarcastically nudges her when she “cheats”, days when she is just too tired to cook so has Rahul and her husband eat out, that she is not taking “enough care of the men in the house”. Others felt embarrassment (sharam) in bringing leftover as tiffin, where everyone can see that you “cheated” on that day, acceptable if one is single, but not so much if one has a whole family to take care of, since others will “think that the entire family is neglected”. People also commented that back in the day when dining out has only just started to become common for the middle classes (cf. Conlon 1995), during the 60s and 70s, people used to gossip about families who ate out, saying that the wife of that family must be totally lazy, or a terrible cook. Cooking for the family indexed proper womanhood and motherhood, as I learned in attending cooking classes with a Gujarati lady, where I was the only male student, many others young working women who were pushed by their mothers to learn how to cook. One 25-year-old corporate worker sarcastically remarked that “a PhD is useless unless she can make a perfectly round

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<sup>139</sup> A memorable scene in the film *Lunchbox* (2013) was when Ila, with the help of her auntie neighbor, took “revenge” on an ungrateful Sanjay, her secret admirer, using copious amounts of chillis in her tiffin. Food is both medium and message of self-expression.

chapatti.” So, from a woman’s perspective, ghar-ka-khana is as much a reproductive tool for the family as it is an occasion to perform status and respect (izzat) in the eyes of in-laws, neighbours, and colleagues, one that certainly replicates patriarchal ideals.

Moreover, their agencies and creative capacities were constantly nudged by the demands, preferences, and tastes of her family members, often pitting the two into conflict. From the classic example of the mother trying to feed vegetables to children who detest it, cooking for the family is, as Mrs Safia, an English language teacher in SNDT college said, “like calculus trying to aggregate everyone’s likes and dislikes, on top of budget, time, and convenience”. Repetition of menus, which were often unavoidable as leftover vegetables had to be cooked at some point, were a constant source of nagging (Janeja 2010). In the cooking class, there were several housewives who attended to increase their repertoire: one Tamil woman was especially keen to learn Punjabi cuisine, as her 10 year old son constantly nagged her to make butter paneer masala - echoing Donner’s (2008: 164) informants who lament her children who dislike Bengali fish curries to prefer rich, creamy North-Indian/Mughlai curries which is a ubiquitous restaurant food throughout India, but adjusts by cooking these dishes herself, representing it not as proper food but as “snacks”, as it is still better than allowing the children to eat outside. Just like commensality, there were two sides to ghar-ka-khana: everyday comfort could quickly turn into unappreciated boredom, and solutions are solely left with the wife-cook.

These ethics of aligning preferences and managing pleasure passed onto the tiffin, and were brought on to the dining table in the canteen. Certainly, tiffin was an embodiment of intimacy, but its contents were regulated by these practicalities which the women had to negotiate. They passionately exchanged recipes and tips of home economics, to which the men, like school kids, listened in awe: as Aarushi said jokingly, it was “a class in how to be a considerate husband”. The way men, jokingly characterized as those who cared nothing about the domestic sphere, who were pitted against the women who “secretly controlled them through their food”, was an instance of what I call *performing intimacy*. Commensality was a temporary, “liminal” space (Turner 1967) which recurred everyday, allowing individuals from different positions in the company to come together, over shared substance, in ways which cannot be envisaged during the seriousness of official work time, or outside the office. To borrow the language Turner used to analyse transitional phases of rites-of-passage, hung “betwixt-and-between” the phases of fixed subjectivities of neophyte and adult,

so the canteen was also implicated in such grey-zone spaces between public and private, domestic and the urban, and the intimate and the fleeting, as well as times between the professionalism of work and intimacy of familial life. Such liminality implied a considerable degree of egalitarianism, and a (temporary) dissolving of social distinctions and hierarchy - just like the dark “meat restaurants” (Chapter III), they implicated a conglomeration of *dividual* elements whereby play, experimentation and re-imagination trumped anchored social distinctions, albeit for a short period of time (Appadurai 2015). Rank was the most immediate marker which was reconfigured in this way - most low- to mid-level white collar workers within a department took lunch during more or less the same time frame, thus freely mingling with each other. This hotpot sociality help build a liberal and carefree atmosphere. Vikas was the youngest of the bunch, and was treated with joking affection by his superiors, people who otherwise would be rather strict and professional - he was incorporated into the group by “being just like a son” through idioms of feeding ghar-ka-khana. Such fictive familial ties did not carry over during work or after-work hours, where professionalism, an altogether different type of egalitarian ideal (“it doesn't matter who you are as long as you do your job right”) took its place.

Among gender and rank, community was also reconfigured within these “small islands of egalitarianism” (Dumont, in Caplan 2008: 131). The accounting department group were composed of a mix of Gujarati, Punjabi, South Indian (Tamil and Kerala), and Maharashtran workers native to Mumbai, and regional and community diversity was often invoked to mark distinction. The important thing was that this was not presented as hierarchy but as pure difference, and in this regard it was congruent with the overall project of maintaining an egalitarian atmosphere. This was most clearly expressed through the notion of “learning about each others’ culture”. In as much as tiffin was an embodiment of your domestic relationships, it was a window into ones’ larger social background, of which regional and cultural difference was an easily stereotyped and joked about form (“Gujarati’s have such a sweet tooth, they put so much jaggery in their food”; “Parsees are pure-non-veg”; “Punjabis have an iron stomach - ghee laden paratha for breakfast, and Patiala pegs at night”). Notably, community and region were much more often invoked than caste and religion, and this was to do with a sense of being “politically correct”, similar to what Natrajan (2012) refers to [as] the “culturalisation of caste” as the process by which caste groups seek to represent themselves as cultural groups, thus naturalizing

their existence and justifying their preferences and practices as “diversity” and “difference” rather than hierarchy,” (Gorringe and Karthikeyan 2014: 21).

Tiffin was both medium and message for these negotiations to unfold, and, as I pointed out in Chapter IV, comparing the individual viscosity of the Indian meal to the individual Western dish, the materiality of the food itself was profoundly important in facilitating commensality. Such self-contained and individualistic foods, such as sandwiches and burgers, had its uses. Vikas, who usually brought his mothers’ tiffins, did not do so on several consecutive days, and asked me to join him to have food in the khau-galli opposite the office. This was done on the pretext of us surveying street food; but he eventually confessed that he had deep concerns about his work being undervalued at GLC - and he wanted to have time away from his colleagues to reflect on these matters. Had he brought tiffin from home, he had no choice but to join in the commensal banter, for eating tiffin alone would have been too obviously anti-social. His colleagues eventually picked up on Vikas’ behaviour, showing concern not only for him, but his mother, who presumably was told by Vikas that he did not require tiffin - Aarushi sympathised with her, saying that a mother knows immediately when her child is stressed, by only looking at whether he’s eating properly. Others said these situations attracted gossip, because it often signified tensions within the family itself - in as much as the tiffin is an embodiment of familial relationships, the *lack* of it meant something was not going right.<sup>140</sup> It was notable that this situation was assessed on the basis of his lack of engagement with the commensal table, and Vikas distanced himself from the cohort by boycotting commensality. Vikas knew that his colleagues were worried; thus, one day, he came to the office with a sandwich packed in tin foil, and started to eat that alone, in front of his work laptop, while others congregated as usual on the commensal table. Aarushi went over to him and asked what’s for lunch, which he replied my “mom’s *chutney* sandwich” - satisfied, Aarushi asked whether he wanted some of her subzi, which Vikas politely refused. After the meal, Vikas told me that he had specifically told his mother to make sandwich the previous night - partly because he was getting fed up with street food, but also, since if he brought a sandwich, he didn’t have to share with the cohort. “Mom’s sandwich” was the most suitable embodiment of both domestic intimacy and individual indulgence. As Bloch (1999) pointed out, commensality is a double-edged

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<sup>140</sup> The storyline of the film *Stanley ka Dabba* (2011) hinged upon such a situation, where the (lack of) tiffin was a barometer of each schoolchild’s family-socio-economic background.

sword, entailing both the pleasures and burdens of sociality. Eating alone is a different kind of indulgence - Vikas temporarily forgot his troubles through slamming in his food into his body in a mindless nature without being disturbed. The sandwich allowed him to manipulate canteen sociality, to simultaneously save face while distancing himself from others.

For the most part, commensality in the office went smoothly, and various rules and etiquette determined its proceedings. Although plates were available from the kitchen, many people simply used the lids of their katoris as plates, to which the owner of the tiffin took a portion of his subzi and placed its contents on these. Spoons were used to distribute, but hands were almost always used to eat. This tactile practice of mashing, tearing, and mixing on the plate gave a sense that one did not taste only with ones mouth, but tasting began at your fingertips (Mann et al., 2011). Eating with ones hands and sharing sticky food did not signify a lack of “table manners” – the way people ripped and folded a piece of chapatti (with only the right hand since the left hand was used for “profane” functions) to construct a mini vessel so as to carry dal and gravy was an artisanal skill. There was no rigid rule as to what, and how much portion each participant received; there was a constant negotiation of offering and politely refusing (“You must have more”; “But you haven’t left anything for yourself”), to which the giver would always succeed in slipping in a small portion; there were times when certain dishes and ingredients were refused from the onset, due to reasons of health (“I cant have potatoes today, because of gas”), taste (“That looks spicy, I’ll pass”), or fasting (“Ill only have a bit of your fruit [because I cant eat onions or garlic today]”); there were also times when certain subzis were announced publicly in order to feed it to certain people (“I brought eggplant today, your favourite, so don't say no!”). Similar negotiations took place for second helpings, so as to not leave any leftovers.

Although office lunchtime allowed for friendships across rank, and opportunities for self-expression, it was nonetheless a carefully regulated social space, where everyone knew everyone. The nonchalance of lunchtime sociality did not come from the random encounters one might expect from on the streets, but a regulated freedom that comes from a cultivated trust between the participants. Social distinction in such an arena functioned as a way to publicly stage ones’ identity, an important tactic to present yourself as sociable, as someone who one can relate to and would want to work with. Issues of caste and religion were too charged; potentially

undermining this carefully crafted public intimacy. This unwritten compulsion to be egalitarian is echoed by Parry's (1999: 34-5) survey of the changing commensal relationships among workers in the Bhilai Steel Plant: on the surface, commensal rules based on caste seemed to have become much more relaxed, but in reality, such liberal interpretation of rules were reserved to public and formal occasions, while a strengthening of rules were observed in the least formal, private, and domestic contexts. Indeed, it was rare for members of the food group to visit each other's homes to have food, or to share after-work drinks and activities. Certainly, this was more to do with each person (especially the women) being very busy with other chores and duties, and less with an aversion to "mix" with people of different rank or caste. However, it all the more supports the notion that lunchtime commensality was a carefully regulated form of egalitarianism, a common project or game where everyone worked to achieve in order to smooth out work relations - rather than actually being "truly yourself", one performed intimacy through the common language and substance of tiffin.

However, tiffin also brought an element of surprise and experimentation. Savita, a South Indian woman married to a Gujarati husband, always lamented the fact that she had to make tiffins to match his tastes, which were on the sweeter side, which she did not enjoy at all, and thus got her "fix" of properly tangy and spicy sambar from her colleagues' tiffins - Mumbai's generic sambar has a sweet aftertaste, influenced by the Gujarati preferences. This was a common sentiment felt by many working women and housewives I met, especially those who experienced inter-caste or inter-regional marriages, where one of the first things they were taught upon entering her husbands' home were instructions from her mother-in-law to learn their family taste, sometimes causing a conflict of tastes and preferences. Luckily for Savita, things worked out in the end, as Nailesh, her Gujarati colleague loved eating her sweet subzis, and the group joked about their ritual "tiffin swap". Although domestic responsibilities dictated a large part of ones cooking, office commensality also granted possibilities to temporarily break away from these. One day, Savita brought a unique subzi made of jackfruit - this was highly popular among her female co-workers, who praised her ingeniousness, to which Savita responded that she had "gambled" that morning, because she knew that her family would hate it, but she herself craved it, and was grateful that her colleagues validated her efforts. This was an important revelation for me, someone who only cooks for leisure and not for



everyday sustenance - the cook, fed up with the nudges coming from her family, revolts through cooking as she desires. Thus, commensality in the office provided an occasion where one could express herself in ways which she can't within the domestic sphere. It was a suspended space of sorts, which, although invariably connected to the domestic sphere, had its own logic and associations - for example, the wives and mothers of the male workers, although having never met any of them, had a presence within the commensal table ("Vikas's mom's lemon rice is exquisite, I can never get the taste right at home").



Figure 14 - Commensality in the office - an everyday banquet. (Photo by author).

### 3. "Welcome to the meat eating table!" - "Non-veg" days, visceral distinction, and estrangement at M&P

In April 2014, several months before I started fieldwork, a post on Twitter caused a humorous uproar among Indian social media users: an employee of the Chennai based news organization *The Hindu* uploaded a notice, signed off by the Vice president of Human Resources, saying that the department was receiving complaints by some workers regarding non-vegetarian food being brought to the canteen, and "all

are aware non-veg food is not permitted in our Canteen premises as it causes discomfort to the majority of the employees who are vegetarian.”<sup>141</sup> This seemingly innocuous request caused agitation and satire because of the widely shared understanding of the politics of vegetarianism and meat in India, which I detailed in Chapter I and III - although in reality, the practice of vegetarianism was fluidly adopted for different reasons, such top-down enforcement of vegetarianism was taken to be alarmingly similar to the tried and tested tactic of imposing caste hierarchy through dietary provisioning (cf. Ambedkar 1990 [1948]; Srinivas 1956). Yet the important thing was that the notice *masked* such power dynamics - it was not set up as a case of vegetarians forcing the meat eaters to abide to their norms of purity and respectability, but rather deflecting the responsibility on to the meat eaters by appealing to *their* conscience and choice - there is a process of individualization of the issue, which simultaneously sets up both a problem and its solution, one which will be swiftly solved *if only* the non-vegetarians would be more “considerate” in respecting sentiments for his/her colleagues.

This is the realm of what Gorringer and Karthikeyan (2014) call “banal casteism”, the processes by which caste inequality become normalized through everyday, embedded practices, which resist and deflect non-Hindu and low-caste forms of self assertion. In this case, the creation of choice and agency, in the form of renouncing meat, entirely reflects the expectations of the dominant castes, and serves to strengthen existing social inequalities by policing the semi-public of the canteen. The innocuous and everyday nature of food naturalized such embedded forms of social hierarchy, as reflected by a comment by one of my vegetarian office worker informants: “As an adult, you should respect each others’ feelings. You can eat meat in your home, but why the need to discomfort your colleagues? Is food more important than your work relations?” The additional irony was that, although *The Hindu* had a reputation for being a “left wing liberal” newspaper, they were taken to be supporting an elitist Brahmin orthodoxy - *appearing* liberal but *actually* was casteist, for it was so banal and ingrained in the minds of “the top 3.5%” who presumably controlled the firm and, according to some, the entire country.

