

footnotes

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Malad



Juhu



Railways



Navi Mumbai



Dharavi



Mankhurd



Matunga

Lower Parel



Sewri



Md. Ali Road



Colaba

mumbai
a compressed guide



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Editorial: The Working City

All cities have workers, but workers belong in Mumbai. Or so historians and other peddlers of myth would have us believe. Delhi has its politics; Kolkata, its Communists; Chennai, its provincialism; but only Mumbai, its workers.

Mumbai's association with trade and commerce goes all the way back to its birth as a city under colonial rule. Its strategic location on the west coast of India along with its ample sheltered bay made it ideal for imports and exports from the Western world. It has been equally associated with the extremely rich and extremely poor, located as it is at the dual site of exploitation and opportunity – that at least remains true, unlike all other myths. Mumbai remains in popular imagination as the city that manufactures dreams, the city where the impossible can and does happen every day, both to good and bad effect.

The city's reputation as a commercial city was established in the mid-19th century with the rise of mills and docks. Over the decades immigrants from all over the country streamed in, drawn by hopes of making it big in industry, cinema or in the many allied servicing jobs that flourished. Even today, though rusted machinery and freshly minted malls stand on the sites that were once Mumbai's hubs of power, the dream remains, embodied by newer industries like call centres and IT services.

Those who had in the 60s campaigned for the inclusion of Mumbai in Maharashtra were propelled to great heights, as in the case of Bal Thackeray, or ignored, as in the case of mill workers. The 80s saw the abrupt demise of the mills, by then a sick industry that was broken by one of the longest strikes in the country. While the 90s ushered in a new generation of jobs and voices, these still seem unstable today, here as in the rest of the country. Factory work has given way to sweatshops and formal work structures are progressively becoming unorganised. Increasingly, public focus has shifted to those who can afford to be noticed and away from those who labour behind the scenes. Instigated by parochial politics since the 70s, this city that was built on migrant labour has turned violently against 'outsiders' and is intolerant of dissenting opinions.

Then, as now.

The stories in this magazine might be drawn from the present, but could as well have been located at any point in Mumbai's long and turbulent history. We do not aspire to conjure myths out of the city and its people. There are enough others who do that. What we do intend though, is to slip backstage to speak to those who work hard every single day, trying to eke out a living from a city in their traditional livelihoods or new ones. We see how far a single skill can go, how aspirations seem to change but essentially remain the same, how this city continues to be crafted and imagined by its lifeblood, its workers.

This publication was made possible by a grant from the Jamsetji Tata Trust.



The Mumbai scent trail

In the midst of Mumbai's many unpleasant odours, if you suddenly encounter a fragrance that turns your head and wafts you away to a happier place, you must be on Mohammed Ali Road. Meet the magicians of perfume, the attarwalas of Mumbai.

Text Nithila Kanagasabai | Photos Ananda Siddhartha

In an age of Gucci and Estée Lauder, Alim Qureshi is an exception. He has none of the airs of a perfumer waving his smelling strip in the air like a virtuoso conducting an orchestra. He simply daubs a drop of his attar on his customer's hand using the glass stopper and waits. He studies them closely as they breathe in, searching for the slightest change in expression. Equipped with knowledge gathered over half a century, Alim Bhai is poised to read the customer's mind even before he or she says anything. He smiles through his beard when he knows he has finally found the right fragrance for his client.

Behind him, row upon row of vibrantly coloured attars held captive in cut-glass bottles are strategically arranged against mirror-lined walls. Multiple reflections of these create an illusion that drowns the clamour of the crowded street outside. Alim Bhai seems to be immersed in this bubble of scents and colourful oils, far removed from the dust and the din around him. I was a wide-eyed tourist when I first met Alim Bhai at his shop Attar Al Hafiz and Bros. on Mohammed Ali Road. Now, almost a year later, I go back looking for him.

Seated in his plush air conditioned office, typing away furiously on his laptop, 50-year-old Ilyas Attarwala, proprietor of Nemat Enterprises, is starkly different from Alim Bhai. They share not one, but two passions: perfumes and business. Attarwala, a third-generation manufacturer of attars, holds an MS in chemical engineering and a diploma in perfumery from London. After completing his education he worked in multinational companies abroad for almost seven years before he decided to take the plunge into the family business. "It was a legacy and I felt I had the responsibility of carrying it forward," he avers.

Mohammed Ali Road in the heart of Mumbai is home to more than sixty attar shops. As in the cases of Alim Bhai and Ilyas Attarwala, selling attar is more than just a business here. It is a tradition, an inheritance from their forefathers. Most belong to the Attarwala community and hail from Rajasthan, Uttar Pradesh or Gujarat. For generations, they have made attar or traditional non-alcoholic oil-based perfumes.

Oils obtained from herbs, flowers and wood are generally distilled onto a wood base such as sandalwood and then aged to

make attar. Sitting alongside the expected *ruh gulab* (rose), *chameli* (jasmine) and *khus* (vetiver) are other natural attars like the exotic *gil* (smell of freshly wet earth) and *oudh* (Agarwood). These fragrances are now referred to as desi attar. While natural attars can cost anywhere between ₹1200 to ₹8000 for a 10g vial, synthetic attars, which are a blend of aromatic inorganic chemicals, are much cheaper. Chemicals are also used to approximate Western fragrances, which have recently become very popular.

Seated amidst crystal bottles of colourful attar and stacks of surma and mehendi, 61-year-old Mohammed Farooq says, “Earlier there used to be a demand for desi attar. Even now people use it for namaaz and puja. When it comes to personal use, people walk in and ask for something similar to Hugo Boss or Jovan! Even that is available in the shops on this road.” He explains that unlike perfumes, attars are not gender-specific. There are different attars for different seasons. “The warm tones of spicy *hina* make it the best for winters, for the monsoon, it is *kewra*, and for the summer, there is nothing better than the cooling *ruh gulab*,” he says as he dabs a little bit of the *ruh gulab* on my hand. “My favourite though is *chameli*. After all, I hail from Jaunpur, the land of the *chameli*,” he continues fondly.

Farooq’s shop, AA Attarwala, is almost as old as he is and he has been sitting at the shop for as long as he can remember. He has seen the neighbourhood change a lot over the years. “Earlier, there were very few shops. Now there are more than twice as many.” Ask him about competition and he smiles. “*Allah sabko deta hai*.” Farooq tells me that Ramzan is when there is brisk business. After all, attar is considered food for the *rooh*, or soul, while fasting. Though attars are usually sold in vials, some vendors oblige by providing dabs from their stock for ₹5 during the holy month. They apply a few drops to the wrist, chest, and behind the ears of the customer.

But it is not just Muslims and old-faithfuls who form a loyal customer base for these non-alcoholic fragrances. Homemaker Usha Hebbar has been using

attar in her daily prayers for over twenty years now. “Twigs from the *kadamba* tree are considered holy in Tulu culture. Since it is difficult to find the tree in the city, I opt for the *kadam* attar instead,” she says. Shabnam Aijaz, 25, buys her attar from AA Attarwala, just like her mother before her, but it is not just tradition that leads her to visit the shop every time she travels to this side of the city. She explains, “The attarwalas don’t just sell their readymade perfumes but also blend different scents to offer a unique perfume. So you get to have your own customised fragrance.”

“The warm tones of spicy *hina* make it the best for winters and for the summer, there is nothing better than the cooling *ruh gulab*”

Winding my way through Mohammed Ali Road, I finally reach Attar Al Hafiz and Bros. Not much has changed in the past one year. The long JJ Flyover continues to bypass the thousands of shops on this road, and the world beneath continues to thrive as noisily as ever. But as I inch closer to the shop, I do not find the familiar face of the wizened old Alim Bhai. Instead, a much younger man who bears a striking resemblance to

him sits behind the counter. He is Abu Saud Qureshi, Alim Bhai’s son. He invites me in and informs me that Alim Bhai has gone to “our native Azamgarh.”

Between catering to requests for Budhia Surma and *mogra* attar, the 32-year-old son soon engages me in an interesting conversation on attars. “Sometimes, first-time visitors to the shop insist on testing umpteen fragrances before they pick one. The truth is, after you smell four or five, you will not be able to distinguish between the rest. That is how the sense of smell works. Still, we cannot be rude to our customers, so we continue to regale them with the perfumes.”

His father is a retailer who sells attars sourced from Kannauj; nevertheless, Abu is more interested in manufacturing the attars. Though young, he has a wealth of knowledge. He attributes this to living and breathing attars since a young age. In his late teens, he was already making ‘cocktails’ – mixing existing fragrances to create new ones. He continues to keep his passion for concocting new perfumes.

Though Attar Al Hafiz is not one of the bigger showrooms on the road, Abu is proud of the almost hundred fragrances they stock. He hopes that his children will be interested in the business, but would never force them to get into the family business. “You must have a passion for it,” he insists. “There is no point otherwise. Sitting long hours in a cramped shop is not easy. I do it because I love my job.”



The Budhia magic box

Attar shopkeepers either manufacture their own attar or get it from dealers based in Kannauj, but when it comes to surma, almost all shops on Mohammed Ali Road stock Budhia Surma. Enquiries lead me to a two-storeyed building inside Null Bazaar that houses the Datu Manji Padamshi Surmawala Company that exports surma, kajal and eye drops to a dozen countries worldwide and has an equally loyal customer base in small Indian towns.

“My great-great-great-grandmother Ratan Bai founded the company more than 200 years ago. Legend has it that Ratan Bai once offered a fakir some food and in gratitude he gave her a tiny piece of paper with the formula for the preparation of surma,” says Arif S Banatwala, the current owner of the company.

Making attars and surmas is a traditionally male domain, but in this family, women have played a significant role. “Though the company is named after my great-great-great-grandfather, it was founded and managed by his wife, Ratanbai, popularly known as ‘Budhia’, and women have been a part of the business since then. Before I took over, it was my aunt who managed the business,” says Banatwala.

He reminisces about his early days in the business and his desire to build the family legacy. “Ratanbai apparently used to say that this was never a business but a dua (prayer). If a person worked sincerely the enterprise would flourish for seven generations after that,” says Banatwala taking me over to the shop counter to show me the 16 kinds of surma and four types of kajal they manufacture. He instructs me on the intricacies of these products: one must never put a wet surma liner into the vial, using these eye drops can provide instant relief for strain caused due to long hours of looking into a lighted computer screen. Some of their surmas are used in Unani medicine to cure early stage cataract, mild myopia and the like.

Banatwala eagerly narrates anecdotes to illustrate the reach of his products. The only other thing Shimla-based Thakur and Bros., who manufacture pickle, stock apart from that is Budhia Surma. “We used to receive bulk orders from rural Punjab and we assumed they sold it. Imagine our surprise when we found that our surmas were being distributed for free by religious units like the Dera Sacha Sauda and by grain sellers and rural banks to customers.” – **NK**

If some attar shops are tiny enough to baffle you as to how they could possibly stock a hundred fragrances, others are plush showrooms with rotating displays of their signature perfumes. A Hami Bros., one of the latter, is a 73-year-old company, initially based in nearby Bhendi Bazaar, was one of the first attar shops to open a branch on Mohammed Ali Road in 1977.

The blending centre of this gargantuan business still functions from Dongri, but the sales themselves have entered new global terrains. A Hami Bros. exports a bulk of their produce, with thriving branches in the Middle-East. They are one of 22 licensed dealers of *oudh* in Mumbai.

Ahsan Hami, the current proprietor, proudly narrates his legacy. “My great-grandfather moved from Udaipur to Mumbai, and established A Hami in 1939. Now more than 20 different fragrance companies on this road alone – Hami and Co., Hindustan Aromatics, Al Hayat, Attari Fragrances and Nemat Enterprises – are our offshoot companies. All of them are owned by my cousins.”

Education, according to Ilyas Attarwala (see page 48) of Nemat Enterprises, plays a huge role in expanding the family business. “It opens up new avenues. My four brothers have their Masters degrees in subjects related to our business – finance,

“You must have a passion for it. Sitting long hours in a cramped shop is not easy. I do it because I love my job”

perfumery, chemical engineering.” Though the entry of foreign fragrances into India post-liberalisation did not hit them badly, the recent global recession did, says Attarwala, as it affected their Middle-Eastern markets. “We believe the attar industry will only continue to grow in the Indian subcontinent since our cultural ethos (with its taboo on alcohol in worship) is such,” says Attarwala.

Smaller shops do not share this

sentiment. HM Zakaria, another well-known attar shop on Mohammed Ali Road, has been around for more than 70 years. Despite its loyal customers, the business is facing tough times. Its owner Abdul Quddus laments the lack of government support. “The taxes are so high, small businesses like ours can’t thrive. We depend on retail sales of attar for our survival. People don’t buy *loban* (a tree resin that is an aromatic and insecticide when burnt) anymore as they find the air fresheners hassle-free.” But soon he cheers up and talks about how his shop has featured in documentaries and Bollywood films, the most recent of which was *Dhobi Ghat*. “We are an integral part of this city, a unique part of its history,” he says with pride.

In the dusty lanes of Mohammed Ali Road, attarwalas are as varied as their attars and customers who keep this centuries-old tradition alive. They may have diversified into the newer terrain of exports, but just as the fragrance of attars remains an integral part of our cultural ethos, so are the attarwalas. ■

No laughing matter

Who thought Indians could laugh at themselves? Worse still, make a profession out of it! Stand-up comedy is slowly finding its audiences and the people who are laughing the most are the first generation of English-language Indian stand-up comics.

Text Gursimranjeet Khamba | Photos Naina Redhu, Mihir Suvanam

The green room of The Comedy Store, India's first and only comedy club, is a bizarre mix of lethargy and excitement. There is the new guy, feverishly mugging up his lines as if the stage is a board exam. The crew, running helter-skelter, making sure the sound and lights do not malfunction. The veterans, sipping gently on their beer, contemplating their fate and wondering why they have been doing the same jokes for over a year. All these come together four nights a week for an hour-and-a-half of what is the biggest exercise in trust in the world – paying a stranger to make them laugh. Announcements are made. U2 blares in the background. Lights dim. Curtains open. The first joke is dropped. Boom. The room erupts in applause.

The emergence of English-language stand-up comedy in India as an industry is very recent. More critical perhaps is the understanding and acceptance of stand-up by mainstream Indian audiences. This is because historically, Indian audiences have been exposed to Hindi comedians whose staple was mimicry, telling jokes or *hasyakavis* who satirized the Indian state through poetry – an entirely different art form. Post globalisation, emcees and video jockeys, including the likes of Ranvir Shorey and Cyrus Broacha were considered comedians purely because being funny

led to that classification within the entertainment industry. The concept of being a stand-up comic and just that alone got accepted around 2003, thanks to an unlikely ally – the internet. Till date, the individual synonymous with stand-up comedy for most Indian audiences is Russell Peters, whose YouTube videos satirizing Indian and Chinese stereotypes went viral in 2003. Through Peters, who has attributed on record his financial success to the advent of the internet, Indian stand-up not only found a voice and market, but also created a new class of audiences who were now exposed to an art form which they now craved within Indian shores.

It is tough to accurately trace the evolution of stand-up comedy within India post-2003 because of multiple claims of being the first mover. Bombay Elektrik Project in Mumbai and Cheese Monkey Mafia in Delhi are widely considered the groups that first started open mic nights in their respective cities. However, there are key events that can be identified as having expanded this market. The first was Vir Das returning to India from the United States in 2004 and recording *Walking on Broken Das*. The other was Papa CJ, who was active in the Delhi circuit around 2006, shooting to fame by appearing on American television channel NBC's *Last Comic Standing* in 2008. From humble beginnings, where only a few



like Vir Das and Papa CJ were considered comics of any stature, to the opening of The Comedy Store in Mumbai in 2010, where a variety of Indian comedians rub shoulders with the best in the world, Indian stand-up has come a long way. The question remains, however, how does one enter such a niche industry?

Rohan Joshi, a graduate from the Asian College of Journalism and an ex-*Top Gear* writer, is a case study on being successful within the industry. Joshi participated and won a *Hamateur Night* organised by Vir Das in Mumbai and subsequently joined Das's company as a writer. He was an instant hit after debuting at The Comedy Store and over the last two years, he has continued to work on his craft by performing across the country. Joshi says, "The great thing about stand-up is that if you're good, there is nothing that can stop you because the only relationship that matters is the one between you and your audience. You have to keep working, learning from other comics and not be afraid to bomb once in a while to see what works and what your comedic style is".

Joshi got into stand-up in 2008 when it was still limited to bars, pubs and occasional auditoriums. With the coming of The Comedy Store, which has a rich history of being a premiere comedy destination in the United Kingdom, stand-up in India has gained a certain cultural legitimacy. New comics come and try their hand at The Comedy Store's *Open Mic Nights* where winners get a chance to perform for five minutes along with some of the United Kingdom's and India's best comics. If they are good, they eventually move up the hierarchy and get 30-minute paid spots.

One such comic to move up the hierarchy is Delhi's Rajneesh Kapoor. Kapoor, who got into stand-up along with Papa CJ and others, decided to host his own open mic night called *The Rajneesh Comedy Challenge* in 2009. A cartoonist by profession, whose work is syndicated in *HT Brunch* amongst other publications, Kapoor says, "I did it not just to provide a platform to other aspiring comics but also because I myself wasn't getting enough

stage time. With adequate stage time, I became a better performer and helped other comics develop too. Eventually it paid off for everyone and now we see a chain of exciting young talent coming

"Whenever you tell someone you're a comedian, they always want you to tell them a joke. If you're an accountant, do I ask you to do my taxes for free every time I meet you?"

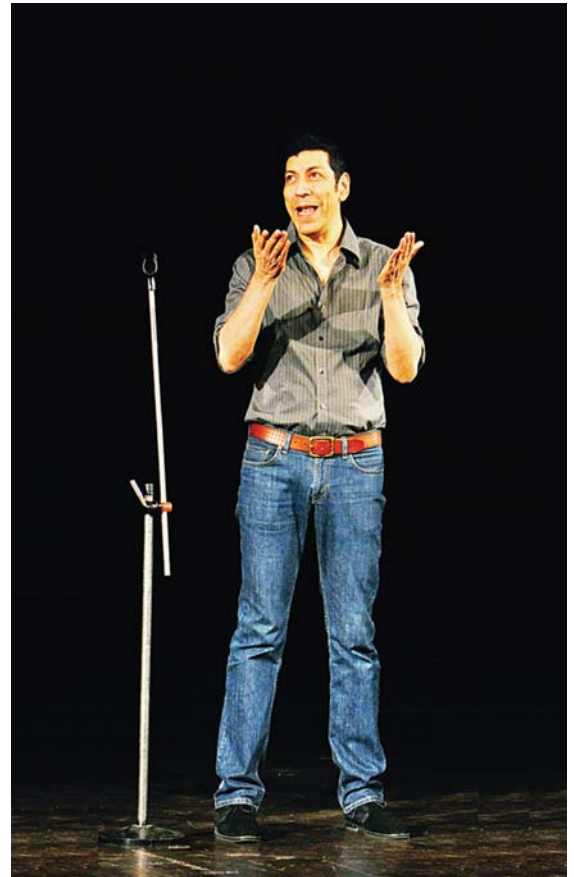
through!" Winners of Kapoor's *Comedy Challenge*, determined by audience applause, also received minor cash prizes as an incentive to keep returning. Delhi now has a variety of amateur comedy nights, including *Loony Goons* by Neeti Palta and *The Grandmasters of Comedy*.

