



SARA RONCAGLIA

Feeding the City

Work and Food Culture of the Mumbai *Dabbawalas*

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WORK AND FOOD CULTURE OF
THE MUMBAI *DABBAWALAS*

Sara Roncaglia

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One blue-bright Bombay morning, in the middle of the masses on the street, I have a vision: that all these individuals, each with his or her own favourite song and hairstyle, each tormented by an exclusive demon, form but the discrete cells of one gigantic organism, one vast but singular intelligence, one sensibility, one consciousness. Each person is the end product of an exquisitely refined specialization and has a particular task to perform, no less and no more important than that of any other of the six billion components of the organism. It is a terrifying image; it makes me feel crushed, it eliminates my sense of myself, but it is ultimately comforting because it is such a lovely vision of belonging. All these ill-assorted people walking towards the giant clock on Churchgate: they are me; they are my body and my flesh. The crowd is the self, fourteen million avatars of it, fourteen million celebrations. I will not merge into them; I have elaborated myself into them. And if I understand them well, they will all merge back into me, and the crowd will become the self, one, many-splendoured.

Suketu Mehta, *Maximum City: Bombay Lost and Found* (London: Headline Review, 2005), p. 590.

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This work is dedicated to Kenneth David, killed tragically in a fatal plane crash while I was in Mumbai.

And to my loved ones.

Preface

This book is about the anthropology of the city or, more accurately, anthropology *in* the city, based on the extensive map of one of the many systems of circulation: food. Food that is carried, delivered and returned from the kitchen to the consumer. The Mumbai *dabbawalas* are food deliverymen that connect homes and workplaces—messenger boys, urban servants who are fast and precise, trustworthy and discreet, clean and punctual. Service, certainly, but service immersed in the teeming ocean of urban modernity. Each day they move along the rail network; their work thus entails a journey and this journey is repeated on a daily basis, with long itineraries cadenced by the sequence of customer addresses where they must deliver without fail the tightly sealed tin that each wife has prepared and handed to them early in the morning, to be taken to a husband working in an office, on a construction site, in a shop, many kilometres away.

A mild sense of duty, of a delicate, humble and scrupulous mission, interwoven with a generous readiness to work for the good of the customer: these are the recurring motifs of work that seem to make the *dabbawalas* happy. They bring together the beneficiary and the benefactor (and is this not pure *Jajmani* philosophy?) in a shared satisfaction, yet seem to expand unexpectedly in the heart of frenzied modernisation. Food is a message, transmitted through nutrition: more than in other contexts, its energetic communication is released socially and physically in space. Born out of tender, loving care, it bridges the distance between one individual and another, passing the expanses desecrated by traffic, the mingling of people and vehicles, environmental impurities of exhaust gases, and inclement weather.

The custom of ordering takeaway food, to be delivered from the restaurant to the consumer's house, is far more widespread in the western

world, although it is also to be found in Indian metropolises. This is a formula that every now and again replaces home-cooked food prepared in the family kitchen, like “going out to eat” without actually going out, a small exception to domestic routine. The *dabbawala* service is just the opposite or the reverse: it conjures up the feeling of home for those away from home. Each day it reinforces ties between the family and the workplace so that the domestic intimacy enclosed in the tiffin can emerge during a lunch break in the office, on a building site, in a factory. In this respect, it is quite similar to the custom once frequent in rural society whereby all kinds of farmworkers were ensured a midday meal.