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<sup>141</sup>Kumar, R. (2014 Apr 15). 'Liberal' news organisation 'The Hindu' forbids employees to carry non-vegetarian food on its canteen premises. *DNA India*. Retrieved 28 Sep 2017 from <http://www.dnaindia.com/india/report-liberal-news-organisation-the-hindu-forbids-employees-to-carry-non-vegetarian-food-on-its-canteen-premises-1978543>

The concept of “banal casteism” points to the fact that such de-politicization of the everyday practices of food is itself political. A correlating tactic is the “culturalisation of caste”: “the process by which caste groups seek to represent themselves as cultural groups, thus naturalizing their existence and justifying their preferences and practices as “diversity” and “difference” rather than hierarchy” (Gorringe and Karthikeyan 2014: 21). The *Hindu* notice sought to resolve these squirming tensions of making vertical hierarchy into horizontal difference by means of setting up the figure of the “sensitive vegetarian majority”, and the “inconsiderate non-vegetarian minority”, which backfired and became re-verticalized through Twitter as “*progressive Brahmins*” oppressing “non-Brahmins”: those elites paying lip-service to the cause of abolishing inequality, but perpetuated those very inequalities in their everyday lives. Yet, this new set up seemed problematic as it often involved characterizing the Brahmin *in the know* of the situation, that they were *consciously* conspiring. Such two-facedness certainly did exist, such as the practice of secretly eating beef/meat while denouncing lower castes in public who do the same. However, in considering the (presumably) Brahmin management as secretly scheming to slip in caste hierarchy into the canteen, its critics rendered them in full control of their food - echoing the sentiment of another office worker informant who dryly stated, “nowadays everything is politicized, even food; its pure politics” - and thus also banalized the affective power of food to proactively mobilize people (cf. Janeja 2010). Over the past chapters, I have sought to complicate this view of food *for* politics in favour of food *as* politics, through investigating the intensely intimate and ventral associations and repulsions that food mediates, a realm which I call *visceral politics*. This is to take the “everydayness” and “embodiment” of food seriously as charged affect, a public discourse which acts through forms of mediations as “gut feeling” than “thought out” representation (cf. Mazarella 2009: 299-300). Could it not be the case that the management at the *Hindu*, instead of secretly scheming to slip in caste hierarchy, *actually wanted* to be inclusive, but *could not help but be* casteist because they were overcome, disgusted and angered by the viscosity of meat, somatically and uncontrollably, less violently but topologically similar to the *gau rakshaks* and rioters who were “taken over by Hindutva” (Ghassem-Fachandi 2012)?

Although I did not come across such a brash notice in any of the office, college, and hospital canteens I dined in (to do so in “cosmopolitan” Mumbai would have caused even more ridicule), this incommensurability of what comes out from the

tip of your tongue and what forms within deep down ones' intestines unexpectedly surfaced on certain days, with great regularity: informally decided *non-veg days*. At M&P, unlike GLC, there was a designated canteen area where everyone went to eat and share their lunches, a space with two rooms of about 15 seats each aligned to several rows of tables - two rooms were separated by two toilet cubicles, and on the room on the right, there was a large sink equipped with crockery and cutlery that workers could use freely. As the entrance was adjacent to the room on the left of the cubicles, I would stay there to see who came in with who, and which room they would choose to eat - certainly my presence affected their choices to some extent, as some, upon seeing me, would sit next to me, but many others simply greeted me and sat in the other room. As I went back and forth between the two rooms with my camera, taking photos of the lunches, talking to the workers who all kindly shared portions with me, several patterns started to emerge: the room on the left were majorly frequented by the high to mid-level Gujarati managers, who noticeably were in a higher rank than most in the office as they had their own private cubicle; the other room was frequented by everybody else, including blue collar workers and guardsmen. There was also a difference in timings - the Gujarati managers would come to eat at the earliest time possible, mostly by 12.30, and ate, conversed, and left by 1pm, by which time most of the other workers started pouring in the other room. The blue collar workers would usually eat much later, starting around 2pm after all the office workers have resumed work. Even if the Gujarati manager room was empty and theirs rather crowded, they sat in their loosely designated rooms. Although nobody overtly stated that the rooms were separated by rank per se, this separation was made sense by my informants through invoking different "friendship groups" - a 25 year old IT worker who recently joined the firm preferred to sit in the other room since "he did not know how to talk to these uncles" - in *theory*, he was able to sit with his superiors, yet rank and seniority importantly nudged the preferences and limitations to mingle and associate.

However, for this young Maharashtran IT worker, virtually everyone in the firm was more senior or older than him - yet he was much more comfortable eating in the mixed room. Did community have something to do with this (unintentional) segregation? Although I felt that both groups in the rooms were very sociable and kind, there was a difference in atmosphere and the way sociality and commensality were carried out - the Gujarati room more serene and relaxed, the mixed room more

boisterous and energetic. Although this certainly owed to the number of people per room, with only around 10 fixed members using the Gujarati room, I had a gut feeling that this was also probably related to the type of food brought by the various office workers. While everyone brought vegetarian tiffins, the Gujarati managers brought smaller, simpler tiffins, and shared less with each other, compared to members of the mixed table, who actively used the plates and spoons provided by the canteen to dish out their own dishes to each other. My instincts were confirmed unexpectedly one Friday, when I was about to enter the mixed room, the first thing that greeted me from the hallway was a familiar *smell* - of cooked meat in spices. As I was lured in by the whiff, I felt the conversation and laughter in the room noticeably amplified compared to previous days - no doubt owing to the fact that it was the last day of the working week - but I understood that something of a feast was going on in this room, when Mr Singh, who has been the CEO's personal driver for the past 30 years, suddenly announced boisterously: "Welcome to the meat eating table!" pointing to an empty seat, signalling that I should join in. Mr Singh was a Punjabi Sikh, men known for their virility and love for meat, whiskey, and business entrepreneurship, who was nearing 60 years old yet was an energetic extrovert as ever, true to his lineage as "a descendant of the warrior caste". On asking what the occasion was, people told me that today was a "non-veg day", and they had all brought their favourite delicacies prepared by their wives. As I discussed in Chapter I, the reasons for people to go in and out of vegetarianism and meat eating owed to various ethical, medical, and economic reasons, and unlike the *Hindu* notice, these rhythms were not formally regulated by management at M&P - rather, it followed a pattern found throughout Mumbai to go "non-veg" on Wednesdays and Fridays as per convention (many people confirmed that Sundays were the largest non-veg feast days). The infrequency of the event made these "treat days" for these office workers.

As I joined in and shared the delicious egg, chicken, and fish preparations, people, who formed many circles surrounding a field of richly aromatic katoris and plates, jokingly asked me: "Which food do you like better, *ours* or *theirs*?", pointing to the neighbouring room. The Gujarati managers in the firm were avid pure-vegetarians, and did not follow these non-veg day rhythms. By now, most of them would have completed their meals, and 20 minutes before I was just having a conversation over their subtle and light vegetarian tiffins, although no talk of the non-veg day came up. I answered "I like all foods, as long as its tasty"; but Mr Singh

provocatively insisted that “Surely *our* food is more enjoyable”. I agreed with him that such a banquet did not happen in the “Gujarati room”; but his edgy insistence made a mark on me, especially compared to the more bland sociality here a few days back. Everyone seemed to be in a mildly euphoric state, an effervescence of ceremonious congregation mediated by virile, libidinous meat. Amidst the laughter and congregation, Mr Jain, a well respected senior manager in the law department of the firm, came into the mixed room, now transformed into the “meat room”, to use the sink to wash his tiffins, as there was only this one sink in the entire canteen. I was always struck by the way he rinsed out his katoris with water and drank the mixture so as not to waste a single particle of food, a diligent and admirable practice based on Jain doctrines of ahimsa. He politely greeted everyone, went to the sink, and did his daily routine - the only difference was that, while on days where others brought vegetarian tiffins, he would stay around and talk and gossip with his colleagues and subordinates, sipping his water; this day, he filled his katori and left the room in a hurry. Our eyes met as he was leaving - in that split second, I could glimpse a curious mixture of embarrassment and bewilderment, which he shed away with an apologetic smile.

What I would like to focus here is not the reason as to how and why these particular days have come to be conventional “non-veg” days in many semi-public spaces around the city; but rather, how these bi-weekly transformations of commensal dynamics sharply interpellated the office workers into two camps, “pure-vegetarians” and “carnivores”, which proved to be bio-morally and viscerally incommensurable. Here, I engage with Bourdieu’s (1984) influential work on habitus, social distinction, and “taste”, as well as sociological and anthropological work which has critically elaborated Bourdieu’s insights to delve on “distaste” and “disgust” as affective mechanisms which reproduce, legitimize, and somaticize social distinction on sensory and embodied levels (Lawler 2005; Rhys-Taylor 2013). In particular, I focus on the affect of *smell* of meat which territorializes such social distinction as stigma (Hankins 2013), a process linked to the interpellation of the two subjects of “(clean) vegetarian” and “(dirty) carnivore”. Yet, *smell* nebulously crosses over the rigid boundaries set up through the project of exercising social distinction - it also de-territorializes these rigid distinctions by permeating the safe distance set up. The affect of “disgust”, then, is not merely a reaction of a pre-existing dominant class towards his subordinates; it emerges amidst the very process of contact, ridden with anxieties of contamination. In

other words, one does not feel “disgust” from a safe distance, but rather it shrouds one’s subjectivity from within the “gut”, the function of a “nauseating intimacy” (Ghassem-Fachandi 2012). As such, these rattling affective experiences become sharply pitted against the ethos of cosmopolitanism, which I discussed in the previous sections through commensal relations in GLC, as it sets entirely new standards for inclusion, acceptance, and mingling.

The initial gut-feeling I had when comparing the two rooms, that the “Gujarati room” was calm and serene, compared to the more voracious and loud “mixed-meat room”, were themselves internalized by my informants, explicated through their comments, etiquette, food, and forms of commensality. The Gujarati managers repeatedly told me that their tiffins were much “lighter” than many others in the firm - indeed, their portion sizes were visibly less than their neighbours, with a few pieces of small *rotlis* (Gujarati chapattis are characteristically smaller), and one simple subzi, with some fruits, curd, and dried *farsans* - and this had much to do with the fact that their average age was older than the others, at around the mid-50s, with one of them suffering from diabetes, and several others from mild overweightness, causing general “fatigue”. These ailments, which many of them blamed on their sedentary lifestyles, required adjustments of their food intake, and their dinners more or less replicated the same structure and portions, with many of them showing distaste for rice as being too fattening and causing sluggishness. They also confessed that their “sweet tooth” was an obstacle to achieving a healthy lifestyle, for these not only allured in the form of the myriad after-meal deserts, but ingredients like jaggery were indispensable for the main subzis and dals, where the taste of “sweetness”, as well as signifying abundance, forms an essential component of the Gujarati culinary universe. And regardless of this shared taste, the Gujarati managers did not share their foods among themselves, because each tiffin was attuned to their specific, individual dietary requirements - as such, they brought self sufficient tiffins in their compact 2 story tiffins or horizontal plastic Tupperware. Conversations thus were not so much focused on the food themselves, except when *farsans* and fruits were occasionally exchanged. It is indicative from a bio-moral point of view that these hard farsans, which is significantly less porous than subzi, and fruits, mere addendums to the full meal, were what was shared - they were the least absorptive of the qualities of the cook.

Since individual portions were less, and sharing infrequent in the Gujarati room, the entire dining experience was short, and importantly, less *noisy*, giving a

more refined and calm atmosphere. On the other hand, sociality in the “mixed table” was lively because it was literally *loud* - following Janeja (2010), if sound can be taken as an important component in constructing “normality”, one would only need to keep his ears open from the connecting hallway that the two rooms had entirely different criteria for their aspiration and conduct of a normal foodscape. In the mixed room, it was noisy because commensality was the norm, which increased the permutations and intensities of actions of involved with the act of sharing food, thus producing various sounds which one did not hear in the Gujarati room. The vigorous clicking of utensils and movements of the hand which distributes and receives food; ripping of chapattis; biting, chewing, and swallowing; the voices which inquire about, explain, and praise the food; rustles and creaks of seats to give way to new comers joining the commensal table; running water from the sink to wash their hands and dishes; all of these sounds came together, and became normalized - it wasn't only that commensality produced these sounds, but these sounds came to be synonymous with commensality, and the healthy, convivial sociality which it stood for. Although on the outlook, the subzis in the mixed room did not differ a whole lot from the Gujarati's, since they were both vegetarian ghar-ka-khana on most days, people in the mixed room brought larger portions, crucially accompanied with rice, which the Gujarati managers never did. In addition, since there were no Jains who came to that room, there were more “fiery” vegetables circulating - onions, green chilli, and garlic were cherished. The uses of spices were also unmistakably amplified here, as Mr Singh and his friends had a reputation a love of chatpata, and those who ate their tiffins, including myself, uncontrollably produced an inhaling noise to soothe ones tongue on fire, accompanied by large gulps of water, followed by jovial laughter by the group who found the entire sequence entertaining.

For Bourdieu (1984), “taste” is not limited to senses experienced on the tip of the tongue, nor does it come “naturally” from ones physiology, but is rather a total aesthetic and social mode of *judgment* which *makes itself* second nature, as habitus: it is “a class culture turned into nature, that is, *embodied*, [which] helps to shape the class body. It is an incorporated principle of classification which governs all forms of incorporation, choosing and modifying everything that the body ingests and digests and assimilates, physiologically and psychologically” (ibid: 190). In other words, “taste”, socially expressed as having “good taste” or “bad taste”, as a criteria of judging pleasing/unappealing, beautiful/ugly, appetizing/disgusting etc., lies at the



interface of the self and the outside world which mutually constitute each other. Importantly, Bourdieu sees two sets of relationships around this socio-physical membrane which is “taste” - firstly, the bundle of relationships formed by various aesthetic and moral preferences and judgments, such as a liking for a particular piece of music, food, or film, which comprises a distinct class habitus; secondly, the relationships *between* these *schemas*, which forms a relationship of contradistinction, not only in its totality, but on the level of individual terms which comprise the distinct class habitus. As Bourdieu convincingly argues in the case of 1960s French society, the social differentiation between the bourgeoisie and the working classes are not only categorical, in that the former is deemed higher, economically and culturally, than the latter; but we can go deeper than that, to say that such social distinction is performed, naturalized, and validated by the specific attitudes towards embodied forms of incorporation and self-expression. As such, the bourgeoisie preferences for delicate, lean, refined, and light foods are a direct negation of working class preferences for salty, fatty, heavy, strong, and simmered foods, and this embodied distinction validates the claim that the former has “good taste”, and the latter, “vulgar”, a way to clandestinely, but materially, inscribe social inequality (ibid: 186). Bourdieu’s sociology strives to resurface these inscriptions.