Another interesting experiment in stand-up comedy is by Vipul Goyal. A graduate from IIT-Bombay, Goyal was part of a three-way combine called Engineers Entertainment. However, two years later, Goyal decided to branch out on his own. He now does shows across college campuses aided solely by one medium – Facebook. Goyal follows a business model different from any other. He uploads every video of his performance on Facebook for his fans to share across websites. His videos have gotten over one lakh hits on YouTube, a massive milestone because of which he now gets invited to perform at a variety of corporate and cultural events. According to Goyal,

Facebook allowed him to reach clients he would otherwise never have had access to. Unlike other comics, who prevent their material from being uploaded on the Internet, he does it on purpose to get shows. On being asked if this hampers his long-term prospects with people already knowing all his jokes, Goyal responds that it keeps him on his toes by forcing him to come up with new content every few months.

All three comics agree that making a living off stand-up alone is not that easy. Kapoor continues his day job as a cartoonist while Joshi supplements his income from stand-up by writing a column for *Mid-Day*, amongst other writing projects, such as television scripts.

While the choice isn't conventional, most comedians say the idea grew on their parents. Says Joshi, "My family was somewhat hesitant at first given that there is no fixed monthly income. But over time they realized that this is an industry that will really grow in the future. The fact that my photograph was in the newspaper every third day also helped them believe I



was doing something right!”

The Comedy Store runs throughout the year but only schedules a comic on one weekend a month. Most other stand-up gigs happen between August to February, parallel to the festival season. Also, every comic's calendar fluctuates, as gigs depend on a person of interest or event management companies liking their comedy enough to invite them. The most interesting love-hate relationships comics seem to have, however, is with the term ‘corporate gig.’

Tanmay Bhat, another stand-up comic who started at Vir Das's *Hamateur Nights* and now regularly performs at The Comedy Store says, “The best paying gigs are corporate gigs – but they're also the worst in terms of audiences because people don't seem to like to laugh when their bosses are around. Also, with corporate audiences you can't talk about things like politics, religion or even sex,

because that might offend them. So there's always a battle between what you want to say and what you can say because without corporate gigs it is impossible to make a living doing stand-up. Once you're good enough and people notice you at The Comedy Store or other auditoriums you make anything from ₹50,000 - 2 lakhs a month depending on the number of shows you do.”

With Bombay Elektrik Project shutting down and Das's *Hamateur Nights* not as frequent, the open mic space has now been filled by a property called Schitzengiggles. A brainchild of comic Karan Talwar, who got inspired by Kapoor's *Comedy Challenge* on a trip to Delhi, its open mic nights see a slew of new comics trying their hand at stand-up every fortnight hoping to perfect new material, get good enough to perform at The Comedy Store or get noticed by corporate event managers. Talwar, who runs his own ship parts

trading business, has different motives for stand-up. He says, “For me, stand-up is a great way of expressing my creativity. Schitzengiggles does a lot of shows for charity and we provide a platform for new talent to emerge. It's amazing, the number of people who go up on stage and say they want to do this full time despite being absolutely horrible. But I guess it is that passion which keeps comics going. Doing it for the money at the outset, just because it is cool, would be wrong.”

The positive thing about the English stand-up comedy industry in India is that beyond regular patrons, every show has fresh audiences. At The Comedy Store, every weekend sees at least a 10 per cent expat audience and a majority of hands go up when the emcee asks if it is the first time people have come to see a comedy show. That said, there are people who have been tracking the scene since a long time. Most comics have their own fan following on social media such as Twitter and Facebook. Tushar Abhichandani has been watching stand-up comedy in Mumbai for the past three years. He says, “Watching stand-up comedy is exciting because you are literally seeing a part of Indian cultural history unfold in front of your eyes. I remember watching comedians like Rohan Joshi three years ago at open mic nights. From hesitant, nervous comedians, they're now some of the biggest names in English stand-up comedy. I almost feel I have a personal stake in their growth.”

With Comedy Central, a major American television channel, setting up shop under the Viacom umbrella, comedians are even more excited at the prospect of Indian comedy being showcased to a wider audience. While there remain apprehensions about the mainstream dumbing down of comedic voices, as has happened in the case of Bollywood, most comics remain positive. Bhat ends by saying, “The best thing about doing this for a living is watching history unfold in front of you and knowing you're a part of it. I just hope ten years from now, journalists realize that reviewing a show for their newspaper doesn't mean publishing all our bloody punch lines.” ■



Will the funny Indian girl please stand up?

Neeti Palta is the only prominent female comic in Delhi's English stand-up circuit. An ex-advertising professional and a comedy veteran of three years, Neeti struggled hard through her first year and contemplated leaving the circuit after many unsuccessful gigs. However, her persistence paid off and today she runs one of Delhi's two major

English stand-up properties titled Loony Goons, which has shows every fortnight. On being asked how she felt about being one of the few female comics in India, she said, “I can understand why so many guys try and become comedians. Luckily for us, we don't need a sense of humor to get laid. And where else does one get paid for one's PMS?” – GK



The Victoria is dead! Long live the Victoria!

Mumbai's Victorias are known for their ability to adapt. They were once dignified taxis in a pre-motorised age, but their transition to brightly-coloured, gilded pop-culture vehicles for tourists was not as smooth for the horses that drew them. As the Bombay High Court weighs the fate of this historic carriage, we talk to the people involved.

Text Epti Pattnaik | Photos Pratik Bhakta

Rajiv Shirke fondly recollects the day when his wife Madhumati told him that he was going to be a father. “It was a lovely evening. We were taking a Victoria ride when Madhumati gave me the happiest news on earth,” says 35-year-old Shirke. He relives the memory once every month when he comes to Colaba and takes a joyride on the horse-drawn Victoria carriage with his family that now includes a six-year-old daughter. It saddens Shirke that there is now talk of the Victorias soon being banned altogether. The matter is currently in the Bombay High Court.

For someone visiting Mumbai for the first time, the Gateway of India is a big draw. This enormous gate that was once the docking point for all important travellers to Mumbai is of interest to both locals and tourists. Between the sea and the famous Taj Mahal Palace Hotel, these elaborately decorated horse-drawn carriages, called ‘Victorias,’ cannot fail to grab your attention.

These multi-coloured Victorias, replete with brightly painted neon signs, fluttering balloons and streamers, and other sundry decorations are modelled on more sober open carriages that were commonly used during the British Queen Victoria’s reign in the mid-19th century. These models were first brought to Bombay in

1882, after the Bombay Tramway Company Limited was formally set up in 1873, and were used as taxis. Gradually, they were phased out by motorised vehicles. Mumbai’s iconic black-and-yellow Premier Padminis came to dominate the streets. Today, the Victorias in front of the Gateway of India are used by tourists for joyrides, though in popular memory they remain symbolic of another era.

Currently, there are around 170 horses in Mumbai drawing Victorias, with about 100 owners and 107 drivers. The drivers of these carriages claim to face a number of hurdles every day, from negotiating with the traffic police to keeping under the radar of animal-rights activists. While these horse-carriages, dressed up in feathers and fake flowers, add a mesmerising glow to the busy streets of Colaba Causeway, they also make the streets more congested and crowded. In order to avoid this congestion, they are always in motion and stop strategically only to get customers. Imam, who has been driving Victorias for the last decade says, “Every day, we come here at around 3pm and give rides until midnight.” He adds, “Even though I have been in this profession for the past 12 years, things haven’t gotten any better for us. We are still harassed by the

traffic police and are asked to move if a VIP comes to the Taj Mahal Hotel, or simply in the name of traffic congestion.”

Today, it seems the days of the Victoria are seriously numbered. Animal rights activists, who have long demanded a total ban on these open-air horse carriages in Mumbai on the grounds that they are cruel to horses, have filed a petition in the Bombay High Court seeking to ban them.

In its case, the Animals and Birds Charitable Trust (ABCT) and the Animal Welfare Board claim that animal welfare laws are being deliberately broken and demand that owners of illegal stables be prosecuted. Overwork, malnutrition, and lack of proper care are common woes plaguing the horses, claim the petitioners. There are other reasons also mentioned in the petition, namely that Victorias are getting bigger and accommodating more people. Current rules say that only three people should be allowed per carriage, but more than four adults per carriage are often seen enjoying these joyrides. This kind of overload puts a lot pressure on the horse, sometimes leading to their sudden collapse. On 2 July, 2012, a Victoria carriage horse was killed in an accident near the Brihanmumbai Municipal Corporation (BMC) headquarters while racing through traffic. The horse died on the spot and the rider suffered head injuries.

Inadequate food and water is supplied to the horses and since these animals are almost always on the move, they are seldom provided with water or given protection from the sun or rain. In its report submitted to the High Court, ABCT states that of the 371 horses examined by the BMC, 196 needed treatment.

ABCT, which conducts feeding programmes for horses and ponies in South Mumbai, said it became aware of the plight of horses used for pulling carriages through one such programme. Trust officials say the laws protecting these animals

STOP PRESS!

As per the Bombay High Court’s judgment in the ABCT case, all owners, drivers and horses are now required to obtain mandatory licences by early 2013, after two previous extensions. Horses will be issued licences on the condition that they are in good health and have accommodation in a legal stable. The HC has given the nod to the BMC to confiscate unfit and unlicensed horses and they will be handed over to NGOs like PETA for rehabilitation. – **Ed.**

were knowingly disregarded and violated. As per BMC records, there are ten horse stables in the city, of which nine are illegal. Only the amateur stable of the Royal Western India Turf Club is legal. Besides ABCT, representatives of People for the Ethical Treatment of Animals (PETA) have also started a campaign called ‘Put a stop to cruel horse-drawn carriage rides in Mumbai’. High-profile Bollywood stars John Abraham, Jacqueline Fernandez and Hema Malini, who played the iconic Basanti Tangewali in the film, *Sholay*, have all joined the PETA campaign.

Victoria drivers, however claim that their horses are well cared for and tell the story from a different perspective. Karan Kumar, who has been driving Victorias for the past six years, says, “Kumari [his horse] and me share a bond which is very close to my heart. There are certain relationships which have no name, and indeed ours is one of them.” He says that on an average they spend ₹500-600 on a horse every day. It involves the cost of fodder as well as stable charges. There are others like Imam who do not own horses but get them on rent and pay around ₹10,000 per week for

them. Says Iman, “I earn around ₹2,000-3,000 per day, out of which ₹600 goes on taking care of the horses every day and then I keep ₹1,000 out for the rent, which I have to pay by the end of the week. So, the average profit I make every day varies from ₹1,000-1,500.”

Saturday and Sunday evenings are ‘business days’ as they end up making more profit on these days, compared to other week days. A single ride on these horse-driven-carriages will cost you around ₹400 and will take you around Colaba Market. Drivers like Kumar have inherited the profession. His great-grandfather was a carriage driver and his family took up the profession. There is no alternate business they can fall back upon, he says, since apart from this, since they know no other means of income.

It is hoped that the horses will be treated more humanely and that those who depend on them for survival will continue to be supported. As one of the last vehicles that depend on the mutual cooperation of man and animal in Mumbai, perhaps the Victoria might continue to reign. ■



MUMBAI'S SHAME

Let's Make Victorias History.
BAN HORSE CARRIAGES.

PETA

MUMBAI HORSES

People for the Ethical Treatment of Animals

Hawking books, circulating ideas

From Charles Baudelaire to Chetan Bhagat, all types of books are on sale on Mumbai's footpaths. But in a city where their existence is now at risk, pavement booksellers struggle to hold on to a space where everyone has access to the tactile pleasures of reading.

Text Nitya Menon | Photos Pratik Bhakta

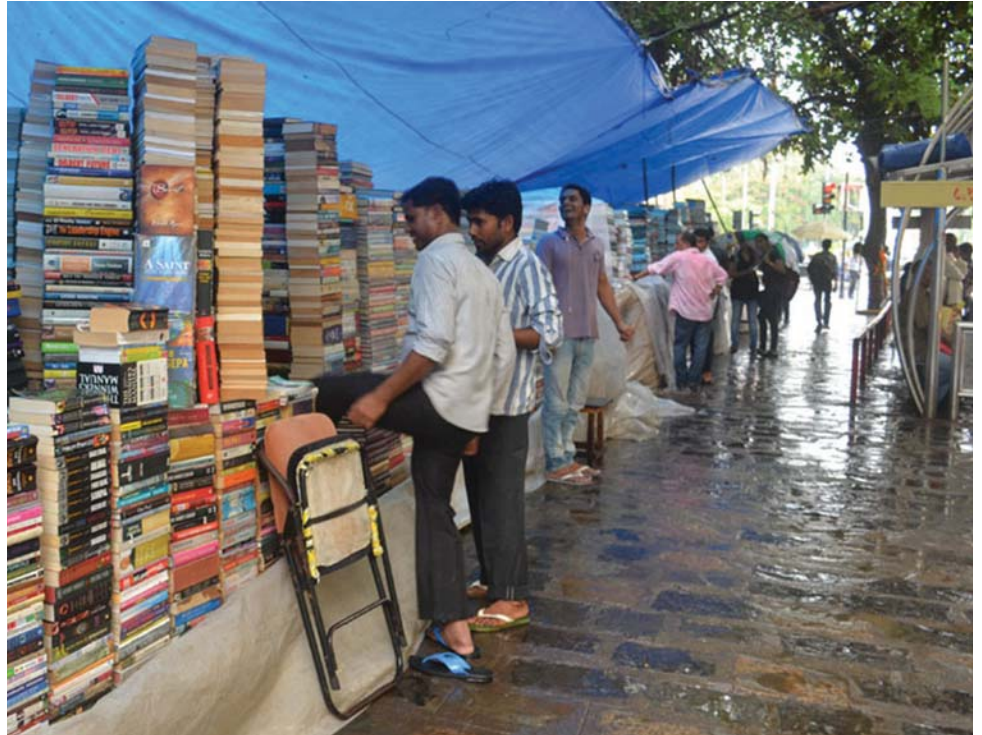
Every day just before noon, Awadesh Kumar begins the elaborate ritual of setting up his business. Almost like an architect surveying the plot that will hold his masterpiece, 29-year-old Kumar takes command of a small stretch of pavement near Flora Fountain which will hold his book store.

He lifts, shifts, stacks and piles books in rows and mazes complete with narrow winding paths and secret passages in between. But there is method in the assembled madness. On the top, one finds health books and under them are the classics. Next to them lounge the business management books, adjacent to which are all the GRE, GMAT and SAT books.

Then comes fiction, which is sub-divided into genres including science fiction, mystery, romance and philosophy. Some fiction titles are catalogued by author. Kumar points out Sidney Sheldon, John Grisham, Leon Uris and VS Naipaul who, by virtue of being popular amongst buyers, have earned the privilege of being in a pile of their own.

"I can't read well since I did not complete my schooling but I can manage by reading the back-of-the-book blurb and getting an idea of the book," says Kumar, who has virtually grown up on this Fort pavement selling books. "It helps to know what a book is about. It's useful in arranging books and in wooing customers." Agrees KV Vasant, a class 10 dropout from Karnataka, who has claimed a spot on the Fountain books pavement since 1994. "I don't know how to read and write in English," says Vasant. "But ask me about any book and I will bring it out for you in a jiffy, I promise."

It is promises such as these that keep many of us walking down the pavements of the iconic Flora Fountain or through the tree-lined streets of Matunga. One is overwhelmed by the thrill of possibilities the pavement book markets offer. Rare literary finds, incredible bargain deals and most of all the triumph of winning bragging rights amongst one's circle of bibliophiles! From Friedrich Schiller and Naipaul to Advaita Kala and stirring self-help guides, the pavement book market and its ingenious sellers promise to never disappoint.



Not far from Kumar and Vasant's pavement corner sits 32-year-old Nilesh Trivedi under the shade of a blue tarpaulin sheet near Fountain circle. He helms the pavement bookstore that has been in his family since 1970. His bustling Global Books houses fiction and non-fiction of different genres. "We have everything. All kinds of books, romance, mystery, science fiction, thrillers. Something for everybody," claims Trivedi. With a diverse range of books, his clientele includes an eclectic mix of students, IIT and IIM aspirants, book lovers and intrigued tourists who come to witness the spectacle of pavement book selling. In Trivedi's words, "People come from Dubai, Malaysia and America. Even Indians who go abroad come back to us for books."

Apart from second-hand books, in which he primarily deals, he also has a good collection of the latest arrivals – bestsellers, 'chick' lit and lighter reads. Strategically placed at the front of the stall, their glossy jackets and kitschy cover art scream for attention. Neatly wrapped in a protective layer of transparent plastic they stand out against the browning blur of second-hand books. Replenishing his stock every month, Trivedi reveals that he sources his books from raddiwallahs, dying libraries as well as magnanimous patrons throughout the city.

Surprisingly, spotting pirated copies of new books can prove to be a challenge. As one hesitantly raises the issue of piracy and copyright with Trivedi, he offers a rather complex response. "I

don't know about copyright, but we are not doing anything illegal here. We only sell these books at slashed rates, making it more affordable to the lay man," he quips. With both parties – customers and booksellers – being intrinsically invested in the smart economic possibilities the space has to offer, issues of ownership and copyright seem to take a backseat.

In Matunga, Unkan Yadgiri, a bookseller holding fort for the past decade, boasts of a 'modern lending library' facility. There is a more conventional lending facility available in most pavement book markets where on making a down payment, one can borrow a book for three weeks to a month, receiving 50 per cent of the cash back on returning it. However, Yadgiri, in an attempt to beat competition also offers phone booking and free home delivery services through the week. This caters to the needs of housewives, young kids and especially the elderly he says.

The art of approaching customers is something Awadesh Kumar throws light on with acute insight. He says there isn't a specific strategy or formula to follow since different people have different tastes but the trick is to see what kinds of books buyers gravitate towards. According to Kumar, if a reader stops at a Pamuk or an Austen, you know they like 'literature type' books so then one has to kick in with suggestions of other books by the same author, or books of other authors in the same league or genre. He also adds that those who come in search of a specific book are tricky because it is very easy for them to move on to other stalls owners. Commenting on the change he has noticed over the last ten years, he says, "These days youngsters don't have time so they generally buy light reads like Chetan Bhagat or Rashmi Bansal. Older people have more time so they get all sorts of books,"

says Kumar.

However, the pleasure of buying books off the pavements of Mumbai threatens to become a fading memory. Starting with the Supreme Court directives in 1985, and the recent implementation of 'No Hawking Zones' by the Brihanmumbai Municipal Corporation (BMC), pavement booksellers have lived through a chequered history of eviction and displacement. Commenting on the change the streets have undergone, Vasant says, "There used

"After the raids we wanted to feel secure, so if any of us get into trouble we all come together to help"

to be so many more stalls in this region, almost three times what you see now. They all had to move out because of the BMC."