Sara Roncaglia’s description of the Mumbaite system reveals that, in contrast with more sophisticated market cultures, the order of affections and food containers maintains its tenacious hierarchy of precedence, which is as much about ethics as it is about taste and aesthetics. This is an order that establishes the indissolubility of the nutritional bond between family and work, men and women, etiquette and bodily ritual, and community membership. I believe that this is where the source of an investigative critique can be perceived, suggesting opportunities for research that will sound the innermost depths of the emergence or development of strongly cultural new urban trades. Such trades can take root deep in the cultural sensitivity of a society swarming with ethnic and religious contacts, innervated with open technologies and abysmal poverty, imbued with deep malaise and rocked by the tremors of social distinction. The Mumbai *dabbawalas* are not just a trade corporation but also a structured community, with dense social identity and cohesive recognition ties. The network of responsibilities, functions and organisational complementarity that forms the setting for the work of something like five thousand meal delivery men does not serve only to ensure the best technical standard for the service system. It could be likened to a modern guild, where work and social identity, devotion and economic gain, even the sharing of beliefs and religious works, as well as mutual aid, are part of this business culture.

Similarly, and from the same root, they produce and administer a symbolic substance without which the very existence of services would be compromised, or at least altered, in that implication of oriental *charitas* (and quite different from Christian charity) in which the welfare of the customer and the service provider are identified. This concept leads to a reflection on the comparison between the economic principles

that distinguish different cultures: Italian, of British origins (slowly assimilated in Latin regions), and Hindu, or more broadly southern Asian. In the first case, it is the meeting of interests (or egotisms) to drive the motor of exchange and ultimately to fuel market solidarity on the basis of a useful cross-calculation: a concordance of convenience. In the second case, which extols trade and links the good to the useful, opportunities to achieve personal benefit is seen (or is represented) as an offering for the benefit of others: the offering of oneself or simply an offer to accord with the customer's contentment. In the most intense versions of devotion, indicated in traces of tradition, of *dharma*, this projective orientation achieves forms with greater signs of voluntary dependency. There is no need to stress that in this economic ethic the rhetoric of selflessness (of an uplifting mission) assumes the role of an ideology of social status and easily becomes an image—something that approaches advertising, the self-satisfied glorification of the corporate self, generous, benevolent, humble, and even joyfully submissive.

A fine, tenuous but persistent web enfolds the ramifications of a city that stretches endlessly, enfolds it with an artful ballet of deliveries, cadenced in minutely signed identification symbols (the *dabbawala* alphabet, writes the author: a system of distinctive symbols for groups and individual carriers, also designating places for sorting, delivery and destination). This sort of encrypted language, similar to an elementary information system that combines space and people, actually accompanies the daily weaving of the impalpable web of clientele and servers. Filaments of paths, competition, commodification: no less than other utilitarian-type exchanges, here the portions of comfort (perhaps consolation or affection) that the tiffin contains in its sealed interior, incorporate the insuppressible quality of the contents.

In the final part of her book, Roncaglia gives an overall (and wide-ranging) key for interpretation: gifts and merchandise move hand in hand in this system. Perhaps they even fuse, complement each other. In the wake of Godbout, the scenario transcends the cold mechanics of efficiency, profitability and monetisation: the ultimate utility of the cycle of patrons, services and remunerations does not drain away in the production or reproduction of material advantages, but in the creation of community ties. Compared to this encompassing aim, *dabbawala* work appears as a "business activity incorporated in a moral perspective". In general, this opinion can be accepted, provided that the commitment

does not preclude further steps, which may be even more unpredictable and riskier, and may lead to the products of this moral economy flowing effectively into other, uncontrollable market circuits.

Pier Giorgio Solinas
Siena, 3 March 2012

Introduction

This book is an ethnographic analysis of a local workers cooperative in Mumbai: the Nutan Mumbai Tiffin Box Suppliers Charity Trust (NMTBSCT). This enterprise employs up to 5,000 *dabbawalas*, who have been delivering 200,000 lunch-*dabbas* daily to students, office workers and factory workers since the end of the nineteenth century.¹ A *dabba*, also known as a “tiffin”, is a specially designed circular steel box made up of three separate sections that fit together to form a cylinder of about 20 cm in height. These food containers are commonly used by Mumbaikars (the inhabitants of Mumbai) to carry their lunch, which is prepared in their home and then delivered to them in their place of work by a *dabbawala*. The system allows everyone to eat home-cooked food without hygiene and cross-caste contamination risks.