The “tastes” of Gujarati management to like “light” and “sweet” foods is interlinked with other criteria which construct their specific class habitus, including age, physiological requirements, and culinary culture defined by community, but also an important one being that they commuted to work with their own car, as opposed to using crowded public transport like most others in the firm. This privileged access to private space is certainly a marker of their economic purchasing power; but it also comprises a cultural capital which harbours certain sensibilities regarding hygiene and mingling - for instance, a higher sense of awareness regarding pollution, and a subsequent distaste of public spaces, which amplified their fetish for ingesting their own *ghar-ka-khana*. For this class, although they could afford to dine out quite often, they had a rather strict pattern as to where they would go: pure-vegetarian Jain restaurants, Udipi restaurants, and larger fast food chains, all of which were carefully selected by their level of hygiene, based on reputation and recommendation. Street foods were entirely neglected, but many cherished certain buttermilk stalls, but again chosen for their relative hygiene compared to other vendors. These ritually and medically sterilized enclaves corresponded to the privacy of the air-conditioned car,

which further corresponded to the calmness and quiet of their canteen. Gujarati preferences for sweet and refined foods contrasted with the mixed (mostly Maharashtran and Punjabi middle to lower-middle class commuters) preferences for chatpata (spicy kick), fiery condiments, and heavier meals, boosted with a healthy dose of rice to “fill the stomach”. These commuters took the public trains, often up to a total of 2.5 hours in a day; dining out in “proper” restaurants were expensive, but once or twice a month people went out to Punjabi/Mughlai and “sizzler” restaurants, which many of the Gujarati management said it was too “heavy”.

When I asked Mr Jain, who on that day brought a delicate kela-methi (plantain-fenugreek) subzi which his wife made, what he thought about the atmosphere in the “mixed room”, he said that he was “happy for the workers to be friendly with each other. Food is a social lubricant, as you well know. Me? I don't share. Anyway, my food is probably too *bland* for those guys!” The oppositions in “taste” - bland/over-spiced; refined/heavy; small portion/large portion; tailor made subzi/variety of subzi - were not as yet inscribed as (vertical) hierarchy, and was framed as (horizontal) difference, which owed to a more or less successful compartmentalization between the two groups and rooms - the only time the Gujarati managers went in the other room was to wash their hands and dishes, and, in any case, no one felt much discomfort towards the lively noises - to say so would have been too stingy and un-mannerly on their part. After all, despite the differences, these foods fell under the category of “edible” for all members in the offices; theoretically, one could eat it, it was just that it was unappetizing.

This boundary became intensely and affectively challenged on “non-veg” days, and troubled the logic of “individual preference” which rationalized the separation of camps. The entire atmosphere of the “mixed room” changed, and all the noises and motions made through commensality were amplified, as each office worker wanted to show off their share for the feast, and others eagerly received, praised, and savoured the meats - “Come, try *Palak Chicken* [Spinach chicken]!”, one would call out, to which an office worker sitting few rows behind would eagerly ask others to make way, first savouring the fresh herby aroma and the bright green colour through his nose and eyes, which makes his mouth water, swallowing hard on his saliva audibly in intense anticipation, and on his way back others would call out to him now saying “Try my *aloo ghosht* [potato-mutton curry]!”. There was a visible positive feedback loop between food, commensality, and virile energy, with each

piece of meat, mouthful, and movement spiralling the ecstatic cacophony upwards. These noises and movements reached out to the corridor, and into the other room, signalling the beginning of a feast - but contrary to these sharp blasts of sounds, the sticky sense of smell was a slow burner, not immediately apparent but gradually building up its saturation, nebulously finding its way into the nooks and corners of the canteen and, eventually, through the nose into the human body - and this sense of being crept up from behind ones back made it an uncanny and troublesome sense for the pure-vegetarian managers - these were expressed, with forced composure by the likes of Mr Jain, by a sense of sudden *estrangement* to his peers and subordinates, who now appeared irreconcilably “Other”.

What makes the sense of smell so distinctly sticky and visceral compared to sound and sight? Hankins (2013), through the concept of “ecology of senses”, explores the complex ways in which the corporeal sense of smell become entangled with, or better yet come to absorb and churn out, the abstract qualities of social and political inequality, in the context of the marginalized *Burakumin* community in contemporary Japan. Historically and publicly, the buraku have been involved and associated with “polluting” work such as tanning and butchery, experiencing perpetual social marginality, in similar ways that Dalits in India working in the same professions have been subjugated to. Importantly, it is not only the *social association* between a community and a particular form of labour which produces stigma, but rather the specific *production and absorption* of senses, such as smell, by the bodies and communities who do the labour, which crystalizes social stigma on specific materials, a realm which I have called *bio-moral*, and the *viscerally political*, throughout this thesis. Prior of going into training in a tanning workshop, Hankins was warned by a close associate that “the smell of leather stuck – it clung to your clothes, to your hands, to your hair. While the odour might wash off initially, after time, after daily contact with the scent, the smell became part of you. I needed to be prepared to stink – and stink permanently – if I were really going to work in the factory. *I also, and here Nakajo-san grew a bit more serious, needed to be prepared to eat dinner alone.*” (ibid: 50, my emphasis) Hankin’s non-Buraku neighbour Nakajo-san’s distaste for eating together with someone who has become bio-morally contaminated through polluting tanning work is highly relevant in the context of “non-veg” days that I have been describing - it points to the need to shift of focus from social association to bio-moral absorption as a basis of thinking how stigma and

social inequality become experienced and territorialized. Although both are inherently based on *knowledge* (in Japan, it is very hard to “detect” who is a *buraku*, hence the prominence of private detectives in Japan which re-territorialize such stigma), there is a different “ecology of sense” at work, where the latter imaginary vigorously involves a bodily reaction, of distaste, recoil, and “disgust” - it is only fitting that commensality, the quintessential act of establishing intimacy through ingesting shared substance, is where Nakajo-san was most repellent.

It is important, however, to make the distinction between “distaste” and “disgust”, for the latter is not only experienced as quantitatively more intense than the latter, but is also structured differently qualitatively, with different implications for both the subject and object in relation - “disgust” is special in that it challenges the *stability* of this relationship between subject and object. Lawler (2005) elaborates from Bourdieu that middle class identity is equally upheld by their *active* “distaste” towards the habits and practices of the working classes, as much as their own sense of “good taste” - amplified by the fact that, since the middle classes have privileged access to means of representation through media and public discourse, characterizing the working classes as disgusting through this means is an easy way to render them as mere “personae in a bourgeois drama” (ibid: 442), hyperbolically defining middle class “refinement” in the process. She also points to an important revelation, that such acts of social distinction are inherently upheld by “an apocalyptic fear, for the middle classes, of being engulfed or swamped by an undifferentiated mass – a mass which lacks the singularity and individuality accorded to the elite. ... What is implied here is a recognition of (and horror at) sameness – that one *could be* like all those who lack ‘taste’, that one could be otherwise.” (ibid: 442) Distinction and taste are fuelled by an anxiety towards the looming possibility of sameness, mingling, and intimacy - “distaste” emerges as a desperate act on the part of the privileged classes to distance themselves from whom they deem lower.

I take this “paradox” of class, that in order to be something, one must know what *not* to be, further. In other words, there is a part in the self which knows what vulgarity is, or else how can one detect one when you see it? - the more one recoils, they are unconsciously giving away that they are not innocent from what they deem is abominable in this world. Unlike Lawler, however, I do not take these efforts of “middle class distaste” for the working classes as “distaste for *standardized signifiers* of working-class culture” (Rhys-Taylor 2013: 240, my emphasis). Such a rendering

assumes a stable relationship between “the refined” and the “disgusting”, “as if there were a simple brand attached to a particular object that subjects merely recognized” (Hankins 2013: 53). Smell is much more difficult to digest than a “disgusting object”, where one could escape from by close ones eyes, or criticize it from a safe distance - it goes over the “membranes of class culture” (Rhys-Taylor 2013: 241), seeping out the container which tries to make it into a controllable signifier. This points to the anxious lacuna, or a desperate leap that is made, every time such “distaste” is exercised - a very real *anxiety of proximity* within the Indian modality of porous bio-moral substances, a fear that “distaste” and distance *may not work*, and penetrate ones innermost self. As I detailed in Chapter I, in extreme cases this takes the form of “hyperbolic vegetarianism” (Ghassem-Fachandi 2012), an intense association with the sensory qualities of meat, which engulfs the subject into an visceral trance of *alagi*, “disgust”, and eventually, violent *Hindutva*; and the intricate technologies of purity that I described in Chapter V and VI were the temporary solutions to such a porous world, a world on thin air which can be disrupted by a single misplacement of delivering a non-veg tiffin to a vegetarian Jain.

Mr Jain, and the other Gujarati managers, were affected with much less intensity than such cases of “nauseating intimacy”, but no less rattling and displacing for the self - their experiences were characterized less by disgust than *estrangement*. Simply put, estrangement is the condition where “what was taken to be a familiar thing suddenly [comes] to be recognized as something which was quite different—quite alien—to what it had seemed like” (Turner 2014: 374), and Terrence Turner, through his (magically) sympathetic association between the poetry of Russian formalist Boris Eichenbaum, and Kayapo shamanistic practice, points to the productive potentiality which comes with “flying to the edge of epistemological boundaries and playing with the powers that come from the shock of estrangement” (ibid: 375-6). Since office lunchtime was too short-lived, and there were ample means to end such a temporal space to play with ambiguity (no matter how much smell travelled to the other room, one could retreat to a safe haven in 10 minutes), the situation is, in the words of Victor Turner, perhaps less than that of “liminal” productivity than playful “liminoid”, ephemeral pockets of anti-structure that is characteristic of industrial societies (Turner 1974). This meant that, in the day time office canteen, although estrangement made you confront a situation which is “not central to the habitual being of things, or people’s ideas of the habitual being of

things” (Turner 2014: 374), its equilibrium of habit rapidly became restored, exercising its “absorptive function” (Berlant 2007: 760) to produce repetitious predictability, and a state of normality.

For, this estrangement entailed not only the clash of epistemologies, or to be more precise, affective sensibilities, between the contaminating smell of meat and Vaishnav-Jain bio-moral aspirations of purity and health, but also *within* the subject, emanating between “distaste” and the composure of cosmopolitanism. The most one could see on the Gujarati manager’s face was some form of grimace, the muscles around the nose and the upper lip contracting, a defence mechanism, or a kind of ventral Freudian slip, in order to protect ones organs from the intrusion of the smell of meat - and the interviews with them after they had left the meat room did not yield a direct vocalization of their predicament, and everyone maintained that “choices of food are individual choices”, as if saying otherwise would give them away as intolerant bigots. Hence, the sense of embarrassment visible on their faces were two-fold: first, a social performance oriented one, as experienced when being the only pure-vegetarian in the room washing his dishes, when all others are joyfully sharing and conversing over something you cannot take part in, a kind of anxiety experienced by being the odd one out in a school playground; and second, a self oriented one, where you *want* to be accepting, as all the good natured Gujarati managers were visibly so on normal workdays, but could not get themselves to go over this important threshold which had characterized their bodies and sensibilities throughout their lives. Estrangement of the self came from this lacuna of what you *should* do and what *you cannot help but* feel.

This estrangement was short-lived because the “carnivores” who brought meat were in many ways in compliance with “normality” in the office canteens - after all, at least three days out of five were pegged at the common language of vegetarian tiffins, out of their own accord. Even on the “non-veg” days were certain considerations on their part, as to what *kind* of meat was brought - eggs and chicken were the most common, for these were the most affordable and available, while mutton was a more luxurious endeavour. Except for a particular Konkani Maharashtran, whose wife’s delicate Surmai (kingfish) fry and Konkani prawn masala was extremely popular among all the workers, fish and other seafood were relatively uncommon. Beef, buffalo, pork, and other game were exclusively never seen, even if some of them ate these meats occasionally. These patterns correspond to the bio-moral hierarchy of

meats which I described in Chapter III, informed by the relative viscosity of different meats. So, for instance, bringing dried *bombil* fry [a lizardfish native to coastal Mumbai], famous for its piercing pungent smell - a favourite of the East Indian community, a coastal Roman Catholic community native to Mumbai with distinct food cultures, whom I engage in the next Chapter VIII - would be utterly unthinkable, even in the most “forward minded” workplaces.

The smell of cooked bombil evokes a particular “taste”, one that has less potentiality to be shared and understood by someone who is not an East Indian. This may not immediately signify “low” bio-moral status as beef did since the beef ban, but its materiality nonetheless resisted a neat signification of it as a marker of “positive” identity for cosmopolitan commensality - it was too strange and peripheral among the bio-moral rank of foods in India. The next chapter VIII explores how such community specific social distinction, as well as communal memory and identity, are economically reproduced through home based catering services. In contrast, the smell of cooked chicken and mutton, although still disturbing for some pure-vegetarians, is within the limits of a lowest-common-denominator “taste” - in as much as tiffin is a display of public intimacy, it inevitably is affected by these considerations of minimizing the “singularity” of one’s intimacy, which has to be horizontally diluted to fit the ethics of public cosmopolitanism. Thus, despite their acts been taken as “not-normal” (Janeja 2009: 61-63) by the pure vegetarians, in practice, it was still within limits of the ethics of cosmopolitanism, *an accepted transgression* (Chapter III, Fig. 6). In this sense, “non-veg days” were not entirely subversive of the bio-moral universe of the office canteen - “normality”, as dictated by the cosmopolitan ethics exercised in the semi-public of the canteen, was restored on a day-to-day basis, through the unconscious efforts on both parts of the pure-vegetarians and meat-eaters who adjusted to the rules of being in a semi-public space.

## **Chapter VIII - The commercial production of intimacy, wellbeing and distinction in contemporary Mumbai - home based tiffin (lunchbox) services**

### **1. Home based caterers - the production of intimacy and social distinction in the urban public**

Having explored the association between ghar-ka-khana, comfort, and intimacy in Chapter IV; how this vital substance is transported from the home to the city by the technology of purity of the Dabbawala network, in Chapter VI; and the way in which tiffin commensality mediates both cosmopolitan pleasure and visceral disgust by means of displaying ones' intimate substance in the semi-public sphere of the office canteen, in Chapter VII; this chapter carries on to explore the visceral politics of food in Mumbai by focusing on the *commercial production* of ghar-ka-khana, and its modes of producing visceral distinction as well as communal identity for a class of commuters and city dwellers who set about outsourcing ghar-ka-khana, to enterprises which I call *home based tiffin services*. While the negotiations between domestic intimacy with urban sociality of my informants in past chapters were hinged on each of them securely having a source of ghar-ka-khana, a domestic hearth and an equipped female-kin to attend to it, there are many in contemporary Mumbai who do not have the resources, skills, or time to produce this community-body specific vital substance to nurture ones' selfhood and social distinction on an everyday basis. As I outlined in Chapter V, these included the migrant labourers without domestic hearths, who reproduced their working bodies by outsourcing their daily needs to khanawalis and Dabbawalas; other than these toiling masses away from family, in modern day Mumbai, there are also many single, unmarried urban professionals, working men and women hectically pursuing their careers, who could afford to eat out, but did not have the time to nurture ones' self intimately; double income households, where both husband and wife are out at work, an increasing category as more women enter the formal workforce; and many elderly men and women living alone at home, outside the safety net of the joint family, who are incapable of performing domestic tasks of self-care.