A hierarchy of licenses and permits determine the BMC's disposition to the ordinary pavement book seller. Umesh Pandit Kumar of Durai Book House, a second-hand pavement book stall in Matunga, says, "They don't trouble people with licences. It is only those without

papers, like vegetable vendors and food pushcart vendors and booksellers that they harangue." Corroborating these sentiments, Ramesh Choudhry, a stall owner in Matunga blessed with a license, says it is only the food stall vendors and small eateries that face brunt of the BMC. "The BMC officials don't trouble us as much. I think they also understand if not for us, the common man wouldn't be able to access books. Their children themselves need us."

In the summer of 2003, following the eviction of as many as 50 of the 75 pavement booksellers of Flora Fountain, there was much public outcry. Faced with aggressive press coverage, the BMC was compelled to roll back and relax punitive measures. Despite that, the number of sellers on the pavements of Flora Fountain have now shrunk to a mere fifteen. However, unlike a decade ago, there has been a certain level of collective mobilisation amongst some groups of pavement booksellers. The Bombay Noble Welfare Group Association headed by Tiwari of Global Books meets once a month. "After all the raids and evictions we wanted to feel secure, so that if any of us get into trouble we all come together to



help,” says Tiwari. Also associated with the Bombay Hawkers Union, this is one of the few active street bookseller associations in the city. Interestingly, in Matunga no such attempt has been made amongst the sellers themselves. Umesh Kumar says, “People come, do their business and go. Nobody wants to get involved in something they don’t have to.”

The BMC is not the only threat. Increasingly, the growing online book market spells doom for small scale second-hand pavement book sellers. With multinational companies like Flipkart, Amazon and eBay providing exceptional discount offers, range of books and free home delivery at a click of a button, footfalls at pavement book shops have certainly fallen. Choudhry mournfully

confesses that his meagre profit margins have dropped three-fold. He says, “People are getting better deals in the comfort of their homes. Why will they come here?” Vasant testifies to the daunting task of making ends meet. “We used to earn around ₹10,000 on a good day but these days we are left with less than half in our pockets.” Ramesh Shah selling books on a pavement of Matunga declares, “I’m planning to quit. I simply can’t survive with the earnings I get.”

Awadesh Kumar, on the other hand, articulates a sentiment less bleak. Even as he acknowledges that earnings have fallen, he says what makes him stay on in the book trade is the books themselves. “When I fell severely ill a couple of years ago, I felt very helpless. I had no one in the city. The

municipal hospital doctors gave me some medicines but I was scared of taking them as one reads so many horror stories in the newspaper about medical fraud. It was then that I started reading those health books I sell,” recounts Kumar. “I learnt about my condition and how to treat it. At least then when I went to doctors I knew I wouldn’t be cheated.”

Serving as a great leveller, pavement book shops democratise access to literature and make the city more vibrant and intellectual. Once seen as adding richness, texture and cerebral worth to the city, pavement booksellers now no longer find space in modernity. If the pavement book market is compelled to fossilize into a nostalgic memory, then that would indeed be a sad day for the city. ■

‘They serve a city of acute book hunger’

Jerry Pinto on pavement booksellers

What role do pavement book markets selling second-hand books play in modern metropolitan cities like Mumbai?

Ideas must circulate or our minds atrophy. And one way in which ideas can circulate is through second-hand book shops. Real estate being hideously expensive in Mumbai, no one is ever going to be able to run a second-hand book shop for long and the last one of significance closed down last year. In this context, the street booksellers of the city become much more important. They serve a city of acute book hunger.

Personally, I owe much of my collection to the booksellers. I have always found them deeply knowledgeable. I remember when a friend was trying to get rid of his entire Camus collection at a pavement bookseller in Fort and was arguing for a better price because it was complete, the possible buyer sighed and asked, “But where is the *Myth of Sisyphus*?”

In all your years as a buyer, what do you think has changed in the pavement book market scene?

The major change that I have seen is not so much in the places or the people but in the interactions. Now that most of the book circulating libraries have closed down, the pavement sellers function as circulating libraries. You borrow a book and you pay a down payment and 20 per cent is knocked off when you return it within a week, etc. It’s a brilliant system and must have been created on the fly.

Considering issues of copyright and legality, where would you place pavement booksellers? How would you react to finding one of your books, say *Em and the Big Hoom*, in these markets?

I haven’t found *Em* yet but I have found a couple of copies of *Helen and Leela* and I have bought them and resold them to people who want them. I love the idea that Jerry Pinto books turn up there now. I also love the idea that so few of them turn up. It means that most people who buy my

books hang on to them. The worst moment was finding that a copy of my book of poems, *Asylum*, signed to a friend, turned up on the streets.

Would you say that pavement book markets offers possibilities of subversion and agency which one may not find in other retail spaces? Why or why not?

I believe that the circulation of ideas seems to have been democratised by the internet but most internet users are grazers. They look for specific answers to specific questions: when was Freud born; they are not there to ask: what was Freud’s contribution to the destabilisation of man’s centrality in the universe? That kind of reader needs books. Where does s/he find them within her budget? On the streets, that’s where. – NM

Jerry Pinto is a Mumbai-based poet and writer, and the author of Em and the Big Hoom.

A long way from home

Though Mumbai has fewer North-Eastern immigrants than Kolkata and New Delhi, many are now increasingly visible in the local spa, beauty, hospitality and BPO industry. As more of them make this city their home, they are also learning to deal with locals who think they are not 'desi' enough.

Text Juanita Mukhia | Photos A Lohrii Francis, Krishna Panchal

Luwang Leima is among the few hairstylists from the North-East who runs her own salon and spa establishment in Mumbai. Located in Chembur market, Leima Salon and Spa is a clean and attractive establishment that caters to a diverse clientele with a range of hair and beauty services. "Following in the footsteps of my elder sister, I came to Mumbai in 1998 straight after completing high school. I came here with just four rupees in my pocket," says Leima, who hails from Hojai, a village in Assam.

She came to Mumbai without any skills in hairdressing or beauty care, but after years of learning by doing and gathering knowledge on the beauty industry, she established her own business. Sitting in the cool and clean space of her salon, Leima seems very much in control of her business and what strikes you most is her personality and confidence

Her story reflects the lives and experiences of many people from the North-East who have made Mumbai their home and are engaged in a cross section of occupations across the city. In the past, young people from the North-East ventured into metropolitan cities primarily for higher education and to work in selective occupations like the retail, hair and beauty industries, or in Chinese restaurants. However, since the early 2000s, they are increasingly working in sectors like the BPO industry, aviation industry, in advertising, and in the food, beverage and hospitality industries. Of late, the spa and relaxation industry is also attracting a sizeable number of workers and it has become an area of work where North-Easterners are gaining acceptance and recognition for their expertise.

Laikhuram Hitler Singh is a manager in Renovar: The Family Spa in Chembur Naka and belongs to the Meitei community from Manipur, in the district of Imphal East. Since he migrated to Mumbai in 2007, he has trained as a spa therapist and manager with Core Wellness Academy. After his training, he was initially placed in the Sun and Sand chain of hotels as a spa therapist and trainee manager in Goa and Pune. He worked for a few years in the hotel and spa industry and has now shifted to the day spa industry.

Laikhuram is at ease within the space of Renovar Spa. Speaking about his foray into this sector, Laikhuram says that prior to his relocation to Mumbai, he knew absolutely nothing about the spa industry. Prior to 2007, he had tried his hand at various jobs in Manipur as a contractor, manager of a university canteen and even trained with the Indian Navy in Orissa for a short while.

Laikhuram says frankly that he joined this industry due to

majburi, as his attempts at earning a livelihood in Manipur had become difficult due to the prevailing socio-political tensions. On his relocation to Mumbai, he was referred for spa-therapist training by a friend. He says, "At first I was frustrated and did not understand the concept of massage and spa therapy, but in the

course of six months, we were trained to understand the human body through a study of anatomy and how massage therapy could be applied for relaxation and stress-busting."

He admits that working in the spa industry as a North-Easterner has brought monetary benefits and taught him to develop a thicker skin towards attitudes he encounters while on the job. Laikhuram's experience strikes a chord with other people from the North-East who live and work in Mumbai.

What differentiates the 'North-Eastern experience' from any other are the reactions they encounter in public spaces, their workplace, and even the localities they reside in. There is a general inquisitiveness on the nationality of North-Easterners based on their physical attributes

"Following in the footsteps of my elder sister, I came to Mumbai after completing high school with just four rupees in my pocket"



and ethnicity. Chakho Adaphro Jancy is from the Mao Naga tribe and has been working as a senior hair stylist at Eye Catchers Salon at High Street Phoenix. “Every now and then, a new customer will ask me if I am Chinese or Filipino. When I explain that I’m from Manipur, they ask me about the lives and ways of my community and also about North-Eastern people in general,” she says.

Joel Makuimai is from the Zeliangrong Naga tribe and has been working in the position of a senior captain in the Aromas of China restaurant in Andheri for the last four years. Recounting his day, he says, “Just today, I was serving in the private dining room and a customer asked me if I was a Filipino. Since I am working in a Chinese restaurant and look different, people think that I am not an Indian.”

Sushil Kumar, who hails from the town of Kalimpong in Darjeeling district (traditionally not considered a part of what is referred to as the ‘North-East’) works as a bartender in Aromas of China, Sushil is often asked if he is from Nepal. He says, “This disappoints me, as I am perceived as an immigrant and outsider, even though I am an Indian citizen.” Though the North-Eastern community is diverse with separate ethnicities, these differences seem to become invisible within the space of a city like Mumbai. Reactions can be humorous, quirky and sometimes even

insulting. It also places North-Eastern workers in a different category in terms of customer expectations and skills.

Talking about her experiences, Leima says that many young people from the North-East come to metropolitan cities like Mumbai to gain exposure and training in various occupations. Jancy agrees. “When a new customer walks into the salon, they usually choose a North-

“Every now and then, a new customer will ask me if I am Chinese or Filipino and I have to explain I’m from Manipur”

Eastern person to cut their hair.” Further substantiating her statement, she adds, “People from the North-East are quite creative and tend to carry different types of hairstyle very well. Also, we have a good command over English and the customer feels that our professional skills are of a higher standard.”

Laikhuram points out the implications of this. While North-Eastern spa therapists are sought after in hotels and resorts which have an upper-class clientele due to their English-speaking skills and professional

conduct, in the day-spa industry where the clientele consists of the local populace from the surrounding suburbs, local therapists are preferred as they can converse with clients in local languages.

Apart from perceptions based on physical attributes, Leima, Laikhuram, Jancy and Joel emphasise the importance of developing professional skills within their industry to achieve success and recognition. Each of them began their professional journeys at small establishments and worked their way up. In 2005, Joel started as a waiter in the Chinese restaurant Noodle Bar at High Street Phoenix, and a year later joined China Gate, a Chinese restaurant in Bandra, as a captain, before moving on to becoming a senior captain at Aromas of China in Andheri four years ago. “Years of training in a restaurant has given me a lot of knowledge about customer service and given the right opportunity, I will be able to shift into other occupations within the hospitality industry,” he says.

This professionalism has sometimes translated into monetary gains. Both Laikhuram and Leima reiterate that in the spa and hairdressing industries, a trained stylist or therapist from the North-East receives comparatively higher wages than their local counterparts. Within the day-spa industry, Laikhuram notes that this factor can also induce employers to perhaps think a bit more before employing a North-Eastern therapist.

When Leima began her career, she was not allowed to style the customers hair and was responsible only for cleaning and assisting, but that was when she learnt the importance of public relations. With the people skills she assimilated in various places, Leima states that she was able open her own salon in 2005.

Leima’s parting comment was, “I just have one request. Please focus on the strength and courage that people, especially the women, from the North East have. We come here, work sincerely and face all kinds of negative and positive attitudes. Yet, we survive and become successful in a city like Mumbai.” ■



The barterwallahs of Bambai

Unbelievable as it may sound today, in a part of Mumbai, a community still depends on barter to make a living, exchanging garlic for junk.

Text Pratik Bhakta | Photos Pratik Bhakta

Imagine giving away a bent saucepan for 250g of garlic pods. Or trading in your mouldy carpet for a kilo of fresh garlic. That is exactly what a group of people from Sathenagar in Mumbai's M-East Ward do for a living – barter garlic for junk.

In a time dominated by cash, the existence of a barter economy – that too of one item, garlic – might seem strange to most people. But this has been the livelihood of at least a hundred people in Sathenagar for the past 20 years. “Junk goods give us more profit rather than direct cash in return for *lasun*,” explains Ram Bhau Thorat, a veteran in the garlic trade. According to him, people who have no means of disposing off goods like old plastic items, used bottles, broken goods, damaged kitchen utensils and a host of other waste materials are eager to sell them off to the *lasunwallahs* in return for pods of garlic. In turn, the poor folk of Sathenagar make their own profit by selling the junk to the neighbourhood raddiwallahs.

An average day in the life of *lasunwallahs* starts as early as 4am. They make a beeline for the highway bus stop where they get trucks, matadors or pick-up cars to provide them a lift to a common place from where they disperse to their respective areas of business which can be as far off as Uran. They have been doing it for so long now that regular truck drivers know them well and regularly pick them up and drop them at designated places. Then they spend the whole day going around a particular area selling *lasun* in lieu of junk goods. At the end of the day they gather at some pick-up point and come back the same way. The whole business is riddled with uncertainties. Some days no transportation may be available back home or they might get too late to catch the last vehicle. In that case, people then stay back in the areas where they conducted business till the next day.

When asked how he manages to carry the heavy junk goods and bring them back, the enthusiastic Dilip, who is just 20 years



“If the customer is clever, I give them a bigger amount, otherwise I give smaller quantities”

old and perhaps one of the youngest of the *lasunwallahs*, shows off the huge sack which he keeps folded underneath his bed. “I can carry at least 50kg of goods in this sack,” he explains proudly. A good day of business means a sale of 10-15kg of garlic in return for junk which can fetch him at least ₹200-250 at the local raddiwallah.

The exchange rate between garlic and junk is dependent on negotiations. “If the customer is clever, I give them a bigger amount, otherwise I give smaller quantities. But people do not mind much because at least this way their junk goods are disposed of,” says Dilip.

Business also remains very volatile. While on some days they get many customers, on others they suffer huge losses. If business is good, then walking down the roads and climbing up stairs is worth it. Otherwise it takes a big toll on the health of the *lasunwallahs*. Case in point Janabai, who quit the business at the age of 30. “It is a big loss,” she complains, “toiling so hard and at the end if the prices of plastic and other junk goods fall then the profit margin is further narrowed. During summer, it becomes difficult to carry heavy junk goods over long distances.” In 2009 she developed a heart ailment and has since been working as a domestic help in Vashi.

Summer is not the only season when the going gets tough. Monsoons are another factor. During the floods of July 2005, all of

Sathenagar was inundated. Houses were in knee-deep water. Razia Bibi, Janabai's neighbour, describes how she had seen many people reduced to penury due to the floods. All the *lasun* that they had stored for sale got swept away or turned rotten in the moisture. They suffered huge losses that year. "Few business men survived the big blow somehow, others could not strike back, they sold off their houses and migrated elsewhere," she laments.

According to Dilip, winter would be the ideal season to go about selling garlic all day but since the production of garlic generally falls during this time and the prices rise, they are unable to buy huge amounts of it and cannot do good business.

But how did the business of selling garlic for junk start? According to Santoshbhai Thorat, a well-known leader and rights activist in the area, "It was started by the Matang community many years ago. They usually worked in the Deonar dumpyard. While sieving through waste they came across fairly valuable junk goods that people had simply thrown away." Thus the community realised the potential for a business in junk goods. *Lasun*, which was easily available in the nearby mandis (wholesale markets) and is a regular item in Indian kitchens could then be sold for junk and a good profit could be earned. They started to source *lasun* in bulk from Vashi market and other nearby mandis. Initially, only a few people did this work but as Navi Mumbai developed, the demand for garlic started growing and more people entered the business.

However, it remains an enterprise of earning for a day and feeding for a day with savings being limited. On being asked how the government could aid the business, *lasunwala* Vishnu Sathe says he would like easy access to small bank loans so that investments to buy *lasun* in large quantities do not remain a problem. He has been doing business in Kharghar for almost 25 years now. "People there have got so used to me that they call me *mama*. I feel more at home there rather than in Sathenagar," he smiles.

Pradip Zohra too has been selling garlic in Khopoli for 15 years now. Often, when he gets late and misses his transportation, he is offered food and shelter by the locals. Over the years he has become well acquainted with his customers and they

"It was started by the
Matang community.
While sieving through
waste, they came across
valuable junk"

take garlic only from him. He has tried his hand at other jobs, but none have been satisfactory. "Working as daily labourer is not a great option. One has to stand at the *naka* and hope to get engaged by a contractor who will boss you around all day. At least in this business, though the income is not much, I am independent and not answerable to anyone," says Zohra.

However an interaction with the younger people in the business reveals how difficult it is to start in the business and take command of a certain locality. "I started this business after my father, who used to sell *lasun* similarly, passed away. Still it took at least six months to get acquainted with the locality in Kalamboli where I go," says Dilip. "However, there is

no strict rule regarding who can do this business. If one has the funds to buy *lasun* then he is usually helped by some friend or relative who is also in this business to learn few tricks."

Most youngsters are not very eager to join this business as it can be quite uncertain and has small profit margins. But those like Pradipbhai Sathe who have stayed in it for years are grateful. "When there is so much uncertainty in other labouring jobs, at least here through the sale of garlic, I manage to send my daughter to school and earn something regularly to feed my family."

While the future of this profession remains uncertain, it perhaps symbolises the ingenuity and enterprise that make Mumbai the city that it is. Locals carving their own destiny through a parallel barter economy based on a spice best known for bad breath and warding off evil spirits. Hollywood film script, anyone? ■





Citizen Hijra

Photo feature Krishna Panchal

As people on the margins of society, both ridiculed and held in fear for their amorphous sexuality, Hijras find it tougher than most to find regular work and make a living. Traditionally, they dance-sing at weddings and in households where a child has been born – their presence often considered an auspicious marker. Increasingly we also find them at traffic junctions begging. It is time Hijras are recognised as members of mainstream society, just as in the census, and have more livelihoods options open to them.





On the line

Attending to calls, soothing frantic customers and often working the all-night shift – call centres provide more than just a source of income to their employees. They exemplify the hopes and dreams of thousands of young people.

Text Likokba | Photos A Lohrii Francis

Well-furnished air-conditioned cubicles, cool lunch rooms and LCD televisions hanging on the wall seem more comfortable than the stereotypical four-wall office. Here work seems to be synonymous with fun and at the end of the day, you get paid decently. People from all walks of life, regardless of their status, regions or background sit under one roof, catering to the needs of customers and clients from all over the world. India has become a haven for Business Process Outsourcings (BPOs) and an increasing number of people are attracted towards working in call centres. One need not to be a graduate from a top-notch university. Just a knowledge of English suffices.