The first chapter looks at the cultural, historical, and economic relationships between the city of Bombay-Mumbai and the NMTBSCT.² The city provides the dynamic backdrop for the establishment of a system of food distribution that offers a sustainable method of feeding the city in

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- 1 I decided not to use diacritic marks when spelling Hindi and Marathi terms (nouns, names of people and places); nor do I use any Anglicisms in the transcription – such as double vowels (e, o) to express long vowels (i, u). The only exception is the term “*dabbawala*”, formed by the noun “*dabba*” and the suffix “*wala*”, which turns the word into a compound noun (like, for instance, “milk” and “milkman”). Please see the glossary for original spellings. The names of Mumbai districts are the official versions applied by the city’s authorities.
 - 2 Throughout the text I have attempted to follow a historiographical approach, referring to the city as Bombay when referring to its history up to 1995, when the name was changed to Mumbai, and as Mumbai when discussing its situation during the subsequent years. The name-change came about as part of a concerted government strategy to set modern India apart from its colonial past. Yet given how the city’s inhabitants themselves tend to associate different meanings and allures to the old and the new name, in some cases I have found it more meaningful to keep the two names as one single construct (Bombay-Mumbai), reflecting two different, and yet complementary ways of understanding the city’s complex soul.

harmony with traditional values. The *dabbawalas* do not consider this to be merely a job, a viable means for mostly poor and illiterate workers to survive: they see it as their profession.

The second chapter describes how religion, caste, and ideology have converged to generate meaning, ascribing specific values to Indian food. Here I apply a gastrosemantics-oriented approach, exploring how culture makes use of food to signify, comprehend, classify, philosophise, and communicate. This chapter offers a description of the complex relationships that link this process of cultural semantification of food to daily religious practices, the daily routine of Indian women and, lastly, surviving caste-related hierarchies in a vast Indian metropolis like Mumbai.

The third chapter describes the organisational structure of the NMTBSCT—its operational guidelines, its generational turnover, distribution logistics, the delivery process, and the technical solutions that make it extraordinarily efficient despite considerable odds. This includes simple techniques—like the symbols drawn on the *dabba* to identify the recipient's location—or more complex expedients, like the use of the railway network as a sort of mind-map that allows the *dabbawalas* to establish a symbolic and material affinity with this megacity of nineteen million inhabitants.

The closing chapter penetrates the tight-knit relationship that links the entire system of *dabba* preparation and distribution to the cultural processes of Bombay-Mumbai's nutritional transformation. The chapter traces this relationship back to the reasons that have made this Indian metropolis a truly global city; it looks at the eating habits and value systems ascribed to food by the many different migrant groups that make up the city's population. The ongoing acculturation process that accompanies the continuous inflow of migrants of very diverse origins has forged the city's characteristic nutritional physiognomy, recognisable in the diversity of cuisines and eating habits. Yet as the shift from old Bombay to new Mumbai progressed over time, there have also been changes in the tensions between different minorities and local communities, exacerbated by the city's growing ethnicisation. Certain groups have claimed collective rights on the grounds of identity and affiliation to particular castes, regional origins or language. Mumbai has become the stage for bloody racial and religious clashes, and the groups involved usually consider food the prime marker of differentiation and separation. Food has come to express distinctions and rivalries that to some extent already existed within the Indian cultural

tradition, but have now been allowed to degenerate into overt political hostility and outright violence. In this harsh new climate, the “other” is subject to a kind of cultural cannibalism, as each social group aspires to an exclusive monopoly of power and culture.

These conflicts and changes are examined using the “foodscape” concept—a comprehensive approach to global symbolic and material shifts that affect food itself, food cultures and nutritional practices. The case of the *dabbawalas* helps us to understand how taste—the discerning and distinctive aspect of any food-related practice—is becoming a key factor in worldwide cultural transformation. Taste is not conceived simply as a sensorial impulse, but as a signifier, a cultural construct that is socially engineered to transform and lend new meaning to geo-political relationships.