Home based tiffin services were small-scale, monthly subscription based informal businesses catering to these needs to secure ghar-ka-khana, an important



form of bio-moral nurturing, and did this thorough bringing together the cook and eater in intimate registers. While being ubiquitous throughout India, these institutions have received little scholarly attention, with few exceptions (Abbott 1993; Quien 2001), and this chapter contributes to the more fertile literature on female reproductive and intimate labour in India, such as maids and domestic help (Dickey 2000; Janeja 2010). One reason for their relative inattention may be the innocuous *fleetingness* of tiffin services. In-house maids, a common destination of outsourcing domestic chores throughout India, require much socio-economic and emotional investment: both Dickey's (2000) and Janeja's (2010) work on Bengali middle class households highlight the endemic anxieties experienced by housewives of having this intimate "outsider" traversing the vital boundaries of home and outside, and the strenuous rules regarding segregation of living space and influence to clear up these porous boundaries, what I have been calling technologies of purity in this thesis. Tiffin services, by contrast, are less direct and internalized interventions into the desires for domestic intimacy, for what is transacted is the final product of the tiffin, and not the person and her (uncontrollable, raw, polluting) agency. The process of screening, employing, and firing a maid are much more strenuous than choosing, subscribing, and quitting a tiffin service - the tiffin market is much more volatile.

This chapter shows that this volatility is in itself a noteworthy object to engage with, as it embodies a certain aspect of Mumbai's cosmopolitanism - as many of my informants have put it, of generic "Indian food", a set of lowest common denominator menus and styles which constitute the tastes of urban commuters for a base-line, affordable, homely and healthy, "good enough" dose of ghar-ka-khana. In terms of ingredients, this largely corresponded to the permissible limit of vegetables and meats which I described in Chapter III (Fig. 3), cooked in common spices used throughout India, such as garam masala, turmeric, and red chilli powder, while the meal structure was of the thali structure (Chapter IV). As I have explored over the past chapters, the tiffin is a ubiquitous means for Mumbaikars to negotiate identity and wellbeing, and its very ubiquity engenders the nuanced forms of social distinction and technologies of purity to maintain vital boundaries within the urban public, from altering ones' diet in the wake of anti-cattle slaughter laws, to the exercising of cosmopolitan distinction in the office canteen, which, *in* its fleetingness, expresses bursts of bio-moral anxieties centred around food. In as much as tiffin services shared the common language of generic Indian food, customers often switched between different

providers as per their convenience and tastes to solve their anxieties of maintaining *affordable* pleasure and wellbeing in the city - one caterer lamented that the “average customer turnover rate is maximum 3 months”. Yet, even the most commercial, generic tiffin providers were steeped in a distinct morality, which contrasted with other commercial eateries, such as restaurants and roadside vendors. The largest difference between these two types of institutions was that, the latter, *bahar-ka-khana* providing enterprises were almost exclusively operated by male cooks, while tiffin services were *always* operated or cooked by women, predominantly from their own homes. While Quien (2001), in her study of women-led catering business in Maharashtra, characterizes their labour as “friends of the household” (ibid: 1), tiffin services in Mumbai which I engaged with, constructed their relationships with clients within the ethos of *family* and *kinship*, their gendered labour opening up to the idealized relationship of mother and child. Tiffin services were an interior which actively *opened itself up* to the urban public.

If tiffin caterers providing generic Indian food are on the far commercial end of the spectrum of intimate labour, steeped in the market logic of shopping for a quick, affordable dose of homely nutrition, there are many more historic and community specific tiffin providers, who cater to customers much beyond the standard “3 month” subscription rates. For fans of the spicy, Maharashtran *Kolhapuri* dishes made by the Patil’s, who have been in the line for over 60 years since the times of the cotton mills, it was not only the generic qualities of “less oil and fresh food” that were desired in these foods, but the cultivated tastes of region, community, and caste which were absorbed by it. The Patil’s, whom I will introduce in the following section 2, who catered to working class mill hands until the 1980s, and now middle class commuters, mainly doctors and medical students, struggled to adjust to transformations of tastes and requirements among their customers. The gentrification of tastes among newcomers to the city, who preferred generic Indian foods over the spicy idiosyncrasies cooked by the Patil’s, are instances where the visceral necessity of incorporating specific community-body substance, comprising a “cosmopolitanism from below” (Appadurai 2011), gave way to cosmopolitan choice within normalized boundaries of “generic Indian food”, an easy to digest, packaged form of intimacy (Appadurai 1988). At the same time, sensations of spiciness and “chatpata” were extrapolated and packaged in an easily accessible manner for a class of young students to exercise social distinction through exercising virility and masculinity

through ingesting spice, vis-à-vis Others who ate milder, “bland” foods. Much like bio-moral negotiations in the office canteen, the sensory distinctions of taste, such as spiciness against blandness, were the foundation of the visceral social distinction exercised by different classes of hearth-less customers (Bourdieu 1984).

The business of Valery Vegas, who cater to her *East Indian* community neighbours, a coastal Christian community native to Mumbai whom I will explore in section 3, is still more sticky and intimate. Her long time clients, almost all predominantly from the same community, were not satisfied with “generic Indian food”, for the East Indian food culture was entirely peripheral to these constructions, and I will explore the visceral politics of two types of community specific foods, the dry *bombil*, a type of pungent lizardfish, and the East Indian bottle masala allspice, cherished by the community. The visceral politics of the bombil and bottle masala were both steeped in communal pleasure for those sharing the same culture, as well as visceral disgust for those not inculcated to its distinctness; these substances not only engendered shared essence and intimacy horizontally through commensality, but also vertically through the generational transmission of vital essence, in the form of nurturing, and transmitting recipes. In particular, the bottle masala proved to be an affordable, and easy technology to East-Indianize any dish, a “magic bullet” solution to reproduce intimacy and social distinction among the community. Chefs such as Valery, who possessed specialist communal cooking techniques to conjure these foods, a labour intensive and slowly dying art, catered to her customers to satiate their appetite for visceral memories of communal identity, pleasure, and social distinction (Bear 2007).

## **2. Patil’s *Kolhapuri* khanawali - *chatpata* (kick) against “generic Indian food”**

Originally hailing from *Bidri*, in the *Kolhapur* district in rural Maharashtra, 350 km south from Mumbai, the Patil’s have been living in the city and operating their khanawali for the past 60 years, for 3 full generations. The fact they called their business khanawali in Marathi, and not the common English “tiffin service”, was a clear marker of their identification with the social history which connected the city with their native land (Chandavarkar 2009). They occupy a 2 room chawl where the family of 9 - the grandmother, her two sons, their wives, and their 4 children - live. The house is their central kitchen, and by 5 o’clock in the morning, as the younger children get ready for school, the women of the house have already started kneading

chapatti dough, chopping vegetables and marinating meat, ingredients which the men had purchased fresh from the market an hour earlier. They have moved to this Maharashtran chawl in Parel 15 years ago, from a place in Byculla, where they stayed for many decades - both areas where once Girangaon, the “village of the mills” (Chapter VI), stood strong. One thing that remained constant throughout the years was that the entire family was always involved in the catering business. Both Mrs Patil’s father and husband were working in the mills, and she managed the business single-handed. Now, her two daughters in-law prepared the ingredients, and cooked under the supervision of her, while her two sons’ did the business work outside the kitchen, such as delivery, buying the raw materials, accounts, and collecting payment. The children helped out when they wanted to, and the young siblings always pleaded to accompany their father on routine delivery motorcycle rides.

For most of their career, the Patil family catered to the mill workers in Girangaon; now, their clients are the doctors and medical students at King Edward Memorial (KEM) Hospital, a historic public hospital in Lower Parel, with a high ranking medical school, SGSM College. The area was a traditionally Maharashtran locale where many mills and chawls lodging mill hands existed, and over the past decade has become massively redeveloped into an upscale office and commercial area, but still many old tenements, markets, and lanes of small scale shops and businesses are clustered livelily together in close proximity. The Patil family has successfully found a niche market at KEM hospital where many other khanawalis could not, where doctors without family, and students who have left their hometowns to study in the medical college, required tiffins everyday. Demand was high, and there were around 10 caterers delivering more than 500 tiffins in total to hospital premises. All operated in the vicinity of the area, but none had such a long history of catering as the Patil’s, where mostly have started their business within 10 years, and new players constantly came and went. The Patil’s served around 70 tiffins a day combining lunch and dinner, all of them to KEM hospital - many students who resided in hostels within campus also required night meals, and doctors who had night shifts also commonly used night tiffin service. These figures were above average, although their popularity was contested by several other prominent players in the market.

Despite differences in history and size, the commonality among all tiffin services operating around KEM hospital was that they ran their business from their own homes. The newest and humblest member was Aisha, a 26-year-old Gujarati

Muslim, who was 4 months into her business, and delivered 8 tiffins daily. For Aisha, the largest advantage of operating from her home, a Muslim chawl in Parel where she lived with her husband who owns an electronic store in Navi Mumbai suburb and their 8 year old son, was that housewives like her could start-up from a comfortable environment with minimum investment, for she could utilize her already acquired cooking skills - a skillset which a woman of marriageable age should acquire - as well as her social networks, built around her neighbours and friends, to reach out to potential customers. She initially got into the business because she wanted some side income to support the family, whilst being able to remain a housewife, and take care of her family's domestic chores. Besides, she "always had a passion for food", and her daily menus draw from Gujarati to Punjabi cooking, dishes which her husband and children like. She charges 2000 rupees for a monthly subscription for "veg" tiffin, and 2250 rupees for a "non-veg" plan, which were average prices for tiffins in the area. The tiffins had the standard thali structure of chapatti, rice, subzi, dal, and condiments (Chapter IV), with the non-veg tiffins substituting a subzi or dal with a meat main or side. She delivered 25 days a month, and when she did, she took a 30-rupee auto-rickshaw ride from her home to the hospital, prices which were passed onto her customers. The "non-veg" tiffins, which mostly included chicken and egg, but also occasionally fish and mutton, were delivered three times a week - on Wednesday, Friday, and Saturday, as per the common rhythm of veg/non-veg food regimes in Mumbai (Chapter I, III). The marginal meats of beef, buffalo, pork, and other game were entirely absent from these tiffins - only specialist community caterers, such as Valery, which I will explore in section 6.3., cooked such peripheries. Her main costs were raw materials, gas, and electricity, which amounted to 40-50% of the retail price - she had 3 veg customers, and 5 non-veg, selling 17,250 rupees worth of food, pocketing in and around 8500 rupees per month. Her husband brought in approximately 35,000 rupees a month from his business, so her contributions, amounting to around 20% of total family income, was substantial.

This calculation did not include her labour cost, and this was the largest advantage of her line of business - for she had to cook for the family anyway everyday, and starting up her catering service meant she only needed to increase the amount of ingredients she bought, and make more portions of the same food. This operational advantage had a positive effect on the way she sold her product: "The food I cook for my customers are the same food I feed my family - it's the same food

that I myself eat. So there is no question about the quality, because how can one cheat ones' family?" Many other caterers would illuminate through the inverse: "A restaurant owner, or a restaurant cook, will rarely eat the food they serve their customers. The food they eat themselves are cooked separately, fresh; they themselves prefer to have ghar-ka-khana everyday." For her customers, whom she got in touch through her chawl neighbours, the fact that she operated from her own home was an important way to ensure quality and build trust, which other commercial eateries did not provide. This was because her tiffins were literally *an extension* of what she would cook for herself and her family everyday. For Aisha, chapattis are the best way to distinguish tiffin food and restaurant food: "You can always tell if it's a good chapatti when it blows up like a balloon when put on the heat. Only when you knead it thoroughly, with love, it becomes like that. Restaurant chefs won't make the same effort." Sabra, a 4<sup>th</sup> year Muslim medical student from Gujarat, agrees: "Her tiffins are good quality, the chapattis are thick, unlike the thin ones you get in cheap restaurants or microwaveable ones in shops." When I asked her whether she had similar quality chapattis from other caterers, she says: "I've tried a few, but her food is the best because it's pretty close to my mom's food. I like thinner gravy curries with a light touch, to soak up with good, thick chapattis - of course it isn't exactly the same as my mom's, but for 70 rupees per meal, it's more than enough."

This aspect of mutual trust between cook and eater (Chapter IV) was, however, a necessary but not sufficient condition for a successful tiffin provider, for while all enterprises emphasized the homely quality of their foods, not all were able to maintain repeaters. The crucial factors of price, service, and taste made certain businesses more competitive than others. This meant that customers at KEM hospital had a wide variety of *choice*. Although Sabra enjoyed Aisha's food, when asked about her future engagements, she dryly mentioned: "Well, we're [students] always on the lookout for good, new tiffin services. Just like we check out new cafes and joints in town<sup>142</sup> or Bandra, we often talk with each other about tiffin, because we eat that everyday. My friend recently got SpiceDabba tiffins<sup>143</sup>, and I tried a portion of hers in the canteen; it's 30 rupees more expensive, but the menus were more diverse, and it changed everyday. I might switch to them, when I get bored [with Aisha's food]." As I explored in Chapter IV, tech savvy tiffin caterers such as SpiceDabba also hinge on

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<sup>142</sup> Colloquial term for South Mumbai business district (Chapter II).

<sup>143</sup> Chapter IV.

the notion of ghar-ka-khana and trust, albeit through visually attractive social media tactics, as opposed to Aisha's tactic of emphasizing the thickness of her chapattis, "proof" that her foods is healthy and made with love and care. For customers like Sabra, the two tiffin providers were *comparable*, precisely because they attested to the same virtues of food quality control (which, albeit, were achieved differently) - the intimacy in both businesses were interchangeable, for it had a price tag on them. While Aisha managed to get her first customers through her contacts in chawls, which meant they were predominantly Muslim - Sabra was first introduced to her tiffin through a friend, who's aunt lived in the same chawl as Aisha - she was happy to expand to non-Muslims or non-Gujarati's: conversely, for Sabra, what got her interest in Aisha in the first place was their common background and reference, but this was more of an opportunity to begin her subscription, and not a necessary criteria for her to choose a tiffin caterer. For her, there was no *necessity* to choose any particular tiffin service, much like there was no necessity to eat in a particular restaurant. They fell under the same marketplace to be assessed based on quality and price.

Mutual trust engendered through homely substance was a way to differentiate tiffin food from bahar-ka-khana, but not among tiffin food; and the presence of a competitive tiffin marketplace suggested that the way consumers chose their monthly subscriptions were in fact on the same line as how they would choose restaurant food, albeit with a longer timeframe. Aisha's food was not specifically Gujarati Muslim, but rather was, according to her own assessment, "just Indian food". As I noted in Chapter IV, Appadurai (1988) saw contemporary Indian cookbooks as technologies whereby the polyglot, multi-caste, middle classes were able to access and modify the foods of different communities, giving rise to the notion of both "regional" and "national" cuisines, a stereotyping of both the self and Other. If we understand the emergence of these two categories as the *simultaneous production of (regional) specialization and (national) generality*, the latter an encompassing field of homogenization in contradistinction to other nations, and the former as pockets of well-bounded diversity *within* such an encompassing field, the generic "Indian food" cooked by Aisha and many other caterers was part of this imagination, comprised of a lowest common denominator assemblage of various stereotyped cuisines.

For many customers, diversity of food was important, but this was a controlled cosmopolitanism within the limits of such stereotyped regional and national foods.