These young, energetic and capable people work round the clock over their phones and computers, helping customers from across the world and enhancing the efficiency and profits of multinational corporations, while also earning their livelihoods. Today, thousands of people, especially those belonging to a younger generation, opt for this profession either permanently or on a temporary basis.

For some, call centres are the only source of income with which to support their family. “It is with this average amount of money that I get [which] helps pay my younger brother’s school fees and

also covers the family’s household budget,” says Alem Watiba, who heads a team in the live operators section in a BPO.

However, beneath the beautiful surface of these offices, there lies a hard, rough and complex work mechanism that makes every day challenging and reminds them of the price of survival. With an average of 9 - 12 hours per day, working six days a week can be a hard task. To be engrossed with computers and telephones, working hard to meet the needs of the company, customers and bosses, and then to find time to relax can be something one is not ready to face. Excessive and heavy working hours have gained this occupation a reputation of being a 21st-century sweatshop.

With globalisation, India has become a convenient haven for multinational corporations and business industries to establish BPOs at a much cheaper rate of employment and overheads. At present, the industry has skyrocketed. India is the leading country for off-shore outsourcing, right next to the Philippines. According to research by Tholons, an offshore advisory firm, the total outsourcing revenue of India stood at US \$59 billion in 2011, which is 51 per cent of the revenue of the global BPO industry. IT and BPO industries first started in India in the mid-1980s, with the availability of a large, English-speaking, low-cost workforce as the

main attraction. The industry grew rapidly through the 1990s and 2000s and today, the Indian BPO sector is said to employ nearly 1.98 million people directly and 7.5 million indirectly.

With the pressure of providing for the families, Watiba and Sao Chingmak, both from Nagaland, decided to find work immediately after their graduation in 2008. Working for nine hours daily with an endless barrage of calls, dealing with different kinds of customers and their never-ending complaints, and sometimes being on the receiving end of customer abuse has become a daily ritual for them. “We can’t help it. We must earn, no matter what,” says a determined Sao. Their monthly salaries contribute towards running their households which are otherwise financially dependent on their fathers’ meagre pension. For them, every day is a new challenge, which they have to counter with a smile and a pleasant voice.

Alem, being an introvert, never thought that he would land up with a job like this. However, the hard task was a blessing. “Dealing with different people every day,” says Alem, “helped me in dealing with my personal problems much more rationally.” He initially worked in the inbound calls section, where calls are restricted to customers registering their complaints and queries. Now he has been shifted to the outbound calls section,

where it is the company that phones customers. “Working in the outbound call centre is easier and more fun than receiving complaints from customers in!” he laughs.

Easily available jobs in call centres have encouraged many students to take up the opportunity to earn for a while and continue their studies later on. For some, it is to support their further studies and for others, to get extra pocket money. Ginsuanlian from Manipur, who is pursuing his Master’s from the Tata Institute of Social Sciences, worked in

“Dealing with different people every day helped me deal with my personal problems much more rationally”

a call centre for a year in New Delhi just after his graduation. Curiosity about the work and the lure of earning some pocket money drew him into the field. He will never forget his year-long experience at the call centre and does not deny the fun they had, especially during festivals. When asked what the most challenging task he faced during his work was, Lian promptly

shoots back, “Talking to the customers is the hardest thing. However, one should always remember that wherever and whatever we do for our survival, there will always be challenges ahead.”

For Preeti Jiri, who hails from Maharashtra, it is her desire to study further and complete her Master’s in Literature that led her to work in a call centre. Her duty, labelled non-voice process, addresses customers through emails and chats and not direct phone contact. She has to sit at a computer for four hours continuously, without even a bathroom break. Every day, she sits at a computer, reads, types and tries to solve what seems to be a never-ending flow of problems and complaints. It has been two years since her graduation and the urge to support her family and to save some money for her further studies. “At first, I thought of working part time and studying side by side, but the work load was so much so that I could not possibly continue my studies,” says Jiri. “Then I decided to earn for a while so I can save some and support my family.”

Jiri shifts between morning and night shifts every two weeks. The night shift is still considered dangerous for women, even with security guards present all the time. Jiri’s determination to complete her Master’s has not been affected by the nature of work in the call centre. As the eldest in her family of four, she supports her family financially by adding to the meagre income her father earns by working at the docks. One day, she hopes to find a job suitable to her qualifications. Although her parents were initially apprehensive about her returning home from office late at night, these fears have subsided with the passage of time. Jiri smiles. “I have been born and brought up in Mumbai and I don’t feel insecure about it.”

Today, thousands of people work in call centres in various fields. In today’s fast-changing world, everyone is on the lookout for a resource from which they can earn themselves enough to put by. People have always regarded Mumbai as the city of dreams. It seems that call centres are the new-age factories in which they realise them. ■

Spot Offer

Domestic
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Age/Qualf.: No Bar

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TELE CALLERS, DOCUMENT COLLECTION

ANY ONE LANGUAGE
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कोई भी इंटरव्यू दे सकता है।



Click maestros

Street photographers held a special place in our imagination because they could instantly provide photographs that captured special moments in public spaces. Now that almost everyone can click a photograph, often just on their cell phones, the street photographer has to deal with reduced glamour and the more serious problem of a shrinking income.

Text A Lohrii Francis | Photos A. Lohrii Francis

Any ordinary person can feel like a celebrity at Apollo Bunder. As you stroll towards the Gateway of India, the Bunder's chief attraction, you are suddenly surrounded by an army of photographers. Paparazzis! That is what you might think when you see this legion of chappal-clad men and teenagers armed with digital single lens reflex (DSLR) cameras running towards you. Whether or not you have a camera of your own, these Gateway photographers just want the chance to shoot your picture with the chief icons of Mumbai – the Gateway of India, the Arabian Sea or the Taj Mahal Palace Hotel – in the background.

What started off as a handful of amateur photographers almost 20 years ago has now become almost a battalion. Equipped with flashy, expensive cameras, knapsacks, and occasionally even Ray Ban sunglasses perched on their noses, one could mistake some of them for tourists, if it were not for the sample book of photographs they all carry with them. According to 54-year-old SP Pandey, a photographer as well as the union leader of the photographers at the Gateway, there are currently over 350 photographers at the Gateway of India. Another 500 photographers do business on the sands of Juhu Beach.

At one time, says Pandey, these photographers had an earning capacity of around ₹40,000 per month, a figure as much as a team leader in a call centre would earn today. Those photographers who started out early have seen the golden days of earning at the Gateway of India. According to 19-year-old Ajay Jaiswal, who has hardly attended any school and became a photographer in 2007, his approximate monthly income in those days was ₹45,000 to ₹60,000. He used to sell toys at the Gateway plaza, but inspired by older photographers he saw around him, he saved up for a small Nikon digital camera and joined the trade. “On a good day, with generous tourists I used to make ₹5000 a day,” he recalls. “But now there are too many photographers and you can’t take as many pictures as you want. There are bad days you go back home with ₹100,” he says, smiling.

Of the many photographers around the Gateway of India, there are only a handful who have formally studied photography and almost every photographer has tried their hand at some other profession before they took up the camera. Pandey, who has been clicking pictures for 18 years, worked in a dyeing mill for ten years and has an 18-year-old son who is a photographer in Bengaluru.

A DSLR camera and a portable Sony colour printer is all you need to survive, but to make a good living, you need to persuade tourists and visitors to buy your services, whether or not they have a camera with them.

Those who cannot afford cameras rent them from *seths*, who lend them out on commissions. Mohammed Rafiq, father of three, is one such photographer who works under a *seth*. Though he started in 1998, he still has not saved enough to purchase his own camera. However, many younger photographers come to him for tips on camera settings. He is one of the few who has worked over a decade and seen the many transitions of photography, from film rolls to Polaroid, and from Polaroid to the current digital technology.

Rafiq recalls the time when they used film rolls. It was a much longer process, as compared to today's instant print technology. They took pictures, noted the name and address of the customers next to the frame number of the film roll and once the film roll was completed, they printed the photographs and mailed them to their respective customers across the country. "Back then people trusted us and paid us in advance," he says.

Most of the photographers at the Gateway of India are independent photographers. However, the system at Juhu beach is not quite the same – here, photographers use small digital cameras and all work under *seths* who own colour printers and cameras and sit at stalls near the beach. There are around 20 to 25 *seths* at Juhu beach and each *seth* has 20-25 photographers under him. For every photograph printed, the *seth* takes a commission of ₹5.

There are no governing bodies to regulate the operations of photographers, nor do they have licenses, but new photographers are only allowed through referrals. "Our situation is better than the hawkers around here because we do not have to run away from the cops or municipal officers," says Pandey. According to him, in his 18 years of clicking pictures the only times their profession was disrupted were when terrorists attacked Mumbai and

when a Manipuri girl was killed in front of the Gateway of India. The whole place was barred from the public after the attacks and they were left out of work for two weeks.

There has recently been a spike in the number of photographers at the Gateway of India and Juhu Beach. Guddu Upaddya, 23, from Uttar Pradesh, whose younger brother is a photographer at the Gateway of India, left his former profession of

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I want"

embroidering to become a photographer a year ago. After five years as an embroiderer he now earns almost twice as much as before. "I am not in a rush to persuade people to pose. I don't overcharge them. I just love photography," he says, with a gutkha-stained smile.

Others are also happy with their new jobs. "I was a Thai-Chinese cook in a restaurant in Andheri for 14 years. Two years ago, I went home for a vacation and was jobless on my return. A friend of mine who is a photographer introduced me to the group and that is how I started," says Govind Saw, father of three, from Jharkhand. Not having to listen to anyone from a higher position is what he likes most about his new profession. "Now I can go home to see my family any time I want," he adds.

For some, it is a fresh start of career. Keshav Kumar and Subodh Kumar, both 20, came to

Mumbai in 2009 after their Class 12 and became photographers at Juhu Beach, where Keshav's father has worked as a photographer for 15 years. Most of the photographers at the Gateway of India and Taj Mahal Palace and Tower Hotel are from Uttar Pradesh, Bihar and Jharkhand.

Some photographers complain that their income has receded a great deal over the past two years. When there were fewer of them, they got to click an average of 120 to 150 photographs a day and brought home an average salary of ₹40,000 to ₹60,000 a month as opposed to ₹10,000 to ₹12,000 a month today. Affordable digital cameras and good cameras on cell phones have made tourists and visitors self-sufficient. Photograph rates have also gone down drastically from ₹60 per photograph to a mere ₹15.

While some are sceptical about the security of their profession, others feel there is still a long way to go. "You may have your own camera but the pictures I clicked will hold a special memory because I am a photographer from Gateway of India," says Mahadev Photographer, a veteran who would like to be identified with this surname. ■



The help

We need to do more than just appreciate those who sweep and swab our homes, wash and iron our clothes, cook our meals and care for our children, elderly and pets. We need to protect the rights of domestic workers and offer them a life of dignity and support.

Text Mrinal Singh | Photos Mridula Chari

Every day at 5am, summer, monsoon and winter, Geeta starts her working day. Thirty-two-year-old Geeta walks through Chembur washing dishes, cooking, buying groceries and sweeping and dusting in more houses than she can remember only to return home by 11pm every night. At the end of every month, she ends up with only ₹4,700 in hand. Her husband, a construction labourer, pools their incomes together to make sure that their daughter can go to the local municipal school and make a different life for herself. Sadly, Geeta's story is not an isolated one. Millions of women, men and children – India's large force of domestic workers, or servants, as most people call them – remain unseen, undervalued and denied fundamental human rights.

According to the 1991 census, out of a total workforce of 315 million, close to 91 million were women. A majority of these women are engaged in the unorganised sector – in agriculture, cotton and tea plucking, pottery, handloom, construction and domestic services. Female domestic work often belong to the lowest stratum of society and are often considered cheap labour. They have virtually no security of tenure, little bargaining power over wages, no regulation of working hours or entitlement to paid leave.

The Domestic

Workers (Regulation of Employment, Conditions of Work, Social Security and Welfare) Bill of 2008 was a ray of hope for many engaged in the unorganised sector. However, this bill, meant to protect

“I blindly trusted my employers and asked them to hold on to all my wages for safe-keeping. They kept it and accused me of being a thief”

the rights of workers, remains pending in Parliament while politicians perfect walkouts and make excel sheets of the latest scams.

Another law, the Domestic Workers Welfare and Social Security Act, 2010, meant to regulate employment-related issues such as conditions of work, wages, social security, provident funds, pensions and maternity leaves also remains pending. This act aimed to protect domestic workers from exploitation by ensuring employers provided particulars of those workers engaged directly or through recruitment agencies to a district board. Another major proposal of this bill was to set up tripartite boards that included representatives of domestic workers, their employers and the government. All workers, employers and placement agencies would then have to register with the board and contribute a designated amount of money annually, which would be used as a corpus fund to take care of the many social security needs of workers. Though the Ministry of Labour has adopted legislative measures for social





security and welfare of unorganised workers, implementation of this law varies from callous to non-existent.

Another complication governing rights of unorganized workers is the difference between national and state laws. For example, the law in Maharashtra addresses domestic workers between the ages of 18 and 60 eligible to register themselves at district welfare boards. But what about those under the age of 18? Many placement agencies are no more than a mobile phone number and are thus extremely difficult to track down. Even under the best of conditions, agents end up depriving migrant women of a substantial portion of their income, especially if they are young. Also, while the government has given workers the right to get registered, the process remains cumbersome. Once registered however, they are entitled to a number of benefits like pension

after the age of 60, concession loans for housing, group insurance, financial aid for dependants, children's education etc. This is critical given the tough working and living conditions of unorganised workers.

A majority of such workers live in slums deprived of basic civic amenities such as drainage, toilets, potable water, electricity, and recreation. There are often no local public medical facilities or hospitals and few decent schools or accessible fair price shops. A majority of domestic workers are also migrants, wives or children of domestic workers or out-of-work construction workers. Construction workers especially are forced to live near the work site where conditions remain brutal.

For most domestic workers, family life remains is an alien concept, secondary to making ends meet. "My job requires me to be away from my family for most of

the day. My father works at a tea stall and my mother passed away due to illness as we couldn't get her treated," says Neetha, a 17-year-old full-time domestic worker. Aarti, a 24-year-old part-time domestic help, says she sees her two-year-old son for barely six hours in a day. While she works from house-to-house, her mother-in-law does the household chores and takes care of her son.

Ill-treatment at the hands of employers is another issues bothering domestic workers. Beenu, a migrant worker from Chattisgarh, recalls, "I blindly trusted my employers and asked them to hold on to my wages for safe-keeping. Instead, they kept all my wages and even accused me of being a thief." These issues are hardly addressed. However, when one domestic worker is found to have committed a crime, all of them end up being branded as criminals. Few people pay attention to why this happens.

Salaries are also determined by the whims and largesse of employers, who remain oblivious to the needs and rights of domestic workers. Tara Agnihotra, a resident of Chembur, says she would prefer a registered employee as this would guarantee a background check and a better, more trusting relationship can then be built. Shubhashna Bhatnagar, a working woman herself, says, "I believe I have a good working relationship with my help, and I do believe that this sector needs to be more organised."

While most would shy away from using the word 'slavery', the truth remains that many domestic workers are treated little better.

Legislation is important, but in the long run things can change only if employers accept that domestic workers are first of all 'workers' and not 'servants', that their rights are as sacrosanct as anyone else's. That they should be paid a fair wage. That they deserve time off. That they too have families to care for. That they should not lose wages when they fall sick. That they are valued human beings without whom our lives would be more difficult. Attitudes such as these cannot be legislated. ■



Baywatch

Photos Ananda Siddhartha, Pratik Bhakta

Mumbai's beaches are a welcome respite in a city deprived of open public spaces, an experience characterised by a cacophony of sights and sounds. From henna designs to feathered party hats and flutes, the hawkers on the beach fulfill all whimsical needs. They ensure you get a taste of everything from peanuts and *bhutta* to salted raw mangoes and ice *golas*.

It is easy to forget that for the creators of this psychedelic fantasy, the beach is an everyday site of struggle for livelihood. Juhu beach and Girgaum Chowpatty have migrants from across the country peddling a variety of goods and services. Beautification drives that seek to sanitise the beaches are now endangering these ways of life.





Remembering 1992

SMCS students of the 2013 batch look back at the 1992-93 riots and return with fragments of stories that reveal as much as they hide in the film series *Remembering 1992*.

Text Mridula Chari | Photos Ananda Siddhartha

When the 1992-93 riots erupted in Bombay, few of my class were in the city and none of us had any conscious memories of it. As one of the four Mumbaikars in a class of 20 at the School of Media and Cultural Studies (SMCS), the riots played somewhat more on my imagination than on others'. In the years that followed, the accounts I heard were typical of households located physically far away from the sites of the riots: they spoke of a suitcase full of important documents left in our flat by a worried Muslim neighbour, of nameplates that were taken down, of a stray incident of a watchman of a neighbouring building being chased down a road and killed two buildings away.

As a child, I heard, but did not feel connected to those events. They happened in another city, in another time. My city had its own set of problems: bomb blasts every few years, interspersed with floods to balance those man-made attacks with natural ones. I could not imagine a time when the city's 'enemies' were so clearly from within. When it was suggested that our third semester films at SMCS be made about the 1992-1993 riots, I felt ill-prepared, my first reaction was that of uncertainty. I had moved well beyond my initial naïve opinions, but as a somewhat-native of Mumbai, I felt that I ought to know more than I did, that it was expected I should. In conversations over lunch and tea, I was asked about my family's memories of the time, but I was removed by time and social class from those who actually experienced the events.

We doubted then, and perhaps still do, our ability to deal

appropriately with 1992-1993, to draw out of the chaos surrounding that time some meaning that would be relevant to us now. As students making our first film, we were technically uncertain and without even the crutch of familiarity with our subjects. We wondered how we would say something that had not already been said hundreds of times before by journalists, academicians, filmmakers, artists, and the lay person who had lived through and remembered the riots. If all their work had changed nothing, how would ours?

We had help – seasoned hands trooped in, shared their experiences and suggested ways for us to go., and we attended meetings at which we interacted with people who would later become characters in our films. We sensed that for our films to be of any use, or even relevance, to anyone, we had to either say something nobody else had said before, or bring ourselves and our perplexity to the fore. From a broad event that we engaged with only as distant spectators, we set out to find narrative strands set in the present day that would focus on the memories of 1992, rather than its viscosity. Our films reflect this. We have deeply personal accounts in *Badalte Nakshe* and what ghettoisation has done to the Muslim community in *Ek Aakhri Panah*, a portrait of Mumbra. In *Framing '92*, we look at the riots through the lenses of two photographers and an artist, in *Flashpoint* at how the middle class perceived the riots and in *Aman Ki Khoj* at peace initiatives in Dharavi.