Finally the appendix provides an extensive introduction to the fundamental issues that made my fieldwork possible. It analyses the polysemic nature of cultural diversity, embracing the multitude of meanings attributed to the subject. The diversity theme is usually addressed in relation to practices of social acceptance or rejection of otherness within organisations and institutions. In this perspective, my research is closely entwined with notions of identity, gender, and economic and social status in ethnic and religious minorities.

The book’s title, *Feeding the City*, grew out of this consideration and the verb “to feed” is used here in the sense of “providing nutrition”. It is an explicit reference to the way a nutritional regimen, a specific diet, affects an organism’s state of good or poor health. Stretching the organic metaphor, food can be seen as a vector of phenomena expressing the easy or uneasy coexistence of different cultures in urban contexts. In this perspective, the way the city feeds itself is crucial for a broad cultural anamnesis of Mumbai. Thanks to the daily work of the *dabbawalas*, these cultural shifts come to light as the meals are ferried around the entire city in a distribution system that offers a tangible testimony of cultural coexistence mediated by one of its most potent signifiers, and the one most essential to human physiology: food.

As the twenty-first century ushers in an era of increasing anxiety with regard to humanity’s ability to feed itself, we also witness the gradual global ascendance of a unified cosmology of tastes well as a heightened concern with nutritional practices. This trend is driven by a growing consensus on the importance of food—what it means, how it is produced and processed—and the deeper ethics of its preparation and consumption.

1. Bombay-Mumbai and the *Dabbawalas*: Origin and Development of a Parallel Economy

But if we do look back we must also do so in the knowledge—which gives rise to profound uncertainties—that our physical alienation from India almost inevitably means that we will not be capable of reclaiming precisely the thing that was lost; that we will, in short, create fictions, not actual cities or villages, invisible ones, imaginary homelands, Indias of the mind.

— Salman Rushdie¹

Midday in Mumbai: teeming traffic besieges the city, lines of cars creep forward at a snail's pace, people walk in the road, buses swerve into their bays for a split second, rickshaws and taxis veer into every tiny space, while placid cows browse amongst all kinds of garbage. Hooting horns and chaos. Lunchtime is coming up for most civil servants, office workers, and school children. Nearly two hundred thousand people are waiting for their *dabbawalas*, who arrive promptly with the tiffins they have to deliver.²

1 Salman Rushdie, *Imaginary Homelands: Essays and Criticism 1981–1991* (New York: Viking, 1991), p. 10.

2 The term “tiffin” refers to a light meal popular during the British Raj. The word first made its appearance in the early 1800s and derives from the English verb “to tiff”, referring to the consumption of a midday meal, and “tiffing”, a slang term meaning the consumption of food and drink between meals. It survives in Mumbai’s daily vocabulary to indicate a meal eaten away from home, as well as being used by the *dabbawalas* as a synonym for *dabba*. For further information, consult K. T. Achaya, *Indian Food: A Historical Companion* (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1994).

Dabbas make a long trip every day to reach the people expecting them: a journey through the winding streets of this metropolis, with its twenty million or so inhabitants, and a solid history that goes back almost one hundred and thirty years.³

Origins of an alliance

The history of the *dabbawalas* runs parallel to that of Bombay itself. The archipelago that developed into the modern metropolis of Bombay became a centre of international trade during British rule.⁴ The city was given to Charles II by the Portuguese as part of the dowry for his marriage to Catherine of Braganza in 1661. In 1668, the city was leased by the Crown to the English East India Company (operating at that time out of the port of Surat in present-day Gujarat) for ten gold sovereigns. It was not until about 1780 that Bombay began to exceed the importance of Surat, India's leading trading port. Thanks to exports of raw cotton and opium to China, what had appeared as a dreary fishing town—where the British had not expected to survive for more than two monsoons—became the second most important city of the colonial Empire.