The basic, “all-round spices”, such as garam-masala, turmeric powder, chilli powder, and coriander powder, all readily available in markets and *kirana* shops, or neighbourhood convenience stores, were used by most caterers, albeit with different qualities and quantities, which gave a different taste: if the former was the *langue* of tiffin spices, the later was the *parole*. The *langue* of the tiffin itself was also fixed, structured as subzi, dal, rice, and chapatti - caterers had to express their uniqueness through adhering to this structure. Mr Naik has been in the tiffin business for around 3 years, who started humbly with his wife, just like Aisha, but now grew to serve more than 150 tiffins a day, employing two chefs. His wife no longer cooks the foods, but supervises the chefs for meticulous quality control. He says proudly: “We are successful because we know what the customer wants, which is variety, and good quality food. Our tiffins are 100 rupees, which are no doubt expensive compared to others: but the extra money doesn’t go into our pockets, but the quality of ingredients and cooking oil, which is so important for taste and health. We have Chinese Fridays, which is a hit, and mix up different subzis and styles everyday. All caterers do chapatti bhaji, so how do you stand out? Caterers don’t innovate, and take it easy, serving the same things all the time - that is why they come and go. For example, we are the only ones giving fresh fruit in our tiffins. It’s these small things which make an impression.” What caterers such as Aisha and Mr Naik feared most was repetition and *boredom*, and thus actively worked not only to ensure food quality, but also to achieve value for money and culinary diversity.

Yet, regional diversity within their “Indian food” was controlled and limited - while “Mughlai”, “Punjabi”, “South Indian”, and “(Indo) Chinese” were extremely popular and widespread cooking styles, both among households and tiffin services, the more nuanced regional specialities, such as “Malabar prawn curry”, “Chettinad chicken”, or “Keralan fish curry”, were much less common, unless the caterers themselves were from one of these regions. Being able to cook and savour such fine-grained regional specialities *outside of ones own* background was itself a form of cultural capital and social distinction - Aisha often put Punjabi-style muttar paneer on the menu, marked by its distinct milky creaminess, but confessed she wasn’t equipped to cook the creamy coconut Chettinad Chicken. At the same time, Aisha, who was Gujarati, and Mr Naik, from Maharashtra, often did not care to emphasize their own community foods, since they found that doing so would limit the potential customer base - as Mr Naik said, “Its better to keep ones’ arms open widest.” Aisha, who was



born in the region of Kutch, in Gujarat, came to Mumbai when she was three; married to a Tamil husband, says that “I don't know how to make specifically Gujarati or Tamil food - and my husband is okay with it, he has never been fussy about particular foods. He only cares that *I* make it everyday - as long as its fresh, less oil, and good for my son, then Gujarati, or Punjabi, or Tamil, doesn't matter. Of course, he loves mutton and fish and all, so I make that, but in a simple style, like coriander and chilli paste. This is not from specifically any region. Everyone in Mumbai eats this type of masala. Only difference is love.”

The open assertion of ones' regional culinary identity is intimately linked with particular technologies of representation, such as cookbooks (Appadurai 1988) adverts for packaged foods (Srinivas 2007), and restaurant marketing techniques. Mr Gajendra, a Konkani caterer who has been in the business for 8 years, says: “There was no such thing as ‘Konkani’ food back when I was a child. The idea of ‘Konkani’ food became popular when some of the successful restaurants, like Gomantak, started marketing their products like that. There were only particular styles and techniques of cooking - for example, my family added fresh/wet coconut to our dishes, as opposed to dried coconut. This is how we knew what was our food, and foods for other communities.” Mr Patil says: “We [Kolhapuris] only use fresh coconut for *usal*<sup>144</sup>, and mostly we use dried coconut. Fresh coconut makes the dishes a little bit mild and sweet, which the Konkanis like. We like it spicy.” The distinction between coastal/inland, wet/dried coconut, and mild/spicy, and so on, was mediated through everyday cooking practice, and not by top-down labelling. Difference and identification between communities and individuals emerged through everyday interaction, and it is through technologies of representation that these boundaries become consolidated, interpellating “regional communal identity” as associated through particular food habits and sensory tastes. It is precisely because this form of boundary making is *a process*, and representable stereotypes did not exist *prior* to such technological interventions, that allows certain stereotypes such as “Punjabi” or “South Indian” to be more widespread and prominent than others, such as “Konkani” or “Kolhapuri”, much in the same way the association between Muslimness and beef became exaggerated over other communities in the wake of the beef ban (Chapter III).

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<sup>144</sup>Maharashtran beans dish.

Among such regional stereotypes with different levels of circulation and prominence, the ones with most widespread popularity came under the rubric of “generic Indian food”. Moreover, Sabra maintained that freshness, healthiness, and homeliness were much more important than any particular *minor* regional foods - she called dishes like Chettinad Chicken “fancy, foodie foods”, and found the humble limits of Aisha’s cosmopolitanism just the right dosage for her daily intake of ghar-ka-khana. She did not know what Indian Christian food was like at all, a cuisine, which was made entirely peripheral from the lowest common denominator Indian foods, an aspect which I will explore in the following section 6.3. When I mentioned an upmarket online caterer who served “fancy” fare such as Chettinad chicken, or strange foods such as Goan (Christian) pork vindaloo, she replied: “With tiffin, since you have it everyday, you don't really want to bother or think about it too much. If I was told that ‘this tiffin is a specialty of so-and-so community’, I’d feel like I have to appreciate it while eating it. This is okay for a special occasion, but not everyday, when you want to focus on talking with your friends, or just want to go on Facebook while eating.” Tiffin culture among this class of middle class youth, was defined on a sense of *acceptable diversity* and harmlessness - something good and tasty enough to satisfy your need for nourishment and taste, but not to the extent of having to make the effort to leap into the stomach of the Other, and consciously delve upon its novelty. One must mention that generic Indian foods, in its competitiveness within the tiffin market, were much less expensive than upmarket tiffin services selling specialist “regional cuisine” - the everydayness of tiffin required both affordability and ease to digest, both physiologically and conceptually.

A small number of caterers took an entirely opposite approach to their business, such as the Patil’s, who prided their regional speciality, and who never described their foods as “Indian food”. The food served by the Patil family was *Kolhapuri* cuisine, notable for its hot and earthy tastes nurtured through the inlands of Maharashtra, famous for their signature “Kolhapuri masala”, a fiery spice blend of more than 10 spices, widely used in a variety of vegetable and meat dishes throughout the region. Each household makes it in their own way, and the Patil’s have been using the same concoction for the past 60 years, made back in their village in bulk to last a year. Mrs Patil proudly says: “This is what makes our tiffin stand out. Other caterers use pre-ground, packet masalas bought from the shop, or uses electric grinders, and these don't have the same kind of aroma. We use the same masala everyday, for our

food too.” Spices are made during the dry season, where the scorching heat makes the whole spices crisp, packing in their taste, and the meticulous process of grinding these with the wet onion, garlic, and green chilly paste with a stone mortar and pestle, is how masala is made traditionally in the villages. Weather, freshness of ingredients, materiality of utensils, and a family recipe passed on for generations came together to produce its distinct flavour, which could never be recreated by industrially produced spices, or spiced made “on the go” with electric grinders and a frying pan, like it was made by Aisha in her humble home kitchen, or Mr Naik through his more large scale centralized kitchen.

While this generational process has been carried on to this day, a feat of passion and pride, marking their sense of community and social distinction, they confess that they have made adjustments as times have changed, now that they serve middle class students, as opposed to working class mill hands. Most notably, although they use the same formula for their homemade masala, they have reduced the quantity, from 4 to 2 teaspoons per serving, and add off-the-counter basic spices such as coriander powder, chilli powder, and turmeric powder to make up for it. Certainly this was to economize, since homemade Kolhapuri masala was labour and time intensive, and passing on such overheads to customers would make their product less competitive. They also rationalized their decision on the basis that their new customer base will not like, and cannot handle, proper Kolhapuri cuisine. Mrs Patil explains: “Our customers [from the mills] were all from our native place, in Kolhapuri - they wanted real Kolhapuri food, and only a Kolhapuri can make it properly. They were labouring away the whole day, so they needed that spicy *chatpata* to keep going. But an office worker or a doctor or a student, who uses his head all day and doesn't really move, won't be able to digest that kind of food. It would be harmful for them.”

Not only were spices increasingly became diluted, slowly encroached by the dominant tastes of generic over the counter spices, individual food items also changed over time: “When we were serving the mills, we always served *bhakri*<sup>145</sup>, as this was what Maharashtrians ate in the villages. People from other parts of India, or the youth are unfamiliar with it, and so we never make them now. They are more time consuming to make anyway. A quick snack for us would be to eat plain *bhakri* with some Kolhapuri masala, and *thecha* [peanut chilli paste], and some raw onion with

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<sup>145</sup> An unleavened flatbread popular in Western India, which is coarser and tougher than chapatti.

lime and salt. Then you wash this down with *chai* with lots and lots of sugar. This would give you energy to work in the fields or mills alike for hours.” When I asked whether her current customers would like such food, she laughed and said: “Most would fall sick! It is too much for them. This is working mans food, and not for office people.” When I tried this delicious snack in her home, and also during my visit to rural Maharashtra, as much as my tongue was enjoying it, my throat and stomach was bombarded with acidity, excess spice, salt, and sugar, I felt my blood pressure was rising, causing an indescribable rush which incapacitated me for several minutes. My peers smiled and gulped this local energizer down, viscerally recharged themselves.

Yuviraj, 21, a 3rd year medical student from Kolhapur, thoroughly enjoyed such spicy kick provided by the Patil’s. He had been introduced to the Patil’s when he first arrived at college, through his senior who also was a Kolhapuri, saying that only the Patil’s served authentic Kolhapuri food around the area. Such word of mouth recommendations keep these visceral linkages based on community and region within the urban public intact, similar to how Dabbawalas act as curators connecting caterers and customers of the same background (Chapter VI). Yuviraj and the Patil’s had an intimate relationship, which went beyond a provider-client relationship; although they did not share direct kin or village links, the fact they were from the same Deccan region within Maharashtra laced their relationship with the ethics of *bhumiputra*, a Marathi phrase which they used to emphasized their shared homeland. The distinct spiciness of the Patil’s masala viscerally nurtured and consolidated this shared essence in ways which lowest common denominator Indian foods provided by other caterers could not. They nurtured their bond outside of business relations too, when Yuviraj would come by to the Patil’s chawl once or twice a month to check up on Mrs Patil’s health - he humbly said that she lets him “practice” on her, but Mrs Patil was extremely pleased to have him around, saying “Yuviraj, my smart son!”, this transaction of intimate care between the two further reinforcing their bond. In return, on some Sundays, Mrs Patil specially cooks him bhakri, the staple bread of inland Maharashtra, and serves it with homely chicken gravy and peanut chutney, inviting over to their home. This special treatment was specifically for Yuviraj, but had it been extended to other, non-Kolhapuri customers, it would not meet the same enthusiasm. The coarse, hard, community specific bhakri contrasts with the soft, easy to digest, generic chapatti, and more Indians prefer the latter. For Yuviraj, "Bakri reminds me of

my mom's food, my childhood. No other caterer in the area serves such real Maharashtran food - only bland spices, and boring soft chapattis!"

As I explored in Chapter VII, Bourdieu (1984) notes how the ruling upper classes in 1960s France preferred a refined taste, while the working classes savoured its inverse, fatty and meaty tastes, and in such eliciting of internalized social distinction that social inequality was reproduced. Its Indian equivalent is the contrast between a wide variety of refined, moderately seasoned cooked vegetables or meat, versus coarse dishes with an excess of masala, salt, and oil. foods. The sensory distinctions between spicy/bland, as well as coarse (bhakri)/soft (chapatti), were instrumental in setting up visceral distinctions among students at KEM hospital. Yuviraj's friend Amit, also from Punjab but native to Mumbai, exclaimed: "I personally can't take Yuviraj's tiffin - its way too spicy! I've tried a portion of his in the hostel canteen, where we come together and share tiffin, you know. Everyone says the same thing, somehow the masala is different ... that kind of spice is okay when drinking [alcohol], as a snack, but not everyday." Amit takes tiffin from Mr Naik, and likes the fact that the tiffin always has fresh fruit and salad, and the subzis are "milder". These differences were understood to be based on community and regional differences - Amit sighed, saying, "I wish I could start the day with paratha with lots of ghee and hot, sweet chai... You don't get it in our canteen or tiffins", exercising his Punjabi-ness. On the other hand, there was a Punjabi customer of the Patil's, 18 year old Gagan, who just joined the college, who exclaimed that "I always liked spicy food, and so have been using their tiffin service for some time now. It gives me energy - you need energy to get through class and clinical training all day. You don't get that kind of *chatpata* with other caterers - the food tastes all the same. It is boring, and bland. Their [Patil's] tiffins are unique."

The sense of distinction expressed by Gagan contrasted with Yuviraj, however, despite linking the same spiciness of Kolhapuri masala. For Yuviraj, spiciness indexed a visceral link with his family in rural Maharashtra, a taste of his homeland. This was comparable to the relationship between khanawali and client. As I explored in Chapter VI, the identification of substance and origin between mill worker and khanawali meant that their relationship was largely predetermined through word of mouth and being introduced through common contacts. This working class neighborhood culture harboured diverse networks of caste, village, and kin based associations, and there was no sense of trying to find a better khanawali beyond ones

immediate social networks. Only then did the secondary preoccupations of taste, pleasure, and enjoyment arise - these associations were “utilitarian” in as much as they were matter of fact, a social relationship which became solidified into a need. While Yuviraj could technically *choose* another caterer, like many of his contemporaries, his association with the Patil’s were held together more strongly with the associations of shared essence and embodied tastes, solidifying it closer to *necessity*. Gagan, on the other hand, did not share the same essence with his caterers - he simply liked the taste of *chatpata*. His was not the pleasure of building visceral connections with ones family and homeland, steeped in communal memory and identity, but rather, the pleasure of cosmopolitan exploration and novelty. Here, Kolhapuri masala was decontextualized and extrapolated from the land which it originated from, and existed purely in its *sensory indexes*, available as a “product” for those interested and inclined to try, “processed” into refined, digestible qualities (Solomon 2016).

This form of technology of purity, which anonymized food from its origins, extracting only a physiological sensation, comprised a different type of social distinction, one steeped in the language of virile and visceral masculinity. One day, in one of the hospital canteens, Gagan is having a conversation with his Gujarati friend, who has a “sweet tooth”, and “cringes” when he eats one spoon of Gagan’s tiffin. Gagan retaliates: Gagan counters: “You guys simply cannot handle spice! I can take all the spice and meat. You should man up.” For an unaccustomed mouth and stomach, Patil’s food was outside the purview of the harmless cosmopolitanism of “generic Indian food”. For its fans, it was constructed as *masculine excess*, much in the similar way that meats are made libidinous in India (Chapter I, III). Osella and Osella (2008) note the same kind of masculine assertion among Dalits in Kerala, who way they can “mop up” impure, spicy, and dirty foods - although their low castes and socio-economic capital usually do not allow for transvaluation, there are an increasing amount of Dalit movements which openly assert their masculine bio-morality as positive identity, through Dalit “beef festivals” and protests. Among the middle classes in contemporary Mumbai, such as Gagan, the ability to absorb spicy excess does not index working class coarseness, nor give way for a potential for the visceral subversion of casteist values - but rather, of middle class masculinity, virility, and prestige, a dare devil attitude to engage with (acceptable) visceral transgression, like vegetarian Rahul eating meat Big macs (Chapter IV). In truth, Gagan did not

subscribe to the Patil's service with any knowledge of such struggles, nor of any idea of "Kolhapuri culture", for he thoroughly disliked bhakri, saying it was "too hard to eat", on one of the rare occasions it was put inside his tiffin. Illuminatingly he used the word "uncool" to describe the bhakri - its association with the peasantry of the rural areas were unfit for an urban modern as he. Backward bhakri had no place in his quest for middle-class, masculine bio-moral distinction - for him, only the spiciness of the Kolhapuri cuisine, in its diluted form fit for the general public, afforded an easy fix of masculine "cool" in the urban public.