Quotes from the series

A person one of the groups met questioned our motives. “Why,” he asked, “do you keep stressing on 1992?” There was horrific violence in Mumbai before and after 1992. Were they not as important, as horrific? Were we just elevating that which was closest to us in public memory? Twenty years later, will student film-makers tread around 26/11, for example, with the same awed trepidation? We had no answers then; we have no answers now.

These films began as projects we had to complete to get through the semester. Some of us never expected this to translate into anything more than an exercise in film-making, and for some, this still holds true. I had hoped to find an answer to my childish question of how this had happened in Mumbai and why it was important we should remember it today. We asked those questions through our films, and we ended up with little fragments of stories, incoherent in a larger context, but no less important for reflecting to an extent, this city. ■



People might accept various different things from the outside world. However, when it comes to engaging with Muslims, my personal experience is that they become intolerant. We are made to feel different when we live in Mumbra. We are accepted in all aspects. That’s why we feel Mumbra is our home. – Faujiya Qureshi, Member of Awaaz-e-Niswan committee.
Ek Aakhri Panah

“Those people who have seen and felt the 92-93 riots...they will have this insecurity in their minds forever. They had to deal with their own neighbours having betrayed them.” – Ayub Khan, Mohalla Committee Member, Dharavi.

Aman Ki Khoj



I think it becomes very important and tricky and it needs to be stressed that such a thing did happen and the way to go ahead is not to try and put it under the carpet and behave as if so many years have already passed...but to keep reminding oneself that it can happen...” – Sudhir Patwardhan, Painter.

Framing ‘92

“Where does the idea of trust come from? It’s only when you talk to that group you don’t want to trust that you find they have fears and dreams and all, just like you. If you’re willing to give yourself the chance to listen to them, you find out. That is how we attack our own prejudices.” – Dilip D’Souza, Writer.

Flashpoint



“When in buildings they say that only Muslim can get a flat or that they can’t get a flat, only Hindus can stay there... It’s become like a ghetto, a kind of groupism... It’s like a country within a country.” – Farhana Ashraf, Writer and teacher.

Badalte Nakshe



Never too young to work

Beneath all its wealth, Mumbai hides an ugly truth. Child labourers abound in the city, working as ragpickers, zari artisans, domestic workers and in a multitude of other service jobs. Will this city ever be rid of such inhumane practices?

Text Aanchal Kataria

Shravan Kumar*, was barely ten years old when he ran away from his home, a small town in Uttar Pradesh. He was sick of his alcoholic father, a daily-wage labourer, beating his mother and him every now and then. Finally, when his mother succumbed to her injuries after a final violent episode, he left home and caught the next train to the city where he had heard that everything was possible. He had heard of tales of people from his town making it big in Mumbai and he too wanted to earn a lot of money and get himself a new house, a new home. "I was so stupid back then. I was just a kid!" exclaims Shravan, suddenly interrupting the narrative of his tough past. But he is still a child – he turned 16 only recently.

Rescued by Pratham, one of the most successful non-profit organisations working for child rights in the country, from a *zari* (embroidery) factory in Baiganwadi, Govandi, where he worked for several years, he now stays in one of their residential shelters where he gets all the comforts of a home as well as an education. "In the zari factory, we started our day at six in the morning. We worked and lived in the same ten by fifteen feet space on the first floor of the factory. We had the same old fixed routine and if someone broke it, they had to face the consequences." Shravan and ten others worked for 15 hours a day, getting only a 30 minute break for lunch. Most of the children working with him were orphans or did not want to return home. The ones who wanted to leave were not allowed to communicate with their families back in their villages. They were, however, allowed to go home once or twice a year. Despite sending their children to Mumbai to work,

the economic condition of the families back home does not really improve. Some children are also sold as bonded labour by their parents who are unable to sustain large families or are desperately in need of money. These children acquire skills, but often at the cost of their health and with the ever-present risk of sexual and physical abuse.

"Our factory owner would never let us go anywhere. Even when somebody got sick and needed to go to the hospital, our factory owner did not agree to it easily. Once my friend Amjad was suffering from fever for over a week and when he was taken to the hospital, he was diagnosed with dengue fever. He nearly died," says Shravan. Zari sweatshops, like the one Shravan was trapped

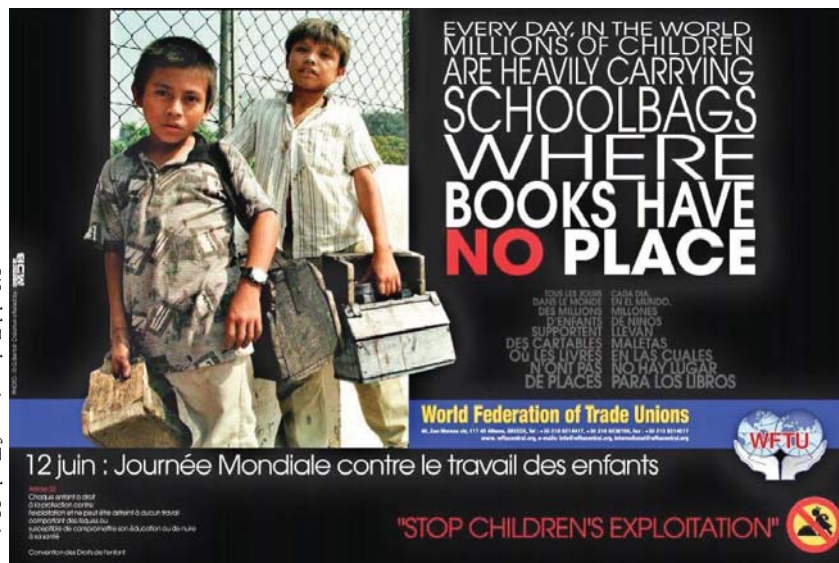
in, still exist in areas like Govandi, Mankhurd and Kurla in Mumbai. Children as young as six years work either as *shagird* or apprentices, earning ₹200 a month, and later graduate to the level of *karigars* or trained experts, earning ₹1,000-3,000 a month after toiling for anything between 10-18 hours a day. Shravan loves cricket and he now goes out to the playground with his friends to play cricket daily. "I would like to concentrate all my energies on studies and I want to be a renowned lawyer some day. Then I will be able to help all those who are troubled in life like I was."

Maharashtra is the first state in the country to have prepared a State Action Plan for the elimination of child labour. The official estimate is that there are some 33,720 child labourers in Mumbai toiling in various industrial establishments in Dharavi, Madanpura, Govandi, Bhuleswar, Sewri, Kandivli, Malad, Chembur and Shahu Nagar. These establishments range from the zari industry, farsan-making, the gold business, plastic manufacture, bakeries, garages and the garment trade.

From 2004 to August 2006, the state conducted 46 raids on establishments suspected of using child labour with the help of a special taskforce that consisted of the police, three civil society organisations as well as Brihanmumbai Municipal Corporation's (BMC) department officials. Around 1,846 child labourers have been rescued and 319 employers arrested. It is also believed that 23,483 children were sent back home by their employers who feared further raids.

For years now, Deonar has literally been the garbage bin for Mumbai city and today

"Our factory owner would never let us go anywhere, even when somebody needed to go the hospital"



it is also home for thousands of migrants who live in very difficult conditions, lacking even the most basic amenities and earning their living on the dumping ground. “We ragpickers make our lives out of what others throw away and regard as useless, but that still does not make our lives any less important than theirs,” says Kajal Sheikh*, a girl living in Rafiq Nagar, an East Mumbai slum located almost on the Deonar dumping ground. She dropped out of school at the age of 14 when her father died. The responsibility of the entire household fell on her shoulders since she is the eldest of her siblings and her mother is often sick and too weak to work.

Child ragpickers work in filthy environments surrounded by scavenging birds and animals throughout the year under all weather conditions. Waste picking is rarely recognised or integrated in the official waste management system despite its large contribution to it. The majority of the ragpickers in Mumbai are between seven and 13 years old. Most have never attended school and do not have any formal education.

“I usually make around ₹150 a day and on a good day upto ₹300,” says Kajal, whose day begins early. After cooking food for her family, she goes to the dumping ground for ragpicking. She returns home at noon and after taking a bath and lunch, she looks after her younger brother. At around 3pm she starts a second round of ragpicking and returns by 7pm. She then cooks an evening meal and finishes other household chores.

“I wanted to be a dancer some day. I like music. My father had bought a second-hand music system for me, but after he died, I sold it off because we needed the money,” says Kajal who is confident that one day she will be able to collect enough money to go back to live in her village near Muzaffarpur in Bihar. “What good is this city to us? This huge mountain of garbage is what Mumbai means to me... It will definitely be better to go back.”

Some families completely deny that their children are engaged in ragpicking because they know that their children should attend schools instead. A very

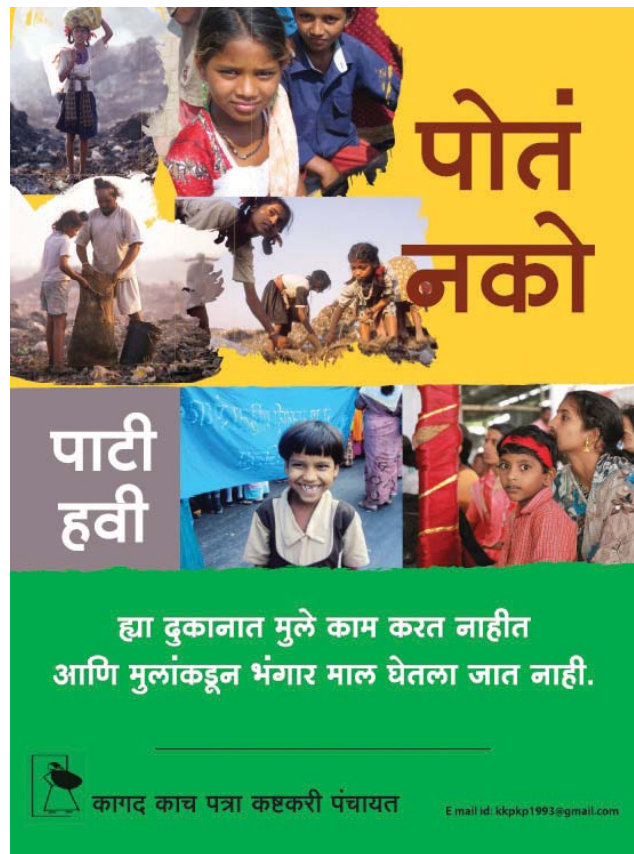
small number of child ragpickers go to school and work during the other part of the day or in holidays.

Even three decades after having banned child labour in India, the country continues to be home to 18 million child workers. There are still around 5,000-7,000 child labourers in Mumbai alone according to official figures. Of them, 35 per cent are females

S a n d h y a Dhamal, another volunteer for Pratham, an NGO started in 2001 for child workers,

works in Mankhurd. She says, “Children who have never attended school or have dropped out of school are far more likely to be drawn into the workforce. At very big contributor to this problem is the failure of the state education system. In spite of having nearly 1,230 government primary schools, the poor in the city still prefer to get their children enrolled in private schools that charge a very high fee. The standard of these state-run schools is so poor that even children who pass out from these institutions feel left out of the competition by default. Another serious issue is the drop-out rate of girls from these government primary schools which is alarmingly high even in Mumbai.”

Despite various laws that prohibit child labour, doubts have often been voiced about whether they will be effective in bringing about any kind of change to the plight of children employed as domestic labourers. This is a socially accepted and widespread practice, especially among India's affluent and educated classes. Poor children employed in middle-class homes are often overworked and underpaid. A huge percentage of domestic child labour



are girls who are vulnerable to sexual abuse, as in the case of the 10-year-old girl who was raped and killed by her employer's brother in June 2006 in Lokhandwala in Mumbai. Her employer was arrested as an accomplice and was booked for her attempt to cover up the crime, which was initially registered as a suicide.

Child labour is nearly always rooted in poverty compounded by other forms of marginalisation of gender, language, ethnicity, disability and rural-urban differences. Evidence shows that child labour increases during economic downturns, as parents withdraw their children from schools to supplement family income. They also delay the entry into school of their youngest children. Girls are especially vulnerable in such times of crises. To tackle this complex social evil, no single particular intervention will work. It requires convergence on all fronts – legal, educational, social and economic. Until then, Mumbai city will continue to be a honey-trap for many like Shravan, and for so many more like Kajal, a hellish and nightmarish existence from which there is no escape. ■

*Names have been changed to protect identity.

Shop talk

The service revolution post-liberalisation created as many jobs as aspirations. We look inside the world of those at the forefront of this new, rapidly growing industry.

Text Shivani Gupta | Photos A. Lohrii Francis

Sitting in the corner of a brightly lit room, I observe the glass doors open every once in a while. People walk across a shiny floor that is mopped every 15 minutes. A strong aroma of coffee mingles with the faint smell of lemongrass-scented cleansing liquid and takes over my olfactory senses. There is a shiny granite cash counter in the corner of the room, behind which cashiers smile plastic smiles and greet everyone who enters the room. All around, there are small tables with wooden chairs where people sip on their coffees, munch their food and chat. The grind of a juice mixer and coffee-maker combines with laughter and dialogue. This room is one of countless that comprise one of the most popular Indian coffee shop chains, Café Coffee Day.

Nevertheless, the smiling face behind the counter who serves you a cup of coffee, the store woman who helps you change the size of your kurta and that person who gets you a burger and fries remain invisible. Extras on a film set, if you will, where customers are the stars.

As I look around from table to table, my eyes fall upon the lady at the cash counter who is looking at the glass door. Her plastered smile gives the impression that she is anticipating more people, but the dull look in her eyes indicates that she is wondering how long it will be before her shift ends. Shruti Sareen, 23, has been working at the Vashi Café Coffee Day for a year and half now. She joined in the final year of her undergraduation due to financial difficulties at home and works here from 1pm to 9pm every day. Initially, this was just a part-time job after college hours, but it has now become her chief source of income. To supplement this, she takes maths tuitions for primary school children at her residence.

She dreams of setting up a large tuition centre as she loves working with young children, but has no time to scout for new



“I see youngsters joining McDonald’s and leaving, but for me it was more about income than a temporary job”

students. “Café Coffee Day only starts to pay well after three months of work,” she says. She is unable to leave her work because of the potential gap in her income. She also does not know where her Bachelor’s degree in Commerce could come in use in the current financial crunch. Due to the recession, she finds it extremely hard to find a decent job. Her current pay as a cashier, ₹7,000 per month not including a bonus, is a huge improvement from her pay as a trainee where she used to get less than half of that amount.

Manoj Yadav, who works at the McDonald’s outlet in K-Star, a mall in Chembur, says that this increment is one of the biggest incentives for people to stay in their jobs. He says, “I have gone from earning ₹30 per hour as a trainee to ₹9,000 per month as an outlet manager. I had to be very patient with the job. I see youngsters joining McDonald’s and leaving, but for me it was more about income than a temporary job.”

Six years ago, Yadav came to Mumbai from Mirzapur in Uttar Pradesh, hoping to find a successful job. He has moved from being an attendant at a petrol pump to a cashier at a local restaurant and finally to an outlet manager at McDonald’s. He is proud of his job and firmly believes that this will bring him a brighter future. This opinion, however, is not shared by 26-year-old Sumit Seth, another employee in a similar capacity, who does not think his job has much scope for growth.

Seth works at the KFC outlet adjoining McDonald's at K-Star. He has been working there for six months and is employed as a cook. His daily job is to fry cutlets for sandwiches and burgers. He is paid ₹30 per hour, but he is not allowed to work for more than eight hours a day. He exclaims, "Even if I want to work more, I can't because I am restricted by the official guidelines. I don't come on weekends because there is another person hired for the same job. I don't get any extra money for travel and the food we get at the end of the day is stale. At times we don't even get anything." He was not able to finish his course in engineering from Patna University in Bihar as he failed in his final year. He left everything to come to Mumbai, where he dreamt of becoming a junior artiste in Bollywood, a dream that is yet to be achieved.

Most people I talk to have similar aspirations. Sonam Kripasankar, who works in a Fabindia outlet at Vashi, was born and brought up in Chennai in a very small and low-income family. She came to Mumbai to assist a fashion designer she had seen on television, but struggled for two years before joining Fabindia. She says, "I help people decide what they should buy and what looks good on them, though initially, I wanted to make clothes that will look good on everyone. I see these expensive cotton clothes around me all the time when I can't afford any." She laments that buyers do not seek help unless they want a different size or want to know the

price if the tag has come off. Most of the time she feels invisible as people do not so much as acknowledge her presence, let alone talk to her.

Sareen adds to this experience and explains, "I am visible only till the time the order needs to be placed. After that, nobody talks to me and I am happy with that as this helps me distance myself from my job; a job from which I can be fired, as I am not under a contract."

She describes how her family keeps checking on her as she works mostly with male employees. Due to this they would rather she joined a sweatshop with

"Being a woman and working includes travelling and engaging with male staff and my parents are apprehensive about that"

other female colleagues. She has to reach home on time and is obliged to part with over half her salary to her parents. "I still don't have control over my income and my family keeps pressurising me to earn more. I don't know how to materialise that. I understand their point but I feel helpless. Being a woman and working includes travelling and engaging with male staff which requires skills more than just

serving coffee."

On the other hand, Yadav displays greater conviction in his approach, despite the evident lack of job security. "I don't care about people. My job requires me to be polite and cater to their needs and I fulfil that." He is under a contract with the company, which he is not security enough. "These big brands can do anything," he says. "One day you will be hired and next day fired. I don't trust their policy but, on my part I try to fulfil all my duties."

Another skill required to survive in this occupation is a knowledge of English. Sareen and Kripasankar both said that companies only hire people who can speak or at least understand English. "It is very important to understand what the customer is trying to say. You need to know the menu, which is also in English, in order to cater to the customer's needs," says Sareen.

"Survival depends on hard work and cooperation," says Yadav. "Both my wife and I work in branded chains and earn a decent living." They have both managed to adjust their shifts to the same time. Kripasankar, however, works for 10 hours a day and goes back to living with her sister-in-law. She hesitated to discuss family but said, "Soon I will be married off and then I won't even get to be around clothes."

Sareen and Seth do not see such a future for themselves. Their families demand support of every kind and it would be an extra burden to take care of another person. The biggest responsibilities, Seth explains, are staying employed by sustaining your relationship with the manager and customers and not getting frustrated with the job. According to him, the latter is more difficult than maintaining a pleasant image.

As I go back to my table with another cup of coffee, I think of all the people engaged in this constant negotiation between aspirations and economic security in a world that is complex and hyper-globalised. Perhaps, we will do well to remember that the next time someone calls out our name from behind the counter. ■



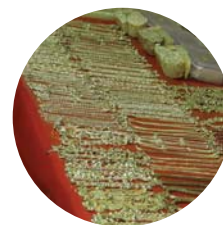
Purchase of raw material
Somwari Bazaar, Malad (E)



Master design prepared



Market testing



Chain rolling, brass cutting
Malwani, Malad (W)

The sweatshop story

The fake silver earrings that happily dangle from your ears have a not-too-cheerful back story. Most imitation jewellery bought at knock-off prices on the streets is produced in slum homes and sweatshops in Mumbai by workers who earn as little as ₹2 for sticking a stone on 12 pairs of earrings.

Text Shruti Ravi | Photos Krishna Panchal

In Mumbai, everything has a story to tell. Even a quaint little sari brooch you purchase for your mother on the roadside can spin a terrific yarn. Pick it up, haggle a bit with the salesperson on the street, exchange a few *gaalis* and rupees and voila, you are the last step in a long chain of production, supply, retail and most telling, exploitation.

Inspired by filmmaker Surabhi Sharma's film *Jari Mari*, which looks at people who earn a living doing piecemeal work for a variety of products ranging from garments to second-hand tyres, I make a journey of my own. Beginning at Hill Road, Bandra (W), I trace the path a piece of junk jewellery undertakes from scrap metal to a fully-finished product and take a closer look at those at the bottom of the economic food chain and to appreciate the true value of labour which we consume so effortlessly.

First stop, the tiny hole-in-the-wall stall owned by 22-year-old Zaheer Sheikh who sells imitation jewellery. This store without a name sources some of its finished goods that range from oxidised metal necklaces to stone-encrusted rings from distributors of Chinese products. But it also sources much of its stock from manufacturers based in various parts of Mumbai city – Dadar market, Juma Masjid near Mohammed Ali Road, Malad (W) and Khar Road.

Next halt: Ankur Mehta, the owner of an imitation jewellery manufacturing hub (whose name he refuses to put on record) in Malad (W), who supervises the manufacture of such jewellery. He explains the entire process. According to Mehta, there are many different types of imitation jewellery available in the market, from bangles, earrings and necklaces to simple chains and sari brooches. "Usually, any manufacturer in this business focuses only on one of these different types of jewellery pieces when starting out," says Mehta. "This becomes their monopoly."

It starts with a master designer patterning a certain piece of jewellery and approaching the manufacturer. If the manufacturer

likes what he sees, this is followed up by design verification. 15-20 pieces of the original design are produced and sent to the market to verify the product's potential success. Once demand is confirmed, the process of full-scale production is set in motion.

The metal raw material is sent for casting and subjected to whatever treatment its final stage merits – chain rolling, shifting, brass cutting, fitting and the like. This is then plated, depending on the product, with choices ranging from gold, silver, mehendi, copper, lacquer and radium. Options exist between 'fancy get-up', 'chalu get-up' or 'antique finish' (cotton is dipped in boot polish and rubbed onto the pieces to give it an old-world sheen). The master designer decrees what fake stones and gems must be stuck on the jewel. Finally, the finished products are packed and sent to multiple markets in the city as well as to other metropolises.

This sweatshop assembly line manufacturing process was explained by 23-year-old Nitesh Dayaram Balia, a resident of Gandhinagar *jhoadpatti* in Railway Wadi in Malad (W). At one time, Balia delivered material from wholesalers to retailers and stuck stones onto bangles.

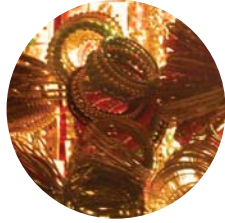
Describing the route a bangle took under the aegis of his previous employer, a *seth* named Chetanbhai, Balia mentions how a *kacchi choodi* purchased in wholesale at Somwari Bazaar in Malad (E) was sent for stone rolling in Malwani and soldering and polishing in Kajpada, Appapada, Pushpa Park, Dutt Mandir road and Pathanwadi. Later, Balia and his three brothers received a stock at home and stuck fake diamonds onto the bangles.

Each stage of the work takes place at different locations, usually in and around Malad, with most of the work done in slum homes and some in karkhanas (small workshops, akin to sweatshops with eight to ten people huddled inside a rented room).

Balia ceased to work for Chetanbhai when he started specialising in a different trade. Now he makes decorative pins or brooches that are used as sari accessories with saris. He makes these at home.



Plating and polishing
Kajpada



Sticking fake gems
Gandhinagar, Malad (W)



Packaging



Sales

He shows me the day's collection, offering me a sample of the bejewelled safety pin. It consists of an oval base behind which the pin must be stuck and it has glittery stones on the front that form the design. Balia, his three brothers, his parents and two of his brother's children survive on this brooch-making work. As before, he is dependent on the vagaries of the current *seth's* orders. "Orders haven't been coming in for four days," he tells me as I examine the finished products lined up on a table. Each piece makes ₹1. The four of them make 600 of these a day on an average. "People here get jobs depending on how well they know the *seth*." This was the case with him and Chetanbhai.

Living in the same hutment colony as Balia is 35-year-old Radha Ganesh Kharvi, who puts together earring and chain sets and packs them. "Hers is a very sad story – her husband left her. She has always had to fend for herself – before, when he was there, he would spend money on getting drunk, and after he left, she was totally on her own," says Santosh Bhojawiya, 25, a resident of the slum who showed me around the area. Kharvi's *seth* provides her with various raw material in the form of boxes, chain pieces and earrings. She packs these into little dabbas. Each box consists of six dabba and she gets ₹2 per box.

A trip to a Muslim neighbourhood in Malad (W) showed similar activities, except here the karkhanas were much closer and were located within the same complex. Raheela Begum, who lives with her unemployed husband, came out with a plastic jar full of what looked like many gold chains, but was actually one long

unbroken line, stuffed and intertwined together. Her job is to cut the long chain into smaller average-sized necklace lengths. She admits that it is difficult when a link in the chain is broken and she has to stick it together. For every jar of chains she delinks, she gets ₹ 20.

The chain rolling karkhana, in this case, was only a few yards away. Lengths of golden coloured chains lay strewn in the room. Four teenagers work while a fifth winds the chains around a rolling machine. They got paid as per the metre of chains they worked on, said the boys, not revealing anything more.

"People here get jobs
depending on how
well they know the
seth"

A mother of two sons, Shabnam Khan makes a living as a children's *malishwari*, a job she does from noon to 4pm. After which, if she has the time apart from managing her home, she packs chain-earring sets as well as bangles into their respective cases. She tells me she doesn't really know who her *seth* is as the factory manufacturers themselves come and give her the material. She doesn't depend on this for a living but it is a good use of her time as one does make some money (₹30/day) out of it, she says.

The location of these factories, sweatshops, manufacturers and wholesale

markets translates into jobs for people living nearby. While imitation jewellery is one of the major industrial mainstays in Malad, other residents of the slum beside the railway tracks indicates that piecemeal work is the norm in other types of work as well.

Komal Pandarinath Shelke, 16, stitches a wire and LED onto a meter box case. She gets paid ₹4 for every 20 completed cases. There is no limit to the number she is supposed to do in a day, so she does as many as she can. She has been doing this for three years now and studied until Class 9 in a nearby school. Her father works at a factory, packing buckles into paper cases. The men do this work while the women stick the final pins onto the buckle.

These people work very hard, hour after hour, day after day, but get paid a pittance for the labour they put in. There is no possibility of saving money for a rainy day as the pay is so low, it is barely enough for basic sustenance. There is no job security with employment being as seasonal as fashion trends in the market. The fact that most of this work takes place in homes and spaces outside of factories leads to incessant flouting of the Contractual Labour (Regulation and Abolition) Act rules with regard to provision of workplace facilities, payment of wages and general treatment of workers.

So the next time you purchase a pair of *dhinchak* earrings or an imitation jewellery set, you can have the satisfaction of knowing that India has its very own 'blood diamonds' too. Fake *maal*, yes, but just as real in its exploitation of the financially impoverished. ■



Give municipal schools (and their teachers) a chance

By keeping the children of the poor in school and making learning relevant to their circumstances, these municipal school teachers endeavour to give their students a chance to dream.

Text Sujatha Subramanian | Photos Krishna Panchal

A chart paper bearing the words, “In 2021, I will go to a big college” greets everyone entering Class 3D, Dharavi Transit Camp Municipal School. I am surprised, but my amazement doesn’t cease there. When nine-year-old Rubina complains to the teacher about her classmate Sohail pulling her hair, her 32-year-old teacher Srini Swaminathan, a Teach For India (TFI) Fellow posted at the school, asks her to write a letter of forgiveness. He says, “Write in the letter, ‘I feel bad because of what you did. But I forgive you’. You have to end the fight.”

Even though I find it surprising that Class 3 students are encouraged to think about college and express mature emotions like forgiveness, I expect no less from the teacher – after all, countless paeans have been written on the role that teachers play in moulding young minds. However, no paean can adequately bear testimony to the importance of the role of a municipal school teacher in Mumbai, a city that needs its teachers to fight exclusion and dream of an inclusive education for all. This is where municipal school teachers, employed in about 1,400 schools run by the Brihanmumbai Municipal Corporation (BMC), come in.

With the promise of a high salary and the security of a government job, the post of a municipal school teacher in India is a coveted one. Trupti Desai, a Class 4 teacher at the Dharavi Transit Camp Municipal School, says, “My parents thought that given the

salary and the respect, teaching is a good profession for women.” BMC primary school teachers earn between ₹9,000 and ₹16,000, while secondary school teachers can earn up to ₹25,000. But it is also a job that is much maligned – an overwhelming majority associates BMC school teachers with apathy, absenteeism and a lack of any real engagement with their students’ lives.

When asked why she chose an expensive private school for her eight-year-old son over the municipal school in the neighbourhood, Archana Tandel, a shop owner at Dharavi, retorts, “Would your parents have put you in this school? Look at the children, running about like monkeys, without any shoes or socks.” It is evident that most people associate municipal schools with a complete lack of order and discipline. The accepted wisdom seems to be that municipal schools in India are meant only for the dirt poor. Teachers’ indifference is one thing, but there is also a larger structural problem. Nandini Manjrekar, Chairperson of the School of Education at the Tata Institute of Social Sciences, points out that one must question the state’s failure to step in and raise the quality of public school education in India.

A closer look at the conditions under which municipal school teachers are expected to teach helps one understand the problem. Ujjwala Ashok Konda, 39, who has been teaching in the Hindi medium section at the Dharavi Transit Camp Municipal School

for the last 18 years, says, “Unlike private schools, we have no office staff here. We have to fulfill not just our teaching duties, but also do clerical work. The lack of time does not permit us to give individual attention to students.” Added to the usual six hours of teaching, the teachers are expected to devote two hours to maintaining school records, besides doing work relating to the BMC, such as data collection during the census, for which they are seldom paid.

Most teachers feel stunted by the lack of infrastructure in these schools. Deepak Ghorpade, 24, who teaches Class 4 in the Deonar Colony Municipal School, rues the old teaching methods followed in these schools. “I wish these schools would bring in the technological tools used in private schools. Without computers, how will these children compete in the outside world?”

Computers seem a distant dream in schools where children sit on mats. “In situations like these I would like to know where the tax-payers’ money is going,” says Swaminathan. “Some months ago, the fan in our classroom stopped working. When I asked the principal to get it fixed, he stalled it for days saying only a BMC worker could be called to fix it. Can you imagine how difficult it becomes to control a class of 40 restless students in such heat?”

When I mention to Swaminathan that the children’s poor attire is a cause for some parents’ reluctance in admitting their children to municipal schools, he affirms the state’s lack of responsibility towards these schools. He says, “The school provides the children with shoes. However, when the orders are placed for Class 3 students, they are placed keeping in mind the body measurements of an average eight-year-old. In actuality, some of these children are so malnourished that these shoes are too big for their feet. Shoes meant for a Class 1 or Senior KG child would fit them better.”

Complaints of rampant mismanagement in schools run by the BMC are common. In January 2012, Child Rights and You (CRY) surveyed 52 schools in Andheri, Bandra and Santa Cruz in a

pilot study on the quality of education in schools run by the BMC. According to the survey, 73 per cent of the schools do not have libraries while 40 per cent of them do not have playgrounds. Over 55 per cent of the schools do not have working water purifiers and 50 per cent do not have proper toilets.

Another worrying factor is frequent absenteeism among teachers. Manjrekar says that one should look at the factors contributing to this and not assume it to be instances of apathy. Ghorpade explains, “Sometimes a teacher gets transferred much before another one comes to fill the vacancy. In the interim period, the other teachers present are expected to take their place. This means that I often have to combine two classes. This affects the quality of teaching.” The student-teacher ratio of municipal schools is a dismal 60:1 or worse, compared to the 20:1 ratio in most private schools.

In a report titled *Making the Grade: Improving Mumbai’s Public Schools* by Dasra, a philanthropic group, former Additional Municipal Commissioner Ashish Kumar Singh observed that most municipal school teachers would not send their own children to such schools. Responding to this, the BMC in January 2011 initiated the School Excellence Programme (SEP) to bring a change in pedagogy by shifting the focus to group- and activity-based learning. Working with McKinsey & Company and organisations such as the Gandhi Fellowship, Teach For India and Akanksha, the pilot programme covered 100 schools across Marathi, Urdu and Hindi mediums. Srinu Swaminathan, a

TFI fellow who quit his lucrative job as a Field Service Manager in Schlumberger, Australia, is part of this brigade that aspires to strengthen the education system from within.

Such initiatives have met with scepticism. Bhau Korde, who works with the Transit Camp Municipal School in Dharavi, points out that TFI Fellows are posted at each school for just two years, a period inadequate to forge a connection with the students. Of the 28 classes in the English medium section of the school, only two are taught by the TFI Fellows, which he feels is gross injustice to the other children. Manjrekar asserts that while the individuals working with such initiatives have good intentions, these ventures cement the belief that municipal schools need private players to make a difference, allowing the state to abstain from assuming responsibility towards the schools.

Staying inspired and motivated even when the odds are overwhelmingly stacked against you is an art these municipal school



teachers have mastered. The conditions of life in the slums coupled with a lack of support from illiterate or semi-literate parents means that most of these children are first-generation learners who do not finish even primary education.

Mangal Dhondge, 23, earlier a private school teacher and now teaching at the Deonar Colony Municipal School, says, "It is foolish for me to expect my students here to be similar to private school students. Here, Class 5 students can barely construct sentences, let alone write essays. It is a challenge for me to bring up the students to the same level before I can take them to a higher level."

Disciplining children is also important in a context where the poor are stigmatized as being uncouth, violent and 'uncultured'. Says Desai, "The first month I started teaching, it was my constant endeavour to ensure that these children did not use abusive language in class. I had to transform the child's value system and focus not just on academics. Corporal punishment was no answer." Desai explains that she has to be sensitive to the nitty-gritty of the students' lives instead of mindlessly enforcing rules. In many families, with both parents working, the burden of house-work falls on the child, so punishing a child for not turning up at sharp 9am is not an option.

The teacher also has to ensure that education is fun for the children and does not add to their drudgery. Says Ghorpade,

who has been teaching for four years, "My students don't have access to swimming pools or even playgrounds. The most I can do is make the lessons inside the classrooms interesting. So I try to teach them through rhymes and hold quiz competitions. I have to teach them in a way that makes them want to come to school."

Teachers at municipal schools constantly battle high drop-out rates. When Dhondge saw that nine of her students had stopped coming to school, she went to each of their homes and persuaded the parents to send them to school again. In cases where the families had been evicted from their houses or had migrated elsewhere, she was helpless.

Swati Parasrampur, who works with the Gandhi Fellowship, claims that making parents stakeholders in their child's education is essential to ensure low drop-out rates. Dhondge agrees. "We regularly meet the parents in parent-teacher meetings and outside school. I tell them that while they might not have studied maths, they can ask their child to count the peas in the pod they are peeling or even make the child read bus signs."

Part of the job of these teachers is to ensure that the parents fight their biases against the importance of a school education. Parents of girls who have hit puberty are often reluctant to send their daughters to school, believing that it is harmful to let them mix with boys. "In such cases it takes a lot of persuasion

before they agree to send their daughters for higher education," Desai says.

Swaminathan believes that awareness can change a mindset. "Everyone wants the best for their child but no one has ever told them what opportunities they have. I ask them to have a vision for their child, not just let them exist. I ask them to take their children out of the *galli* and put them on a highway," he asserts.

His dedication is evident. He has drawn up a 'life map' for each of his 40 students where he has written out the options each child has in terms of higher schooling and college, keeping in mind their family conditions. "I tell my students how despite my economic condition, I managed to receive a college education and work in a multi-national corporation," says Swaminathan, who was raised by a single mother in a slum. "If I could defeat circumstances, why can't they?"

In an environment of poverty and squalor, these teachers are the architects of dreams – dreams of a career, of a stable future, of a respectable self. "When I meet the parents of these children, I realise they expect me to transform their children's lives. I realise the huge responsibility I shoulder as a teacher," says Dhondge. "The rule I follow is: I should teach my class in a way that I would not hesitate to send my own children to study here. We teachers need to overcome the self-defeating attitude that we teach in inferior schools, where the children will not go far." ■





Sellers on the move

Mumbai's iconic local trains are not just a lifeline for millions of daily commuters, but also for hundred of hawkers who make a living by selling everything from safety pins and *bindis* to lemons and *gajras* in its compartments.

Text Archana Sadar| Photos Ananda Siddhartha, Krishna Panchal

Salim Bhai is sceptical of dream. “*Sapne to sabhi dekhte hai Madam, lekin wo kabhi poore nahi hote hai* (Every human being has dreams achieving greatness, but these dreams rarely translate into reality),” says the 26-year-old, a resident of Wadala. Salim Bhai sells earrings and bangles in the local trains of Mumbai. He seems too young to give up on his dreams. But it is probably the daily grind – of haggling and selling imitation jewellery in the ladies’ compartment of the Harbour line even as one keeps an eye out for the train ticket collector – that has dampened his spirit.

There is little to love about commuting by a Mumbai local. The trains are always packed, delays are frequent and unannounced, and most stations are a stinking mess. However, there is a reason why the trains have come to symbolise the never-say-die spirit of Mumbai. There is barely a dull moment while commuting on them. The sight of people getting into trains – pushing, shouting, abusing – never fails to amaze. The madness doesn’t cease even after you are inside the ladies’ compartment. The many hawkers selling pens, notebooks, wallets, hair clips, combs and cosmetics, keep women engaged with their colourful goods.

Hawkers are a welcome sight for the many bargain-hunters who commute on the train. Rupali, who is doing her post graduation from Nirmala Niketan College, finds this method of shopping rather novel. New to Mumbai, Rupali says, “This is really fascinating for people like me who have come to Mumbai from other cities and towns.” Neeta Badge, a resident of Chembur, tells

me as she buys bangles and a pencil pouch for her daughter, “Goods sold here are so much cheaper than the ones sold in shops. A pouch that costs ₹50 in a shop will be sold here for ₹10. Those working eight to ten hour shifts are saved trips to the shopping malls, thanks to the presence of these hawkers and their inexpensive cosmetics and trendy accessories in the train.”