In this way, indexes such as spiciness not only showed that taste and physiology changed with class, between working class mill hands and middle class commuters, but was indicative of finer differentiations within the latter, with different tactics to exercise visceral social distinction in the urban public through these commercial caterers. While the Patil's cooked full-on Kolhapuri cuisine for her mill hand clients, whom they shared common class, caste, and village ties, they had to dilute their foods to cater to a more "general" public, with diverse regional and community backgrounds. Only people like Yuviraj, who successfully found a caterer with shared communal essence, engaged with his caterers deeply. Most middle class urban dwellers such as Sabra and Gagan were united in exercising their distinction not through a necessitated link with specific communal food, but the nature of their *choice* was constitutive of their social distinction, signalling their particular preferences. However, this sense of distinction was not only a matter of *buying into* a lifestyle, but viscerally embedded, reproduced, and signalled ones' social class unto and from the sensing body. While for many middle class youths, social distinction was exercised through ingesting intimacy through generic "Indian food", a common language from which homeliness, health, and wellbeing were expressed, for non-Maharashtran fans of traditional khanawalis such as the Patil's, it was precisely the deviation from such lowest common denominator foods which marked their individuality and distinction, and a virile masculinity which hinged on being able to absorb spicy chatpata. The next section will further explore how social distinction is exercised through commercial eateries, by looking at the Catholic East Indian community, native to Mumbai. Their community specific foods are idiosyncratic, and peripheral to generic Indian foods, inducing pleasure within, and disgust and bewilderment for those unaccustomed to it. East Indian caterers such as Valery Vegas

utilized her expertise to provide these foods, which commercially and viscerally reproduced communal identity and memory among her customers.

### **3. Feeding and eating *East Indian* - food, memory, and distinction among a coastal Christian community in Mumbai**

The East Indian Catholics are a community based in the coastal areas of Mumbai city, who trace their ancestry to groups of fishermen who inhabited the Thana and Salsette island, and the north Konkan region of pre-colonial Bombay. They are Roman Catholics who converted from Hinduism in the 16th century through Portuguese missionaries, and, according to community historian and ethnographer Elsie Baptista, were called “native Christians” or “Portuguese Christians”, until the Bombay islands were handed over from the Portuguese to the British in the 17<sup>th</sup> century, as Catherine of Braganza's marriage dowry to Charles II. By the 18<sup>th</sup> century, they started openly calling themselves “East Indians” after the British East India Company, because “they wanted to impress upon the British Government of Bombay that they were the earliest Roman Catholic subjects of the British Crown in this part of India” (Baptista, in Solomon 2016: 19). This identity politics has marked their community as both “native” to Mumbai as well as being direct descendants to their Western colonial rulers, claims on genealogical status and pedigree and also to ensure stable employment under the British Raj (Bear 2007). In turn, this allowed for linguistic, cultural, and religious distinction vis-à-vis their numerous Others within the city. They're names are all Portuguese Roman Catholic, such as Rodriguez, Pereira, and D'Souza, the easiest form of identification within a culture where name directly denotes family, caste, and region. They are multilingual, speaking English and Portuguese, as well as a distinct dialect of Marathi, called East Indian Marathi (which is slowly dying out as their mother tongue, giving way to English). Their marriage, funeral, and lifecycle rituals are influenced by their Roman Catholic religiosity, but with distinctly East Indian customs, such as singing East Indian wedding songs sung in a combination of Marathi, English and Portuguese, distinguishing the community from other Christian communities who have populated the city since the time of the British, such as the Goan and Mangalorean Christians. There are approximately



600,000 East Indians living in Mumbai city, and in the northern districts of Thane and Vasai.<sup>146</sup>

During the bulk of my fieldwork, I stayed in a sprawling cosmopolitan suburb in central Mumbai called Bandra, with my East Indian landlord, Derek Rodriguez. His three-storey bungalow, called “Rodriguez House”, was a spacious piece of housing in one of the most sought after areas of real estate of the city and country. What made its valuation and rent slightly cheaper compared to his friends’ bungalows in the northern Bandra suburb of Pali Hill, was that Rodriguez House was located on Chapel road, which, unlike the pristine and quiet Pali Hill, was a bustling one-way street which connected Bandra railway station to the entrance of the Bandra-Worli sea link, gateway to South Mumbai CBD, and the reclamation areas which were home to extremely congested Hindu and Muslim chawls and bazaars, giving the entire neighbourhood a lively, and at times assaulting, mixture of noise, people, and movement. Still, Derek’s rooftop terrace, which was shrouded with exotic plants and equipped with a beautiful sound system, always mesmerized first time visitors, and it was a meeting place for party going Mumbaikars who looked for an oasis within the bustle of the city.

Amidst the various markers of social distinction from language to marriage, my East Indian informants time and time again expressed their love for food, and the fact that their distinct culinary culture was what constituted their communal identity. Visceral identity and boundaries were most often illuminated through the interaction with the Other, as I explored in Chapter VII. One day, I had brought a Gujarati friend to the house to show him the terrace that I’ve been boasting about for a while. Him being a native of Mumbai, and myself absorbing the city for months, we were confident that we have domesticated all of Mumbai’s sensory assaults - until we started walking up the flight of stairs, when we sensed an extremely pungent and distinct smell which engulfed us like a sticky blanket. Having no idea whether this was coming from the streets or the house, we eventually realized that the smell was getting denser at each step; when I finally flung the door open, I see Derek in the kitchen frying pieces of brown pulp, humming to an unidentifiable Rockabilly tune blasting from the terrace above. He turns around, and bursts out laughing when he

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<sup>146</sup> Kumar, R. (2013 Aug 02). The original East Indians. *The Hindu*. Retrieved 28 Sep 2017 from <http://www.thehindu.com/features/magazine/the-original-east-indians/article4959668.ece>

sees my poor friend covering his nostrils and mouth with his arms, eyes watery and crumpled up as if in an effort to block every single pore in his body from the particles of smell coming from whatever it is on the stove. Recovering from laughter, Derek exclaims: “Ken! I had texted you earlier, saying that Ill be cooking dried *bombil* today! I warned the entire neighbourhood beforehand too! Not that the East Indians care ... but the Muslim barber opposite gets screwed in the head when I cook it!”

Bombil (in Marathi; Bombay Duck in English; binomial classification *Harpadon nehereus*) is a widely consumed lizardfish throughout coastal Maharashtra. Its etymology is contested, but historian and novelist Farrukh Dhondy (1990) suggests that: “when the British introduced the railway system to western India under their Raj, it (Bombil) started going in wagonloads to the interior from Bombay. The crates stank of dried fish... They were marked 'Bombay Dak', literally 'Bombay Mail'. ... The English may call a spade a spade, but they don't call 'stinking fish' by that name. They referred to it euphemistically as 'Bombay Dak', the Bombay Mail” (ibid: 241). This explanation has been contested, since the Bombay railways only opened in 1852, while the Oxford English Dictionary dates “Bombay duck” to at least the year 1850; whatever its origins, what has always been clear is its unmistakeable aroma, which is brewed when salted and spiced bombil is left in the sun to dry marinade, packing in its acerbic aroma and taste, which becomes unleashed when re-heated. Many coastal communities eat this preserved food, and the East Indians are particularly fond of this fish, making pickle, chutney, and curry out of it. Derek was frying leftover dried bombil left in the fridge for months, and added a large batch of fresh fenugreek leaves with garlic, onion, and special East Indian bottle masala to make a staple, easy, East Indian ghar-ka-khana. Derek, who is 40 years old, says fondly: “We had bombil two to three times a week, when I was a child. We get them from the *kolis* (fishermen folk) by *Bandstand*, in its dried form, and would use it in curries or snacks; or buy fresh bombil, and come home and make bombil pickle as a condiment to your usual vegetable dish. Pickles last weeks, and dried ones for months. It’s so easy to prepare and cook. My body starts craving that sourness and bitterness if I go without it for more than a week!” My friend, who was born a vegetarian, but prided himself on being a “foodie” who was fearless in trying anything that tasted good, whether it be heavy mutton or spicy fish, did not go anywhere near this pungent concoction - it posed a transgression which he could not digest.

While East Indians cherished the pungent bombil, the dish was a coastal Maharashtran staple, which was a part of their identity, but wasn't specifically an East Indian dish. On the other hand, the East Indian *bottle masala*, which Derek added to the bombil, was distinctly East Indian; and unlike dried bombil, which induced recoil and disgust for those not inculcated to its tastes, it induced familial and communal pleasure, a pleasurable experience even to those who were not of the community. Bottle masala, which gets its name from it being commonly preserved in glass (beer) bottles, is an East Indian allspice blend, made from 20 to 25 different ground roasted spices, with copious amounts of Kashmiri red chilli's, local herbs such as *maipatri* (mugwort), and significant doses of ground wheat, creating an unusual yet subtle concoction of spiciness, bitterness, and warmth. As Derek put it, they are like "magic bullets", which "gets the flavour out of everything, without overpowering the ingredient or the dish. I use it when cooking a simple cabbage subzi, to when I want to cook pork ribs, rubbing a bit of it before doing the BBQ marinade. When you eat it, people can't put their finger on it, except for the fact that it tastes really good." As Tanya Aguiar, 24, banker and food aficionado, puts it succinctly: "the Bottle masala is an East Indian emergency kit. One can add it to anything, and not only it will taste good, but it will taste *East Indian good*." The masala, like the distinct Kolhapuri masala of the Patil's, was comparable to a shot of East Indian "umami", sensorily pumping up the dish with East Indian distinction. While a complete outsider may not notice the subtleties of this spice, other Christian communities in coastal Bandra knew its flavours: Mrs Pereira, a 60 years old retired high school teacher who is a Mangalorean Christian, recalls East Indian wedding parties in which she found similar coastal Christian dishes, such as Pork Sarpatel and Vindaloo, always had a different aftertaste: "It's the wheat in the Bottle masala, which makes the curries more thick. The East Indians like that, to scoop the thick gravy with rice or bread. We Mangaloreans like it much more soupy, and a tad bit more vinegary. Its remarkable they sprinkle it into absolutely everything!" There is a strange, comforting quality to the bottle masala, and it has mesmerised other communities too: Genesia Alves, journalist, talks about her aunt's "proper" Punjabi husband who discovered the magical spice, and since then used it every single time he cooked *chole* (chickpea

subzi), the epitome Punjabi ghar-ka-khana.<sup>147</sup> The marriage of chole and bottle masala viscerally mirrored their inter-community conjugal bond.

While using the bottle masala was a simple and effective way to East-Indianize the meal, making it was an entirely different ordeal. Naresh Fernandes, historian and editor, reminisces: “Bottle masala is summer for me, more than mangoes or jackfruit. It’s the sound and smell. The spices would be left out to crumble in the sun, and the women would pound these in enormous pestle and mortars for hours, while singing songs matching the steady rhythms of pounding, and the layered aroma of the spices would fill the neighbourhood.”<sup>148</sup> These sights can still be seen in East Indian houses and neighbourhoods in Bandra during summer, as people painstakingly pounded the dark, reddish brown spice into finer grains, bottling it in glass containers to use throughout the year. But its laboriousness has increasingly made these practices obsolete from households, and instead, specialist caterers, such as Sandra Blanchette, who runs Sandra products Co., make it a business to sell a variety of masalas, pickles, and sweets to cater to East Indian clients who are too busy to make it themselves. Yet, as Sandra says, “real” bottle masala must come from ones’ family home and recipe: “Our bottle masala recipes have been handed down generation by generation, and we haven’t altered it to this day. Back in the day, every one of these houses had their own bottle masala, and distinct recipes. For example, our masala uses 21 ingredients, and we use Kashmiri chilli’s on the higher side; but others may like a more sweetish flavour, so would add more *dalchini* (cinnamon). When you went to a friends house, or a wedding, you’d notice the differences in the same curries, because of the differences in bottle masala.” This was “cosmopolitanism from below” (Appadurai 2011), where the nuanced sensations of the masala are instrumental in highlighting visceral, familial boundaries of self and Other within the neighbourhood community.

There are several other masala makers in Chapel Road, and they all inadvertently take part in the homogenization of bottle masalas in the neighbourhood, as less and less families make it on their own, and instead outsource it to these few caterers. While most of Sandra’s clients are working professionals or elderly East Indian families who long for the taste of East Indian food, even if it were slightly less

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<sup>147</sup> Alves, G. (2011 May 22). Bottle Masala. *Asian Age*. Retrieved 28 Sep 2017 from <http://archive.asianage.com/dining/bottle-masala-116>

<sup>148</sup> Doctor, V. (2016). Feast of the East Indians. *Audiomatic podcast*. Retrieved 28 Sep 2017 from <http://www.audiomatic.in/show/feast-of-the-east-indians/>

than the real thing, there are also non-East Indian fans who have taken a liking to the masala, like a Gujarati man who was introduced to bottle masala, and the community at large, from eating his East Indian colleague's tiffin in their office canteen. According to Sandra, although he was "pure-veg", and could not savour the various meat delicacies of East Indian cuisine (and is always slightly disturbed when he came to purchase the masala, since the store also sold dried bombil and other pungent smelling pickles and dried foods), nevertheless has remained a loyal customer for over 3 years, who asked his wife to put the masala into their daily subzis. Sandra jokes: "His wife is lucky; sprinkle a bit of bottle masala and your husband is happy!" These encounters show that, while the advent of ghar-ka-spice caterers may signal a commercialization of authentic tastes, a gentrification of "cosmopolitanism from below", it gives way to a different type of cosmopolitanism, one of "regional diversity" (Appadurai 1988), which hinged on extrapolated and processed sensory indexes. In a similar way to the spicy Kolhapuri masala of the Patil's being savoured, not in its truly local, sticky associations with coarse Bhakri and the land of Kolhapur, but the packaged indexes of "chatpata", so the wide appeal of bottle masala came from its versatility as an allspice, which could be used throughout the spectrum of vegetarian to non-vegetarian Indian foods, regardless of community and attesting to individual preference.