There are hundreds of people who work as train hawkers in Mumbai. Salim Bhai is one of them. He came to Mumbai from Nashik 15 years ago with dreams of becoming rich. As a hawker, he earns anything between ₹1000 to 1500 daily. Salim Bhai says, “With this job, there is no assurance that I will get my daily meal. Luck alone allows you to survive in this job.” Salim tells me that his younger brother is a hawker too, although Salim would rather not have him work in the same profession. He says, “Since I could not study much, I want my brother to receive a proper education. But along with his studies, he needs to work so that he can add to the family’s income.” Salim aspires to start his own business but saving money in the present circumstances is difficult. With his earnings, he procures jewellery in wholesale from Malad market. (See page 32) Whatever money remains is spent bribing railway officials. He explains that those who hawk on the local trains have to pay a daily hafta or a bribe of about ₹50 to the ticket collector. Sometimes ticket collectors demand bribes as high as ₹600. Salim Bhai rues that he spends about a quarter of his monthly earnings in paying bribes to the ticket collectors and police officials. He sounds

upset as he says, “I too want to live a better life, but society will not allow us to get out of this rut.”

What makes it possible for the railway officials to demand bribes almost recklessly is the fact that under the Indian Railways Act, hawking is illegal and those hawking without a license can be imprisoned for one year and fined up to ₹2,000. When I ask Salim Bhai what he feels about hawking being illegal, he says, “I realise that it is illegal but I have no other way of earning a livelihood. Besides, I consider myself more honest than the corrupt officials and politicians who run the country.”

Salim Bhai debunks the notion of the local train being a democratic space when he tells me how his being a Muslim makes it difficult for him to approach customers. “The belief that most Muslims are terrorists still exists. People are often suspicious of me and my friends because of our religious identity,” he says. Our conversation is interrupted as Salim Bhai prepares to get off the train. He explains, “You usually run into a ticket collector after Reay Road station, so my friends and I get off before that.”

On the eve of Raksha Bandhan, 12-year-old Shubham Patwa sells *rakhis* on the Harbour line. A resident of Dharavi, Shubham and his elder brother sell *rakhis* on the train after they get off from school. “My father asked me to accompany my elder brother. I come here so that I can help my brother with selling the goods,” says Shubham, who is a student of the Dharavi Municipal School. His elder brother studies in a college at Chunabhatti. Shubham also has two sisters, both of whom are students. His father works in godown at Masjid station. All four children are employed in some work or another to help their father improve the economic condition of the family. For these children, hawking in the train has taught them to shoulder responsibilities early in life.

Sunita, 35, a resident of Vashi Naka sells nail polish, lipsticks, and other cosmetics in the local train. Her small cardboard box is full of lipsticks and nail paints of different colours. She starts working at noon and works till 9 in the

evening, earning up to ₹200 per day. She affirms Salim’s belief that the only way out of such a profession is a good education. She says, “I did not get a chance to study, otherwise I would have been employed in a better profession today.” Sunita looks like she has more to say about her profession but she is forced to get down at the next station.

The train from Chhatrapati Shivaji Terminus resounds with cries of “*Septi pin ghya, Septi pin ghya, kangava ghya kangava.*” The voice belongs to 20-year-old Aarti, who stays at Mankhurd. Aarti tells me that she lives with her three-year-old daughter. When I ask her about her husband, she tells me that she has been divorced for more than a year. She says, “I got married at the age of 16. But my husband used to beat me often. So one day, I decided to leave him.” She is wary of marrying a second time. For Aarti, hawking in the train has become a

means of economic independence through which she could find the independence to confidently seek a divorce and escape a violent marriage.

The local trains of Mumbai are a site where the livelihoods of various individuals at stake. Most hawkers believe that their life and livelihood is solely a question of fate and a lack of opportunity elsewhere has forced them into a livelihood where there is no certainty of a daily meal. However, for many, hawking in the trains is the sole source of income and economic independence. Terming their work as ‘illegal’ and ‘unauthorised’ puts their future at stake. In such a situation, the optimism of these individuals takes a beating. Says Aarti, “We have been denied the possibility of even dreaming of a better future.” Stuck in a profession with no opportunity of growth, the bangles that she sells are the only things that add colour to her life. ■





Fishing for a future

Trawler fishing, pollution, over-fishing, North-Indian fish sellers, real estate mafia – the woes of the original inhabitants of Mumbai have just become worse.

Text Mridula Chari | Photos Mridula Chari, Krishna Panchal, Ananda Siddhartha

Do not ask for directions to the bustling fish market at Sewri. Just follow your nose and ears. The smell of fish and the vehement shrill bargaining of women out to sell the best fish at the best price is your unmistakable guide. Once you reach the market, be prepared for baskets upon baskets of fish of all species and sizes laid out on the ground, seawater still oozing out of their worn cane edges, and huge blocks of ice to keep the fish fresh.

The Kolis of Mumbai have long been subjects of conversations, from newspapers to research papers. They are Mumbai's fisher people, a community that lived on Mumbai's seven islands well before colonisers arrived. In today's political scenario, with different groups contesting the validity of their respective claims to Mumbai, the Kolis' position as indigenous settlers is often silenced or reduced to tokenism. There are around 38 koliwadass in Mumbai, most along the coast, such as Cuffe Parade, Sewri, Dharavi and Versova, though there are some, like the Sion Koliwada, which are established near reclaimed land. According to testimonies from within the community, fewer Kolis engage in fishing nowadays, though there are no official numbers for this.

Fishing is the only primary economic activity (one that harvests resources directly from the earth) that takes place in Mumbai and the Kolis are unique in being the city's only indigenous fisherfolk.

Since primary economic activities are not usually conducted within the confines of the city, there is little official economic aid (such as micro credit) that Kolis can ask for. "Unlike farmers in Maharashtra, there are no aid packages given to us even though we also suffer losses during the monsoons when our equipment gets damaged," says Vimal Koli, 32, who gave up fishing for an office job in Chinchpokli ten years ago. "What could I do? I grew up by the sea, but now, it only gives us pain. I have to provide for my family and I cannot do this here."

"What could I do? I grew up on the sea, but now, it only gives us pain. I have to provide for my family and I cannot do this here"

Fishing is also the only seasonal activity whose entire process is based in Mumbai. Rasika Tamboli, a Koli who comes every day to the fish market at Sewri, says, "Since we don't fish during the monsoons, we have to live on our savings and whatever temporary employment we can get. That means that all through the monsoons, we are hoping to survive until the rains get over." Many seek employment in factories or have handicraft industries at home. Employment during this period is difficult to find. "Employers don't

hire us because we can't work more than a few months. At one level, we understand their difficulty, but what else can we do? This is our traditional occupation," continues Tamboli.

Tamboli is from a community on the deep sea side or west coast of Mumbai. Due to Mumbai's peculiar peninsular shape, there are

different problems for fishing on the east and west coast. Fishing in the Arabian Sea on the west coast is obliged to be seasonal since the Kolis' small boats cannot weather the high winds of the monsoons. During this time, saltwater fish lay eggs and replenish their population. Over the past 20 years, there has been a change in fishing activities. Larger boats, called *hodis*, which are capable of trawling even in the monsoons supplement the growing middle-class demand for fish all through the year. Consequently, the germination period for fish is interrupted and the catch, especially in the monsoon, and now all year, has become smaller in size and quantity. Further, since fish stocks have been depleted, those Kolis still using traditional methods find it increasingly difficult to catch enough to make an adequate living. Mechanised trawlers empty fishing grounds in a night, leaving the area barren for months. Kolis are then forced to go deeper to sea and at greater risk to themselves.

The scenario is also changing on land. In the morning at Mumbai's Chhatrapati Shivaji Terminus (CST), one sees men with plastic boater hats and large fish baskets atop their heads clambering into the luggage compartments of trains headed northward on the Harbour line to Sewri and beyond. These are not Kolis but second-rung fish dealers. They are mostly north Indian men, often employed by owners of deep sea trawlers to directly sell their goods to consumers. They buy their produce in the morning from fish markets like those at CST and Andheri, then travel to places like Panvel and sell their catch at individual houses or in bulk to restaurants. According to the Koli women at the Sewri market, these sellers are eating into their traditional customer

base thus reducing the footfall at the markets where they traditionally sit. (See Box)

There are problems beyond distribution on the east coast. Since it is sheltered from the vagaries of tides and monsoons by the island city and the mainland, it is possible for Kolis there – at Trombay Koliwada, for example – to fish all through the year. As the demand for fish remains high all year, these communities usually supply fish at higher rates. Their fishing too has been affected by deep sea trawlers that supply the more popular varieties of fish through the year. Now that they too are adopting mechanised fishing practices, fish stocks are getting depleted more rapidly.

"Earlier, the fish used to be this big," says Surekha tai, indicating the length of her hand as we walk down the Trombay jetty early one morning. "Now they are much smaller," she continues, pulling a handful from a passing cart and spreading them out on her hand. Some are no bigger than grains of rice. "We use them to make chutney. A basket of them costs ₹500 normally, but twice or thrice that during the monsoons."

Though the community is known for its openness, there is now some amount of reserve since the November 26, 2008 terror attacks when terrorists entered the city by sea, in the boat of a murdered fisherman. In Trombay, nobody is allowed on the jetty



without permission and fishermen are regularly asked for their identity cards by the navy. Nobody disputes these measures.

Attempts have also been made to reclassify koliwadadas as slums and have them removed under the Slum Rehabilitation Authority. Slum dwellers in and around the Cuffe Parade Machhimar Nagar, a lucrative plot of real estate, were recently offered half a lakh rupees or new houses in an area nearby to vacate their present homes. The Kolis were the only community to reject the idea. "They wanted to move us away from our traditional houses near the sea, where we have our entire livelihood, to flats in the middle of the city," says one enraged Koli.

In June this year, it was revealed that Sahana Developers, a local construction company that has done a significant amount of work under the Slum Rehabilitation Authority, forged signatures of Sion Koliwada residents in no-objection certificates. Those Kolis

who exposed this forgery and publicly protested against it were manhandled and thrown into jail while no action was taken against the builder.

"We have been here since British times and we have documents to prove that they reserved this land for us. We are the only ones in Mumbai who were already here. Everyone else is actually a migrant," says Prathamesh Shivkar, 21, a Koli from Sion Koliwada who filmed these protests. "Everything and everyone is 'managed', from the judges to the police. Our local politicians are on their side. It's a ₹700 crore scam that nobody is talking about. Some journalists tell me that there is pressure from above not to report this story." On the fate of his home as a koliwada, he says, "My mother sells fish in the market, but most people are either government servants or office workers. There used to be a creek right outside the Koliwada that went to the sea but when Pratiksha Nagar was built thirty to forty years ago, we had

to abandon fishing. We can't go anywhere else to fish because others will say we aren't from there, how can we take their fishing grounds?"

Surekha tai tells me of how few of the younger people want to take up fishing. "Earlier, the sea used to come right up to where the jetty is now and we could anchor our boats there. Now, the sea is receding and we have to walk through *keechad* to get the fish from the bigger boats to the jetty," she says. Those children that can get education usually seek employment elsewhere. There is also not enough money to compensate for the hard work. "Once they are educated and have the chance to move on to better employment, why would they want to work here?" she asks. Most of the children we see are busy studying for their exams.

What is the future of the Kolis, I ask. "We will all get educated and continue living here," she laughs. "And we will eat fish." ■



The unbelongers

Early one morning, as the north Indian fish-sellers get into the luggage compartment of a Panvel-bound train at CST, I join in for the ride. Unlike the Kolis, these fish-sellers are a largely unorganised group. "Marathi people and Kolis have their own MachhimarSanghs supported by the MNS. We don't have anything so we're left to ourselves whenever any problem happens," says Anish Patel, 25, who came to Mumbai from his

village in Uttar Pradesh eight years ago.

When I asked about the friction between Kolis and North Indians, the entire compartment, which until then had been jovial, clams up. "The last time, problems were caused by people writing about us," explains Muharram Ali, 43. "We don't want any more trouble."

Naresh Babu, 58, adds with an air of finality, "Hum lafda nahin karte hain. If others do, it isn't our fault." After a pause, he continues. "See, Mumbai used to be a good

place for us. We have been here for thirty years and didn't have problems. Suddenly everyone is saying 'Don't do this', 'Don't do that'. They beat up taxiwallahs and create problems for us no matter what we do. We also have to work to feed our families. How can we do that in our villages? Kolis aren't the only fisherfolk in the world, so how can they say that no other community can work with them? We all do what we have to." — **MC**

Wheel of fortune

A corner of industrious and resilient Dharavi is occupied by Kumbharwada, where for several generations potters from Saurashtra have practiced their ancient art and made a living.

Text Aanchal Kataria | Photography Aanchal Kataria

For 57-year-old Natha Bhai Chauhan, to be a potter is to struggle all your life. “I am a diploma holder. Still, I chose to take up the art of pottery after a couple of years of service. I wanted to keep the family tradition alive,” says Chauhan sitting in his workshop in First Wadi in bustling Kumbharwada in Dharavi. “The most basic hurdle plaguing every potter today is that of selling their produce. The demand for our products is so very limited,” rues this third-generation potter.

In the mid-19th century, when Mumbai, then Bombay, was still developing into an important port city, the Kumbhars or the Prajapatis – people belonging to a caste that is traditionally involved in pottery – used to come from Saurashtra to Mumbai via the sea to make their livelihood for eight months a year. The soil around Dharavi was perfect for their business, so in the mid-1930s, when they requested the British government to allot them some land, the government leased them 13.5 acres of land in Dharavi for 99 years. Around 200 families of potters settled in this area and started their small-scale business of producing earthen pots, diyas, murals, etc. The community continues to grow, with potters from other areas also migrating here in the hope of a better future.

As one walks down the crowded lanes of the Kumbharwada which now houses more than 400 families involved in pottery, one cannot miss the pre-Navratri bustle. Kumbharwada produces around 70 per cent of the earthen pots and diyas sold in Mumbai. The narrow labyrinths are strewn with earthen ware, painting the entire scenery in hues of reds, browns and blacks. This flurry belies the fact that the youngsters of the community are no longer interested in taking up pottery as a profession.

Jhagdamba Bhai Yadav, who owns a PVC wholesale business in Kumbharwada, says, “The number of people taking up pottery as a profession is decreasing gradually. Every potter would like to educate his children instead and give them a better future.”

Meghji Bhai, 56, who dropped out of school to help his father in pottery, takes pride in the fact that his two grandchildren study in private schools. Meghji, his wife, his three sons and their spouses are all potters. Some potters can afford to hire labour to



“The number of people taking up pottery as a profession is decreasing gradually. Every potter would like to educate his children instead”

do menial chores like carrying the raw materials and mixing the clay, but Meghji bhai says he is not one of them. “The cost of living is increasing rapidly and so is the cost of our raw materials. The cotton and wood shavings we use in our kilns are expensive and we have to import our clay all the way from Rajkot, Thaan and Morbi in Gujarat. The same clay which costs ₹1,000 per tonne there, costs

us anywhere between ₹3,000 and ₹4,000 by the time it gets here.”

Sitting in his Third Wadi workshop, the frail, white-haired Meghji intently turns the potter’s wheel, fashioning a perfectly shaped pot from a lump of clay. He continues, “Our main income is very seasonal in nature. Sales go up during Navratri, Diwali and Makar Sakranti. Despite it being a hand-to-mouth existence, I am content and do not wish to run after money like most people these days.”

It is not just the shrinking markets and rising prices that these artisans have to deal with. Most often, the potters sell their wares to middlemen at throwaway prices. Natha Bhai shares, “When I was a child, we hardly had enough to eat. My parents had six children and our daily earnings would not exceed ₹5. The shop-owner gave us ₹1 for 40 pots and he sold each pot for ₹1 himself. It was only by accident that my parents realised that that they could directly sell their pots in the market for ₹1. This was the turning point in our lives.” Natha Bhai though is one of the lucky few to have gotten out of the middleman menace and there are many others who are still beset by this trenchant problem.

Despite their many troubles, or perhaps because of them, there

is a strong sense of community among the people living in Kumbharwada. Since their personal spaces also coincide with their work spaces, their community is very closely knit. But even that seems to be a thing of the past for people who have spent their entire lives here. Says Natha Bhai Chauhan, “Back in the old days, whenever someone died, the entire wada (lane) would shut down in mourning. But these days, people here do not seem to feel for each other as much and only bother about money. The community spirit is vanishing.”

The women of Kumbharwada play an essential role in the tradition and culture of this area. They labour endlessly, equally shouldering all the responsibilities with the men. According to the kumbhar tradition, women are forbidden to work on a *chakh* or the potter’s wheel because it is worshipped, like other Hindu gods, on occasions like Diwali. Women only do menial work – drying earthenware, mixing

clay, rolling it into balls, taking the newly-baked earthenware out of the kiln, etc.

Geeta Govind Vejad, 38, was born and brought up in the Kumbharwada. Married into a family of potters 16 years ago, she paints and decorates diyas and clay pots to support her husband’s income. Her husband, a third generation Kumbhar, quit pottery and now has his own small clothes manufacturing unit in the neighbourhood. Geeta manages to colour around 300 diyas a day which fetches her ₹75, at the current rate of ₹15 per 100 diyas. Previously, she got only ₹10 to paint 100 diyas.

While most potters lament the fact that their work neither has a market nor is considered art, some like Kasam Dawood refuse to believe that this is the end of the road for potters like himself. He sees technical innovations not as robbing the potter of his greatness or art, but as supplementing it. “A lot of changes have come about in our community of potters. Due to the invention of the electric

wheel, production has increased and it has become more convenient to make pots. The market for clay and ceramic products is still very limited but there is a huge potential in this industry,” he insists. Born and brought up in Kumbharwada, Dawood is a manufacturer of earthenware and also has a pottery factory at Vangani in Thane district. He also trades in the stock market and is a member of the Prajapati Saurashtra Kumbhar Mandal that oversees the potter community in Dharavi.

Those who can afford to expand their business have already started venturing into ceramic-ware. They believe that ceramic pottery will open up newer markets and increase their incomes. Most potters in Kumbharwada have also started teaching studio pottery in various educational institutions and privately organised workshops. As the potters of Kumbharwada fashion things of beauty from a lump of clay, they hope everyday to create a better future for themselves. ■

Trial by fire

Tanvi Barge

After eight years and Rs 51 crores have been spent on it, the Dharavi Redevelopment Project (DRP) continues to face hurdles. The residents of Dharavi allege that massive profits are being offered to developers and government without actually providing adequately for those displaced by the new development. While previous redevelopment plans required the consent of at least 70 percent of the population, DRP’s planning process is said to have been top-down, without the involvement of the community. The residents are unhappy with the 300 square feet houses that are being offered to them and want 400 square feet homes for every family instead.

For the potters in Dharavi it is not just their homes at stake but also their livelihoods. The residents of Kumbharwada in Dharavi occupy approximately 13 acres of Dharavi, which works out to almost 5,66,000 square feet of floor space. Now with the DRP, the potters allege that they are being cornered into just four acres of the original space they occupied, thereby robbing them of 9 acres. They are also against the present scheme because it promises every household only 300 square feet, irrespective of the size of their present holding.

The potters also estimate that they need at least 92 square feet to store and mould the clay, install their potters’ wheels,



ovens, dry their produce and sell them. They say that the proposed area of 28 square feet is clearly inadequate. They also point out that they need more space because they burn cotton, waste oil and cloth, emitting harmful gases.

Additionally, the Kumbhars argue that the Kumbharwada is not a part of the Dharavi ‘slum’ because they have land deeds issued by the erstwhile British government to show that they have 99-year leases. But proponents of DRP say that the colonial law under which the leases were given have been repealed, thereby invalidating the lease documents.

The potters claim that they are not against development but insist that the government consult them as stakeholders in any development plans that it draws up for Kumbharwada. For here they have laboured for generations and now as the wheel of time turns, their voices also need to be heard.

Dirt of the nation

We have a 20-year law in place against manual scavenging. Yet, the profession thrives with lower caste workers in the city municipality forced to literally clean our shit.

Text Piyush Garud | Photos Sudharak Olwe

Ramakant Solanki is a Class IV municipal sanitation worker. He cleans septic tanks which carry urine and faeces. *Halalkhor* is the official designation given to Solanki by the Kalyan-Dombivali Municipal Corporation (KDMC). After working for hours in the tanks, with no gloves, proper boots or protection of any sort, he stinks. No one sits next to him while at work or in the hotel where he stops for a cup of tea. Solanki tells me that he drinks a lot; most mornings he comes to work drunk. “A sober mind will make it practically impossible for me to do this job,” says Solanki.

India is perhaps the only country where manual scavenging still exists as a profession. Most countries have an organised septic system consisting of a pipe that carries waste water from toilets and showers into a septic tank buried outside. In other countries, sanitation workers are provided with state-of-the-art technology that prevents direct exposure to sewage water and waste. In India, such a system has not been effectively implemented because of the prevalence of dry (non-flush) latrines in a number of public toilets. The non-implementation of technology also means that the workers have to climb down into the pit or the septic tank which carries human waste.

In an interview with the *Frontline* magazine, Bezwada Wilson, National Convener of the Safai Karmachari Association, says that there is no reliable data available on the number of manual scavengers in the country. In 2010, the government had proposed a national survey of the number of workers, which was later dropped. In the interview, Wilson states, “We have conducted sample surveys with our limited resources, and we estimate that there could be as many as 12 lakh scavengers in the country.”

Any understanding of the prevalence of manual scavenging in India has to incorporate the centrality of the caste system. Almost all sanitation workers belong to the Dalit community, of which sewage workers, pit workers, belong to the Bhangi community. The Bhangis are placed at the lowest level of the caste hierarchy and are considered unclean and impure, to the extent that even other Dalits consider them as untouchables. Santosh Chavan, a scavenger hailing from Ahmedabad, Gujarat, states, “When we work, those of other castes ask us not to come near them. At tea canteens, they have separate tea tumblers which we are expected to clean ourselves. We still cannot enter temples or use water taps meant for people of the upper castes. I have to travel one kilometre just to get water.” In the presence of a structure that allows



untouchability to exist even today, the necessity of legal measures to abolish manual scavenging becomes even more pertinent.

As a step towards addressing the issue of manual scavenging, the Employment of Manual Scavengers and Construction of Dry Latrines (Prohibition) Act was passed in 1993. However, there seems to be little awareness about the Act. Ironically, the Indian Railways is one of the biggest employers of manual scavengers, as are local municipal bodies across the country.

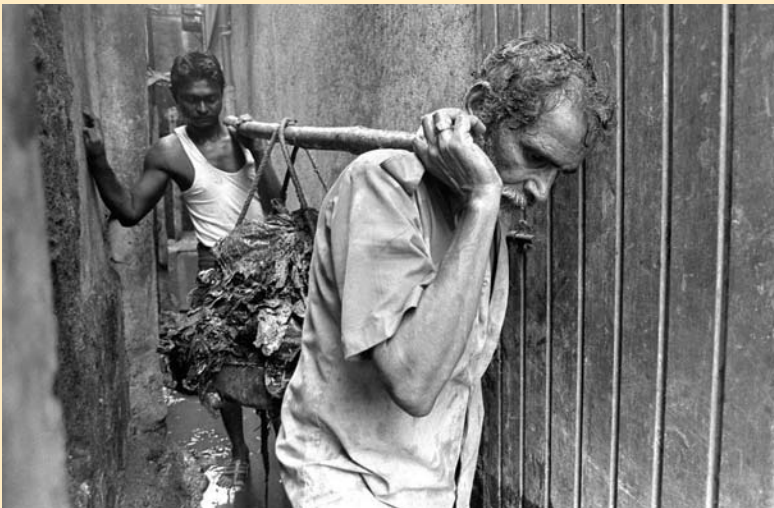
These manual scavenging workers employed by the Brihanmumbai Municipal Corporation (BMC) work under a *mukadam* or supervisor who is responsible for allotting the workers to their respective areas and duties. Usually, there are 20 workers in a ward under one *mukadam*. However, Solanki says, “There are a few people who don’t turn up for their daily work and bribe the Mukadam for their attendance. So most of the workload falls on the shoulders of the few honest workers who won’t bribe him. Most of us can’t afford a bribe anyway.”

The life expectancy of these workers is between 50 and 55 years. The profession is extremely hazardous and scavengers often suffer from respiratory diseases, gastrointestinal disorders and trachoma, a disease often resulting in blindness. Deaths due to tuberculosis (TB) are also common. On an average, 25 sanitation workers of the BMC die every year due to these illnesses. Liquor consumption among the workers is also high, owing to the inhuman conditions in which they are expected to work. As Solanki tells me, for most workers consuming alcohol makes them temporarily immune to their work conditions.

Conversations with the workers reveal that banks usually don’t give loans to Class IV workers. This often means that the

workers cannot afford an alternative to the accommodation provided by the municipal corporation. On the demise of the workers, their children are often forced to join the same profession just to hold on to their homes – flats provided by the corporation. An example is Rakesh Chauhan, an MBA graduate whose father was a manual scavenger from Kalyan. Although a post-graduate, Chauhan still works as a Class IV worker in the KDMC in order to shelter his big family. Chauhan, a Valmiki, rues that he failed to break the vicious circle that the family's caste status forced them into. He says, "I didn't have a job when my father died, so I had to take up his old job. Otherwise our entire family would have had to leave the house given by the municipality."

Chauhan's example isn't a sporadic one. A number of the present workers are graduates or have passed their HSC. However, in order to retain the accommodation provided to them by the BMC and to get employed in the same capacity as their fathers, they fake their education qualification as 10th pass or 10th fail. Most of these workers hope that after employment, a few years down the line, they can submit their actual degrees and diplomas and get promotions. However, they soon realise that their profession comes with a rigid code of its own. A worker tells me that before they are given their joining letters, KDMC officials make



Photography for social change

Over the past 20 years that Sudharak Olwe has worked as a press photographer, he has built a portfolio of sensitively shot photographs on a number of social issues in India. In 2005, he received the All Roads Photographers Award from National Geographic for his insightful and poignant photo essay, *In Search Of Dignity and Justice: The Untold Story of Mumbai's Conservancy Workers*. The photographs featured here are from that photo essay. – Ed.

them fill an affidavit that states that they do not mind doing sanitation work for the KDMC and will not ask for a promotion in the future. It seems that despite their educational qualifications, most job openings offered by the KDMC are not available for these workers.

The country has seen a number of efforts towards eradicating manual scavenging. Sulabh International, started in 1970, is one such NGO that aims to liberate scavengers by employing low-cost sanitation models. Efforts of individuals such as Wilson Bezwada in educating the workers about their rights and mobilising them to put pressure on the government has also led to the issue being brought into the public domain. Recently, an episode of *Satyamev Jayate*, a show hosted by Aamir Khan, ensured that the inhumanity of manual scavenging became a topic of household conversation. However, as conversations with the workers reveal, discrimination within the system has meant that their work conditions are rarely questioned. It seems that Gandhi's Harijans will remain synonymous with filth and impurity unless the government is firm in its resolve to eliminate this heinous practice. ■





Brun-bai meri jaan

The people behind Mumbai's Irani Cafés, the common man's haven of bread and chai, are as eclectic as the cafés themselves. While some manage to adapt to the ever-changing needs of the city, some firmly resist change and others just slowly fall off the culinary map.

Text Ananda Siddhartha | Photos Ananda Siddhartha

On most days of the week, one can find 30-year-old Mirza Irani behind the cash counter of his small, non-descript corner store. Between billing purchases for small groceries, Irani barks out orders to the four or five waiters flitting around the shop. Apart from being a grocery store and a bakery, Café Colony in Matunga is also one of the few remaining Irani cafés in Mumbai.

At one of the many tiny tables crammed into the shop, and right across from Irani's counter perch, sits his father, Agha Irani. The 68-year-old with watchful eyes and a smiling face, is often found chatting boisterously with customers, many of whom are around his age. Agha Irani says both his son and daughter are taking over the family business. Although ownership has changed hands many times since the café's opening in 1933, Agha is adamant to keep it in the family. And in an ever-changing, fast-paced city like Mumbai, that is no small feat.

There are few places in the city that can match the Irani cafés' combination of good ambience, great food and reasonable pricing.

Having settled in India during the late 19th and early 20th centuries, Zoroastrian Iranians opened small cafés in Mumbai (then Bombay) in India and Karachi in Pakistan. Usually these were corner stores, traditionally considered inauspicious by Gujarati and Marwari traders. "In the past there were over 250 Irani cafés that dotted the by-lanes of the city but today there are only about a dozen left," says Sarosh Irani, one of the proprietors of B Merwan and Co, an Irani café located near Grant Road Station.

The marble-topped tables and bentwood chairs of B Merwan and Co are a concession to bygone times when horse-drawn carriages were not a tourist attraction but a regular feature on the streets of Mumbai. Like other Irani cafés, this too has two entrances, which allows for a steady stream of people in and out of the café.

"My forefathers started this place in 1914. It is going to be 100 years old in two years. This gives us more reason to stay because this will prevent people from coming and demolishing the place

as it will soon be considered a heritage building,” he says while handing out change to a customer.

What one does not have to worry about while visiting these cafés is the cost of a snack or a meal. They are easy on the pocket, in stark contrast to some other hotels in the city where one has to spend a small fortune to have a simple meal. “If we want, we can double our prices or even raise them four-fold. But our tea has remained roughly the same price for the last 15 years. It was only in 2007 that we were forced to increase it by one rupee because of the rise in the cost of sugar,” points out Irani.

As in the past, these cafés are a hit with the college-going crowd that flocks to them at least a couple of times a week. Radhika Trivedi, a student of St Xavier’s College, frequents Kyani & Co. The ₹100 pocket money that she gets is just right for her to eat to her heart’s content and still have money left for other expenditures. “I just wait for the days when we have a free period after lunch. The food, the ambience and the price of the place is just too hard to resist,” she says, polishing off her plate of kheema pav.

There are also those who have come to these cafés as kids and now relive their childhood by bringing their own kids, recounting stories with both nostalgia and excitement. These places are more than just cafés. Ali Irani, the owner of the 80-year-old Koolar and Co in Matunga says, Koolar, like some other Irani cafés, was not solely a café but also doubled up as a provision store. “We had everything from kerosene to all types of sports equipment. At one point, we were the only place in Mumbai which used to sell cigarettes,” says Irani.

Like the owners, in some cafés, the waiters too have been around for a couple of generations. “Our café has a strong sense of family. Some of the waiters you see here today are sons of the waiters whose fathers have worked here. Some of them have moved on and become taxi drivers or started their own businesses. But they come back from time to time to have a chai with us,” says Ali Irani. Raj Kulkarni,

36, formerly an employee at B Merwan, quit his job as a waiter and switched to driving a taxi. “The job I have been doing for the past year gives me more money but my body also takes a beating with the long hours of work. I would come back to this place if I had a choice but unfortunately I don’t,” he says.

Adi Mazkooi, the owner of Café Excelsior established in 1919, maintains that running the café has never been a problem as far as employees are concerned. Needing on average between 12 and

20 people to run the place smoothly, he lays his luck down to his location. “A lot of people come here, right outside VT station, looking for a job. We try them out for a month or so before we take them on permanently.”

The cooks at the café have been the same for the past 30 years. “They are from Kerala and are very good cooks. We have a closely guarded family recipe of mayonnaise, our USP, for our chicken rolls, which they have made day in and day out,” says Mazkooi, smiling proudly. “If I can



Sudhir Patwardhan, *Irani Restaurant*, 1977

work here for the next 40 years, I will. It is a family-owned business and will remain so. We have no plans to sell our space. No one has the guts to ask us.”

Traditionally, Irani cafés were places where one could get a quick chai, a bun-maskar (bun and butter), kheema-pav and a host of other small items. But today a changed business sense and customer demand has forced most of the remaining cafés to alter, or altogether change, their menus and ambience. Café Excelsior, for example, has added a Chinese cuisine section to their menu. Other places have been more liberal with their changes, so much so that they do not even resemble the humble Irani cafés they began as.

Café Royal in Colaba no longer dishes out the delicacies it was known for. Instead, it now serves sizzlers and other continental dishes, apart from beer which cannot be bracketed as easy on the pocket, a feature Irani cafés were known for. Upon entering you are greeted not by a waiter in a white uniform with a towel slung over his shoulder, but by a sharply dressed man in a suit who shows you to your table. Café Mondegar and Leopold Café that were also once Irani cafés have been transformed into pubs frequented by tourists from all over the world.



While these cafés have changed with the times there are others that have stayed roughly the same. “Until today, there have been no big changes in the place. We have done minor repairs to the building whenever necessary, but we want to preserve the spirit of the place. Besides, renovation has the problem of increasing prices and therefore decreasing the

“The main reason Irani cafés have closed or changed is because they have been bought by somebody else instead of remaining in the family”

customer base. The floors, walls, mirrors and teak wood beams are the same as they were a hundred years ago,” says Agha Irani of Café Colony.

“The main reason why Irani cafés have closed down or changed is because they have been bought over by somebody else instead of remaining within the family,” he adds. “Giving in to pressure from the extremely competitive food market is another reason.” A good example is Gulshan-e-Iran near Crawford market where one is no longer greeted with the

familiar smell of freshly baked bread but with fried chicken, fries and Pepsi.

Koolar and Co too seems to have fallen victim to the pressures of real estate sharks and fast food joints. Within a year’s time, Koolar is expected to be converted into a McDonald’s branch. “I have come to Koolar at least twice a week, for the last 30 years. It is very sad that they are closing down. This is another landmark that Mumbai is going to lose, not forgetting that Ali will be replaced behind the counter by a person donning a ridiculous McDonald’s cap. I will have nowhere to go to have a nice cup of chai and relax now,” laments 64-year-old Muhammed Rustom, a regular customer.

While Rustom dwells on what he will do in the future, Ilyas Attarwala (see page 6) has fond memories of the past. “Sarvi at Nagpada Junction and Gulshan-e-Iran were two places we used to go to a lot during our childhood. My brothers and I used to look forward to Sunday morning breakfasts when the whole family used to go there,” says Mr. Attarwala nostalgically.

Mr Attarwala likens the slow demise of the Irani café to that of the Parsis in Mumbai. “That family legacy seems to be dying out,” he says mournfully. When an Irani café disappears, talented cooks and friendly waiters too disappear, merging with the hustle and bustle of everyday life, getting lost in the multitude of people in the city. ■



The School of Media and Cultural Studies, TISS

The School of Media and Cultural Studies of the Tata Institute of Social Sciences, Mumbai, is engaged in media teaching, production, research and dissemination.

A unique feature of the School is the close linkage between the technical and academic areas of its work. The SMCS has done pioneering work in critical media education in the country. It has a two-year Masters degree in Media and Cultural Studies which focuses on professional media practice and research within a framework that enables the development of a critical perspective on media, culture and society. It seeks to enable the creation of a lively group of thinking doers and doing thinkers. The students of the School produce documentary films and other video/audio/web-based texts. It also offers a PG Diploma/Dual Degree in Community Media

Production has been an important component of the School's work. It has to its credit more than 40 awards at national and international film festivals. The School is also involved in media and cultural studies research. The School has three Centres.

Centre for Critical Media Praxis (CCMP)

The emergence of digital communication technologies and convergence offers exciting possibilities for media production and dissemination. The CCMP consolidates the praxis base of CMCS (including media production and theorising on practice)

and expands its scope to include new media, community based participatory initiatives and the production of multi-media and web based materials. The CCMP also anchors the production and skill-based courses of the School.

Centre for the Study of Contemporary Culture (CSCC)

Cultural Studies in India today is a diverse cross-disciplinary field that engages in an impassioned way with contemporary social political, historical and economic contexts reflecting on questions of ideology, identity, power, and discourse. The rationale behind this Centre is to further engagement both in terms of research and pedagogy focussing particularly on the contemporary. The CSCC also anchors the courses that belong broadly to the area of cultural studies, media studies, critical theory, visual culture, digital cultures, new media and development media.

Media Archive and Resource Centre (MARC)

The MARC consolidates the audio-visual and graphics services currently offered by SMCS. The Digital Archive has built up a valuable collection of around 3000 films as well as photographs and footage. It is in the process of making selected sections of the archive available on the internet. It also networks with other organisations to promote dissemination of films through screenings, film festivals and other events.



Photo: Mangesh Gudekar

Activities of the School

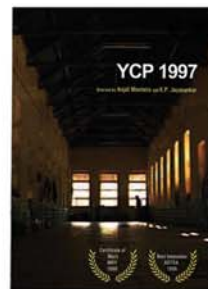
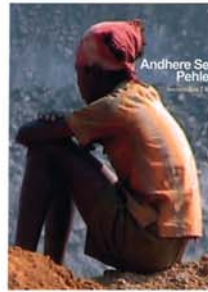
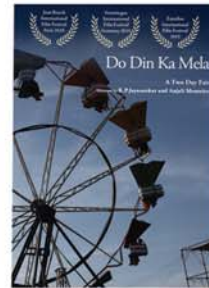
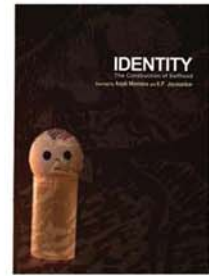
Culture Café is a space for dialogue on issues concerning media, culture and society. It features film screenings, discussions, performances and other events that move us to think critically, discuss actively and enjoy ourselves.

Adda is a weekly film club managed by students. It screens a range of Indian and international documentaries and feature films and invites filmmakers to screen and discuss their work.

Frames of Reference is a national annual student seminar conducted by SMCS. On 17-18 December, 2012, the fifth edition of Frames of Reference will mark 20 years of the 1992-93 communal riots in Mumbai and examines the politics of violence/erasure/memory.

Cut.In is an annual student film festival organized by SMCS and invites students of diploma, graduate and postgraduate programmes to participate in categories from fiction to documentaries and public service announcements. The fifth Cut.In Students' Film Festival is being held on 15-16 December, 2012.

Early Career Fellowships. SMCS offers two fellowships for film-makers and media practitioners at an early stage of their career. The fellowships are designed to provide the resources and environment for films, websites, multi-media artefacts and other audio-visual media documentation projects that contribute to the growing body of documentary, audio-visual and new media work in India.



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