Still, many families, like the Aguiars, made bottle masala at home, every year. It is a family ordeal, and the entire joint family takes part in it like a festivity, grinding and bottling it together, celebrating with wine and meals afterwards - but only Mrs Aguiar, the grandmother who rules the kitchen of the house, knows the exact proportions of spices which went into their bottle masala. Tanya, her granddaughter, says with amusement: "Once I asked her what all and all she puts in the masala; she looked at me like I was crazy, a criminal trying to steal something from her!" However Tanya took it, the testimony of other East Indian's confirmed that Mrs Aguiar's guarded secrecy was less a case of being mean, than evidence of just how important the bottle masala is for East Indian families, and the fact that one had to earn the trust of the head chef of the house, to be deemed trustworthy to handle this vital substance of nurturing. The blending of over 20 spices at exact quantities is considered a much more complex alchemy than cooking - only through the art of blending does the bottle masala become a "magic bullet" which generates pleasure and distinction. Neil, 43, a long distance taxi driver, and also a cooking expert, says:

“I have one bottle masala which is 20, 30 years old. People [non East Indians] hear this and say, *karaab ho jaega* (it’ll spoil). But for my mom, I mean, she has unopened bottles from *her* grandmother’s time, my great-grandmother. For East Indians, opening bottle masala is like opening well-aged wine.” The bottle masala is an *asset*, more than an expendable consumer good; a very slow-burning expendable, like ageing whiskey. In order to *inherit* this substance one had to prove oneself in the kitchen, training for many decades, for this meant handling the viscera of the individual as well as the family as a whole - the bottle masala not only transmitted bio-moral substance horizontally through feeding and commensality, but also vertically, as genealogical wisdom and substance.

Food and memory was inseparable for the East Indians, and the sensory qualities of sight, smell, tastes, and textures evoked visceral memories of ones childhood and identification with community (Sutton 2001). I recall a memorable and saddening time in the Rodriguez House, when Derek’s ailing mother, Elsie, had passed away fighting terminally ill cancer. The usual party atmosphere of the house was washed away with grief of the Rodriguez family, who had gathered in Bandra from other parts of Mumbai, the U.S., and Dubai. Following the funeral, I was at home with Veronica, temporary housemaid and caretaker to Elsie. She had spent many months with the Rodriguez family and Elsie while she was fighting her illness. We lit a candle in front of Elsie’s picture, adorned with beautiful flowers, who looked very young and virile. Veronica went on to tell me how a great lady she was, and how thin she had become in the end, with tears pouring out of her eyes. I had never met Elsie in person, but I could not stop tears forming listening to Veronica’s solemn soliloquy. She shed her tears, and said she had to do something to forget this grief: she will teach me how to make *hand bread*, a traditional East Indian unleavened bread made of rice flour.

As I helped Veronica thoroughly knead the powdery flour into flat disks, Derek’s elder sister, Tanya, who has moved to New York since 30 years, and just arrived in Mumbai for Elsie’s funeral, had just come home with heavy dark circles under her eyes. Being the eldest surviving child, and closest to Elsie, and not being able to see her before her death, she was beaten down, and I hadn’t seen her smile once for the past few days. I distinctly remember the moment she came in the room and set her eyes on the porous, white mush that Veronica was kneading, and her cheeks lit up red and eyes opened wide, like a child who found candy. “Is that hand

bread Veronica?!” she exclaimed, and both started to sob with each other in their arms. Hand bread was the sustenance of the Rodriguez family, like many other East Indians, the equivalent of chapatti and rice *combined*, and that night, we had a humble meal of hand bread with Derek’s signature bombil *methi* (fenugreek). The smell of dry bombil that engulfed the house induced not novelty and disgust, like when my Gujarati friend came over, but of communal identity and commensal pleasure. Amidst this solemn but warm atmosphere, I experienced the pungent, piercing smell of bombil as strangely comforting. This was not in the least because I gradually became used to bombil, which grew on me; but also I felt gratitude that I was allowed to take part in such an important moment of this family, which I could claim as my own in Mumbai, a feeling which was nurtured through commensality, which bio-morally changed my own tastes and physiology. It had been many years since Tanya had come to Mumbai, and to eat the foods of her childhood, which she rarely made, for her American husband and her children did not take a particular liking for it. Veronica was extremely pleased that her humble hand bread was so loved by her elder sister from the US (as she called many of her distant female relatives), who hadn’t eaten anything the past few days out of grief. She visibly gained nourishment and virility, and the family talked away about fond memories of Elsie and their childhood. As our hand bread soaked up the East Indian curry, a little bit of the grief that shrouded the Rodriguez house was also mopped up - the texture and taste of each dish viscerally restored familial and communal memory within the house and our stomachs.

The labour done by Veronica was contractual but laden with the ethics of caring for a community of ones’ own. This was similar to the business of Valery Vegas, 52, for whom grief and loss was also what motivated her to seek solace through cooking and feeding food to her people. Valery’s husband had passed away more than 5 years ago, and her son left to New Zealand to follow his dreams and study hotel management since the last 2 years. She was always interested and talented in cooking, and found catering for her neighbours and friends for house parties and birthday parties therapeutic, since it gave her the opportunity to strengthen her ties with her community during a period of loss and solitude. Although she found it important to think about profits to keep her business going, there was a strong ethical sense of doing charity and service to her fellow community members - thus, she did not make much profit, just about enough to pay for her cook Henry’s wages, and cover the overheads. She owned her home, and mainly lived off her and her husbands’

savings, as well as some support from her extended family. She had pride in her cooking, and drew inspiration from East Indian, as well as Goan and Mangalorean Christian recipes and techniques. Her tiffins, consisting of two mains, chapatti, rice, and other condiments, was majorly meat based: wet, gravy based dishes such as *Vindaloo*, *Sorpatel*, and prawn gravy with okra, served with boiled rice and a few chapattis, with hearty sides such as potato chops and cutlets.<sup>149</sup>

Her customers were familiar and fond of her repertoire, which they grew up on, and which grew on them: long time customers Mr and Mrs Pereira, 72 and 68, do not think twice about switching to another caterer, because they are now used to her food, and they are not satisfied with the usual “chapatti-bhaji” served by average tiffin services. They were particularly fond of pork, which was not popular at all among Hindus and detested by Muslims, which, in turn, constructed a positive and distinct sense of being Christian in India, alongside eating beef (Staples 2016) - Christian caterers such as Valery were the only ones serving this marginalized meat. The Pereira’s are healthy, but have long retired into their homes; Mrs Pereira gets “too tired to cook” with her increasingly rheumatoid hands. Their two female children are married, having their own family; one has gone away to Dubai, while the other stays in Kalyan in East Mumbai, but is working and only can visit her parents occasionally. Valery takes on the important work of feeding this couple in relative isolation, and, in their words, Valery was “just like our daughter”; Valery, in turn, took pleasure in caring and cooking for the Pereira’s, who are “just like my parents.” This was not only because Valery often checked up on them outside working hours, visiting the Pereira’s for tea, where she would occasionally make banana fritters for them, an East Indian favourite, thereby acting as a kind of temporary caretaker; but precisely because her food mnemonically and viscerally reproduced the Pereira’s wellbeing, from within.

In a similar vein, Bear (2007) explores how Anglo-Indian families in Kharagpur, Bengal, assert that food is a visceral medium which “makes bonds between people in households, ties dispersed families together, and changes the essences of people” (ibid:195), a distinct marker of their community, genealogy, and pedigree, which also mark their social distinction by cooking family food on their

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<sup>149</sup> Many of the ingredients were expensive, and the cooking process time consuming and required skill and patience, and I was thoroughly surprised at the price levels (120 rupees) she was selling her tiffins - it seemed she could charge double this price.



own, without relying on maids or domestic help, who may only be employed for menial tasks such as cleaning and chopping, and not cooking. This echoes the middle class Bengali housewives studied by Donner (2008a; 2008b) who also are reluctant to outsource this step of intimate reproduction. While for the Anglo-Indians, visceral intimacy does not readily travel between the maid and family; but other forms of remote transmission of bio-moral substance are more accepted, such as sending parcels of homemade masala and dry items to distant relatives by mail (Bear 2007: 195). As we have seen with the bottle masala, a magic bullet to easily East-Indianize the meal, domestic technologies are always geared towards abbreviating certain tasks for affordability and ease, whilst striving to maintain channels for the love, intimacy, substance, and essence of the caring to sufficiently pass onto the cared. The Dabbawalas, allspice such as bottle masala, the domestic caretaker, and tiffin provider, are all forms of this technology that brackets certain tedious domestic chores, while still claiming the visceral production of body, family and community, over space and time.

As of what *types* of domestic technologies are considered acceptable bio-moral interventions differs with class and community - as I explored in Chapter VI, the Dabbawalas were a suitable technology of purity for high caste, lower-middle class commuters. Veronica and Valery, who were trusted destinations of outsourcing the production of intimate substance for the Rodriguez' and Pereira's, were so trusted because of the way the connection between cook and eater were solidified within the rubric of family and shared essence, as well as their expert knowledge of the means to produce community-specific vital substance, which reproduced the ties between disparate families, consolidating and surfacing the shared essence of what it is to be East Indian, sensorily and viscerally. The specificity of the bottle masala as well as specialist cooking techniques helped consolidate these links. The Dabbawalas maintained their work ethic and brand image in order to build trust with their purity conscious customers; on the other hand, middle class anxieties regarding domestic help always stem from the dissociation of class essence and substance between employer and employed (Dickey 2000; Janeja 2010). For Clive D'Souza, 28 years old, who works in an IT firm in the Bandra-Kurla-office-Complex (BKC), Valery's food is an essential way to be East Indian, at an affordable price. "Getting proper food in Mumbai is getting more and more difficult. My mother is getting old, and I have no intention to get married just yet. Even if I do get married, don't even know if she'll be

an East Indian; if she is one, she may be a terrible cook. See, we are open people, we don't force anyone to do anything. If the girl likes to stay at home and cook, that's okay. But that kind of girl is not in any way better than a working girl. So, its more rational to have people like Valery, who's a real good cook, likes cooking, and does it everyday for cash, without the commitment of getting married!" Clive is one of the younger generations who is flexible with how his visceral needs of nourishment and identity are produced, and his views echo the two "progressive" Christian gentlemen whom I interviewed in Chapter VII, who expressed that ghar-ka-khana is love, but also cost and chore. For Clive, it is less the "cosmopolitanism from below" of the family bottle masala that counts, that is, distinction *within* the neighborhood, than distinction with entirely Other communities in his multicultural office canteen. "I recently had a Punjabi colleague rave over Valery's tiffin - its through her tiffin, that my entire team, who come from all over India, know about our community. It's a great feeling to be appreciated; and food does that."

## **Chapter IX. Conclusion**

This final chapter will recapitulate the entire argument of this thesis, while concluding with several remarks on recent events taking place in contemporary India, where a violent strand of visceral politics is starting to define communal and electoral politics. Chapter I began by investigating classic Indian theories and ethnographies to critically evaluate the concept of the “bio-moral”, as a specifically Indian modality of thought-action which also informed the everyday concerns of my informants in Mumbai. Rather than taking this as a concluding point about this modality and environment, this thesis takes this as an important starting point to explicate their nuanced attitudes towards negotiating communal identity, social distinction, and cosmopolitan pleasure in the urban public, which took the form of managing the flow of vital substance, the boundary making negotiations which I call “technologies of purity”. Food emerged as an especially important site for actors to carry such negotiations out, for the particular potency of food in India in embodying the qualities of its handler, and the everydayness and ubiquity of the substance in nurturing the self, as well as of highlighting the bio-moral differences between selves. I go on to show how such everyday bio-moral-economic management must be contextualized within the larger boundaries between *ghar* (home) and *bahar* (outside), which became consolidated throughout various historical moments from colonial to contemporary India. I further contextualized these historical moments through the concept of “visceral politics”, the processes by which these negotiations became experienced in and expressed through the intimate scale of the gut, thereby pointing to the need to understand wider communal agitations and historical transformations as interconnected with visceral mobilizations from within ones’ entrails, often experienced as uncontrollable urges. These have ranged from Ambedkar’s critique of anti-beef Brahmanism in ancient India, to “bovine politics” in colonial India, to contemporary anti-Muslim Gujarat pogroms in 2002 (Ghassem-Fachandi 2012), a tendency which is becoming evermore pertinent in the political arena of India since 2014, as I will allude to in the end of this chapter.

Chapter II introduced the different fieldsites which I engaged with throughout fieldwork in Mumbai between October 2014 and January 2016, showing how I utilized participant observation, interviews, and questionnaires in settings ranging

from the Mumbai suburban railways, the office canteen, the Dabbawala delivery team, tiffin caterers, and khau-gallis, to sociologically map my interlocutor's habitus and attitudes towards food, work, and life. I also explored my own visceral politics vis-à-vis my informants through commensality, which, on the one hand, was an important means to build meaningful social relationships by ingesting the common substance of ghar-ka-khana, literally and viscerally making family and community from within; while on the other, due to the charged nature of ghar-ka-khana, and the way food habits in India index particular lifestyles which may be consolidated as incommensurable among communities, commensality at times reinforced social distinction rather than communion. In particular, my omnivorous aspiration to "eat everything and make friends with everyone" resulted in discrepancies *within* my own body, between my tongue and gut, pointing to the inseparable link between knowledge production and the visceral limits of the researcher. This discussion methodologically lays down the foundation for the visceral politics of food engaged with by my informants, which I explore in the subsequent six chapters.

Although these chapters follow an order based on the gradual development of the two key concepts, first by highlighting a spectacular case of visceral politics in action through the "beef ban" and "meat ban" in Chapter III, then looking at the more nuanced, everyday politics of distinction and intimacy of ghar-ka-khana in Chapter IV, followed by tracing ghar-ka-khana into the urban public as tiffin in Chapters V and VI, to the office canteen and its gastropolitics of cosmopolitan pleasure and visceral disgust in VII, and finally to the tiffin caters which commercially take on these gastropolitics for a group of hearth-less commuters, here I group these chapters along two axis: the *everyday* and *spectacular* forms of visceral politics and technologies of purity. Everyday visceral politics is the realm of the perpetual forms of bio-moral-economic management engaged by commuters on a day-to-day basis, to negotiate their social distinction, which, more or less looks at the successes of these negotiations in consolidating vital boundaries in the urban public - these are Chapter IV, V, VI, and VIII. Spectacular visceral politics denotes a *breach* of this carefully balanced order of bio-moral-economic normality, where conventionalizing technologies of purity are challenged through larger historical, legislative, and media forces, as in the "beef ban" and "meat ban" incidents in Chapter III, or the weekly rhythms of "non-veg days" in office canteens, which separates this semi-public space of congregation into sensorily incommensurable "meat" and "veg" zones, in Chapter

VII. I first describe the former, then lead to the latter, which will branch off into an analysis of recent events in India, which can be characterized as spectacular, violent forms of visceral politics.

Chapter IV explored the vital boundary between ghar and bahar through the two interconnected substances of ghar-ka-khana and bahar-ka-khana, which emerge out of this boundary. I examined how ghar-ka-khana is not only a substance which embodies the ethical and familial relationship between cook and eater, but embodies social class and distinction, through the ubiquitous “Indian meal” of dal-chawal, a staple dish consumed by members throughout Indian society. I set forth to tabulate different socio-economic positionalities through variations in the elementary form of the Indian meal, the dal-chawal, and how different commuters, from working pure vegetarians to middle class youth, utilized ghar-ka-khana to negotiate their sense of selfhood, distinction, and wellbeing in the urban public between domestic intimacy and cosmopolitan experimentation. Moreover, ghar-ka-khana emerges as a discursive substance, one that epitomizes tradition, family, and intimacy, values which are consolidated and disseminated through food adverts, as well as institutions which I call “tech savvy tiffin services”, and an emergent group of “luxury home chefs”, which capitalize on the positive values of ghar-ka-khana to cater to a class of middle class consumers who long for a dose of homely nourishment, coupled with their tastes for novelty, a distinct tactic of bio-moral-economic management.

Chapters V and VI followed ghar-ka-khana out into the urban public, protected by the stainless steel tiffin container, and carried by a Dabbawala to its respected workplace destinations. Before ethnographically exploring how the tiffin, the Dabbawala labour, and the Dabbawala organization comprise distinct technologies of purity for a class of lower-middle class, high caste, vegetarian commuters, an indispensable and affordable means to protect vital substance across a distance, I examined the history of the Indian tiffin and the Mumbai Dabbawalas to contextualize how these facilitate bio-moral-economic management in contemporary Mumbai. The unique history of the Dabbawalas in being integrated within Bombay-Mumbai’s manufacturing economy since the late 19<sup>th</sup> century, connecting the bustling cotton mill industry with food providers such as khanawalis, shows how their organization and labour have always been implicated in the intimate reproduction of bodies on lines of shared class, caste, regional, and family identities. In the contemporary era, their clients are mostly white-collar office workers who eat food their female kin have

made, and as their organization garners evermore cultural capital through being taken up by management scientists and media personnel as an organization harbouring spectacular supply chain logistics, the Dabbawalas have increasingly collaborated with governments, NGOs, and corporations as brand ambassadors of cleanliness and hygiene, feeding back into their everyday ethical labour of delivering tiffins across the city.

Chapter VIII explored a prominent and related industry, “tiffin services”, who commercially produce ghar-ka-khana for a class of hearthless workers, such as double-income households, migrants away from family, single working men and women, and the elderly, who do not have the resources, time, or energy to cook their own meals. Due to complex dietary proscriptions in India, informed by an array of religious, regional, class, and community markers, these grey-zone businesses in between generic commerciality and domestic specificity, mostly operated by housewives for side income, are indispensable ways for these urban dwellers to dose on their community-body specific substances at an affordable price. While many tiffin services provide “generic Indian food”, lowest common denominator foods open to most palates, some caterers take pride in providing their idiosyncratic recipes, such as the Patil’s, who have served their authentic Kolhapuri cuisine for over 3 generations; and Valery, from the East Indian community, a group of coastal Roman Catholics who have a distinct food culture which is made peripheral to the purview of “generic Indian food”. For their customers, ghar-ka-khana is not only about ethical and familial nourishment - which more regular tiffin services do provide - but also important ways to exercise their social distinction, as well as indulging in communal pleasures and visceral memories which are mediated by the foods of their childhoods. Such tiffin services provide an indispensable service to uphold bio-moral-economic management for these community members, which otherwise cannot be fulfilled.

Now, I move from the variations of everyday bio-moral-economic management in Mumbai, to the spectacular breach of these technologies and rhythms. Chapter III explored two incidents which politicized food on a national scale, which occurred during fieldwork, in 2015 Mumbai: the “beef ban”, which illegalized the slaughter of all cattle (except the water buffalo) in the state of Maharashtra, where Mumbai is the capital, and the “meat ban”, a row which came after the beef ban, where a certain Jain trust sought to ban slaughterhouses and butchers in the city for the duration of their fasting period, *Paryushan*. I analysed these two incidents, a

combination of state legislature and an exaggerated mediascape, through examining a range of ethnographic, media, legal, and statistical data, as eruptions of deep seated anxieties regarding cosmopolitan mingling, communal identity, electoral politics, and visceral boundary making between self and Other, in contemporary Mumbai. The beef ban incident, by consolidating certain food habits (slaughtering/consuming beef) as illegal, pinning these to specific communities (Muslims as prime handlers of beef), and pitting different life trajectories against each other as viscerally incommensurable (beef eating Muslim vs. pure vegetarian Hindu/Jain), cut into a cosmopolitan field where experimentation with different food habits and life trajectories were more or less accepted, such as by my informant Viral, who, despite being a pure-vegetarian, occasionally indulged in eating beef in dark, back alley meat restaurants. The change in Viral's attitudes before and after the ban were symptomatic of how the technology of purity of anti-cattle slaughter laws transformed cosmopolitan (transgressionary) pleasure into visceral distaste and disgust towards the scapegoated Other, the Muslims, within a national scale. The meat ban incident, although implicated in less far-reaching legislature, demonstrated how food in Mumbai continually conjures concerns about negotiating the distance between selves and communities within the scale of the city, providing ample room for political parties such as the Shiv Sena party to capitalize on, and exercise their trademark rhetoric of communal agitation and xenophobic politics. Food was a potent medium to ingeniously traverse between various scales, from the city, to community, to the home, to the gut, simultaneously implicating the intimate interior and public identity.

While the first half of Chapter VII examined how the semi-public space of the office canteen harboured a distinct sociality of cosmopolitan mingling and pleasure, through commensal practices of sharing and ingesting each other's ghar-ka-khana, the second half explored how informally decided bi-weekly "non-veg" days among a chemical contractor office viscerally cut into this cosmopolitan environment, separating the canteen into "meat" and "veg" zones. While meat lovers looked forward to these "treat" days, engaging in the cathartic carnivorous feast among themselves, the largely vegetarian, Gujarati managerial classes of this office could not stand the sight and smell emanating from these tiffins. What complicated this division was that the two viscerally incommensurable camps still had to work side-by-side - unlike Viral's dismissal of meat eating practices and meat eaters post-beef ban, the managers could not simply dismiss their colleague's practices as distasteful and

disgusting, for they all aspired to the cosmopolitan ethos of openness and acceptance. Not only did the “non-veg” days interpellate the incommensurable subjectivities of carnivores and vegetarians on a bi-weekly basis, but also there was an incommensurability *within* the bodies of the vegetarians, between the tongue/head and the gut, where the former aspired to accept the Other, while the latter viscerally and uncontrollably refused to digest it. This incommensurability did not allow the meat eaters to be fully objectified as sources of disgust, but instead resulted in the sense of estrangement felt by them, who’s’ colleagues suddenly appeared irrevocably alien.

While the 2015 beef ban and meat ban incidents were pivotal moments during fieldwork in Mumbai, which urged me to contextualize these events, as well as my engagements with my informants, in the light of a more nuanced look at how food mediates social distinction and disgust, communal and electoral politics in contemporary India is evermore turning dangerously visceral. If the “non-veg days” in the office canteen were *recurring spectacles* every week, the brutal murder and mob lynching of a Muslim man and his family in Dadri, Uttar Pradesh, by a group of Hindu vandals, over (false) allegations that he had beef hidden in their refrigerator (it was actually mutton), which made national news headlines in October 2015<sup>150</sup>, were in a much more severe register of visceral violence. Yet, I emphasize that the disgust that a vegetarian feels towards his meat eating colleagues, and the violence caused by such visceral mobilizations, are structurally continuous - the alarming frequency at which such acts of violence are occurring in different parts of India show that the former are young seeds which may blossom into anger and violence. Another of such incidents in March 2016, in Jharkhand, a state bordering Uttar Pradesh, also made top news, where two Muslim men, a 32 year cattle herder and his 15 year old son, were beaten to death and hanged from a tree by a group of self identified “cow vigilantes”, who had tracked them down as they were walking with 8 oxen on their way to the cattle market.<sup>151</sup> It has been reported that such *gau rakshaks* (cow vigilantes) have been on the rise throughout the country over the past few years, policing the streets out of their own accord and harassing, more often than not without any substantiation,

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<sup>150</sup> (2016 Sep 28). Dadri lynching: One year on, what has changed after Mohammad Akhlaq was beaten to death?. *First Post*. Retrieved 28 Sep 2017 from <http://www.firstpost.com/india/dadri-lynching-one-year-on-what-has-changed-after-mohammad-akhlaq-was-beaten-to-death-3023850.html>

<sup>151</sup> (2016 Mar 19). Five held after two Muslim cowherds hanged to death in India. *Reuters*. Retrieved 28 Sep 2017 from <http://www.reuters.com/article/us-india-killings/five-held-after-two-muslim-cowherds-hanged-to-death-in-india-idUSKCN0WL0FU>



those who are “torturing cows”, or “transporting” them to slaughterhouses.<sup>152</sup> These incidents of bovine related deaths have historically fallen under the “cow belt”, the combined area of the Indian states of Haryana, Uttar Pradesh (UP), Bihar, and Madhya Pradesh (MP), the four northern, populous Hindi-Urdu speaking states, called so for the prominence of cow-worship among Hindus in the region, the cow being a potent tool for communal agitation and political mobilization since anti-colonial movements. However, West Bengal, which borders Muslim majority Bangladesh, is fast rising as a state harbouring cow related fatalities, reporting more of such incidents than Uttar Pradesh in 2017. IndiaSpend’s all-India database shows that since 2010, there were 30 (reported) fatalities and 210 injuries, while 87% of the victims were Muslims, and 9 out of 10 incidents were caused by rumours.<sup>153</sup>

The frequency at which the events are occurring and the consistency of the parties involved, all the victims being either marginalized Muslims or Dalits who were handling or in close proximity to cows and beef, point to an alarming trend, one that has roots in India’s history of bovine nationalism and cow worship, and the visceral politics of disgust towards its meat, as I explored in this thesis. It is not a coincidence that these events are taking place under the current BJP government headed by Narendra Modi, who, during his election campaign, has repeatedly criticized the Congress party for leading a “pink revolution”, referring to the fact that India has grown into the second largest beef exporter in world by volume (after Brazil), through government subsidies to abattoirs and meat processing industries, a populist political card which Modi played in order to agitate Hindu-Muslim communal sentiments during the 2014 general elections, which he won in a landslide victory. He has been rather quiet about the cow vigilante incidents over the past years, until recently, when he openly “warned” against “fake *gau rakshaks*”, implying that he may be more lenient towards “real ones” with more valid causes to police the

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<sup>152</sup> Chakrovorty, S. (2016 Jul 22). Tyranny of gau rakshaks: The rise of cow vigilantes under the BJP govt. *First Post*. Retrieved 28 Sep 2017 from <http://www.firstpost.com/india/tyranny-of-gau-rakshaks-the-rise-of-cow-vigilantes-under-the-bjp-govt-2908244.html>

<sup>153</sup> Saldanha, A., and Vivek, V. (2017 Sep 1). Bengal Deadliest State For Bovine-Related Violence In 2017. *IndiaSpend*. Retrieved 28 Sep 2017 from <http://www.indiaspend.com/cover-story/bengal-deadliest-state-for-bovine-related-violence-in-2017-2017>

streets.<sup>154</sup> With the Modi led BJP party winning a landslide victory in the 2017 Uttar Pradesh elections, where the rhetoric of cow protection and policies promising the closure of all illegal slaughterhouses within the state gained fervent support, and with the appointment of Yogi Adityanath, a Hindu religious leader and a fiery proponent of cow protection policies, as chief minister of the state,<sup>155</sup> the concept of “visceral politics” gains ever more analytical gravitas to fully understand how such populism “works the gut” of a population to somatically realize political consciousness, and to take part in extreme communal violence in the national political field of contemporary India.

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<sup>154</sup>(2016 Aug 07). Beware of nakli gau rakshak': PM Modi denounces 'cow vigilantes' for the second time. *First Post*. Retrieved 28 Sep 2017 from <http://www.firstpost.com/india/beware-of-nakli-gau-rakshak-pm-modi-denounces-cow-vigilantes-for-the-second-time-2940986.html>

<sup>155</sup> Barry E. (2017 Mar 18). Firebrand Hindu Cleric Yogi Adityanath Picked as Uttar Pradesh Minister. *NY Times*. Retrieved 28 Sep 2017 from <https://www.nytimes.com/2017/03/18/world/asia/firebrand-hindu-cleric-yogi-adityanath-picked-as-uttar-pradesh-minister.html>

## Glossary

These terms are transcriptions from “Bombay Hindi”, a vernacular language spoken widely in Mumbai which combines words from Marathi, Hindi-Urdu, English, Sanskrit, and other languages.

*abhang* - *Varkari* devotional song dedicated to the god *Vithoba*

*ahimsa* - non violence

*aloo* - potato

*amti-bhat* - Maharashtran Brahmin version of *dal-chawal* cooked with jaggery

*auto* - taxi, rickshaw

*auto-wallah* - taxi driver

*bahar* - outside

*bahar-ka-khana* - outside food

*bakr-Id* -Muslim sacrificial feast

*bhajan* - Hindu devotional songs

*bhakri* - coarse, unleavened bread widely eaten in Western India

*bhakti* - devotion, worship

*bhumiputra* - son's of the soil

*bombil* - type of lizardfish found on the coast of Mumbai

*chapatti* - soft, unleavened flatbread consumed widely throughout India

*chatpata* - spicy, tangy, kick

*dabba* - box, lunchbox

*dabbawala* - lunchbox delivery man, tiffin carrier

*dada* - neighbourhood big men

*dal-chawal* - a staple Indian meal of cooked lentils with rice

*dalchini* - cinammon

*dalit* - low caste, scheduled castes

*dharma* - spirit

*dhokla* - Gujarati flatbread

*dosa* - South Indian crepe

*farsans* - dry Gujarati snacks

*garam masala* - all round spice

*gau mata* - “mother cow”

*gau rakshak* - cow protectors, cow vigilantes

*ghar* - home  
*ghar-ka-khana* - home cooked food  
*ghee* - clarified butter  
*Girangaon* - village of the mills  
*gosht* - mutton  
*haldi* - turmeric  
*Hindutva* - right wing Hindu chauvinism  
*hing* - asafoetida  
*jat* - caste  
*jugaad* - bricolage, creative improvisation  
*khanawali* - tiffin caterer  
*kokum sharbat* - berry drink  
*koli* - fishermen community native to Mumbai  
*kunbi* - farmers  
*Maratha* - Maharashtran caste  
*methi* - fenugreek  
*mitha paan* - betel leaf mouth freshner  
*mukadam* - dabbawala team leader  
*palak* - spinach  
*Paryushan* - Jain fasting festival  
*pura-khana* - full meal  
*raja rani* - type of mackerel found on the coast of Mumbai  
*sants* - saints  
*shakti* - power  
*sharam* - shame  
*shudh* - pure  
*sorpatel* - a tangy curry dish with Portuguese origins cooked by coastal Christians  
*subzi* - cooked vegetable dish  
*surmai* - type of mackerel found on the coast of Mumbai  
*tamasha* - popular village plays  
*tendli* - Indian ivy gourd  
*thali* - plate, full plate of meals  
*thela* - pushcart  
*tiffin* - lunchbox

*uttapam* - South Indian pancake

*Vaishnav* - Hindu followers of God Vishnu

*vam* - type of eel found on the coast of Mumbai

*Varkari Sampradaya* - sect of pilgrimages in Western India

*varna* - caste system

*vindaloo* - an Anglo-Indian, coastal Indian Christian dish, made with meat and spices

*Vithoba* - popularly worshipped God among *Varkaris*

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