The 1861 American Civil War gave further stimulus to Bombay's development as the British textile industry moved its bases to India and used the city as a production and export centre. The metropolis experienced startling economic growth and attracted significant amounts of capital for the creation of new investment and employment opportunities. The most evident aspect of this change, a trait of Bombay still seen today, was a migrant workforce arriving from outlying rural areas in search of employment. The gradual extension of roads and railways (the first railway line from Bombay to Thana was opened in 1853) made it easier for increasing numbers of people to travel all over India. The end of the

3 *Dabba* means "box" in Hindi. In this case it means a special container, made of steel and consisting of three separate sections that assemble into a cylinder about eight inches high, used specifically for taking lunch to work. The noun *dabbawala*, formed by the noun *dabba* and the suffix *wala*—which turns the word into a compound noun—means "he who carries *dabba*".

4 The city was named following the 1534 landing of Portuguese conquerors in the archipelago of seven islands known as Heptanesia (Greek for a "cluster of seven islands") in the Bronze Age. The islands of Bombay, Colaba, Mazagaon, Little Colaba, Mahim, Parel and Worli were called "Bom Bahia", the "welcoming port", by the Portuguese. When the city became part of British Crown possessions its name changed from "Bombaim" (the crasis of Bom Bahia) to Bombay.

American Civil War and the ensuing crash of cotton prices were the first stumbling block in the city's industrial expansion. But when the Suez Canal opened in 1869, it reduced the distance to London by approximately three-quarters, and cotton exports became one of the major contributors to the colonial economy. Bombay, a point where the land meets the seas, was christened *urbs prima in Indis* by the British and grew into a commercial hub for the whole of India.

The transformation from a fishing village to an important industrial city was partly the product of Bombay's connection to the British Empire. It actually became common to think of the city as the main driver of westernisation for the Indian subcontinent, although it was equally true that the centripetal forces moulding its commercial and industrial development were not just underpinned by western modernising forces. The Indian commodity market was linked to broader production and trade relations with the hinterland and with foreign markets (for instance trade in sugar, indigo and opium),⁵ and its cotton mills relied on increased production and domestic market penetration. By 1920 Bombay held two fifths of India's total foreign trade, seventy per cent of coastal trade, and the majority of exports to the Persian Gulf and ports of East Africa. The city slowly evolved into a business hub, simultaneously turning into a political, administrative and educational centre where the arrival of new money created opportunities. It therefore attracted increasing numbers of migrants from all over India and the old continent, leading to the development of new forms of cohabitation and social organisation.⁶

A city of migrants

Bombay's remarkable development was reflected in the evolution of its social and demographic profile. In 1661, the population was estimated at

5 Giorgio Borsa, *La nascita del mondo moderno in Asia orientale. La penetrazione europea e la crisi delle società tradizionali in India, Cina e Giappone* (Milan: Rizzoli, 1977). Kirti Narayan Chaudhuri wrote that "The colonial impact on Asia was not confined just to diverting the flow of trade in a longitudinal direction from the previous latitudinal flow; it reoriented Asian intellectual thought in a similar direction as well". See Kirti Narayan Chaudhuri, *Asia before Europe: Economy and Civilisation of the Indian Ocean from the Rise of Islam to 1750* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991), p. 11.

6 Rajnarayan Chandavarkar, *The Origins of Industrial Capitalism in India: Business Strategies and the Working Classes in Bombay, 1900–1940* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994); Gillian Tindall, *City of Gold: The Biography of Bombay* (New Delhi: Penguin, 1982).

about 10,000; by 1872 it had risen to 644,405; by 1941 it was at 1,489,883.⁷ A series of events were decisive for this population growth which included opium trade with China; the outbreak of the American Civil War; the expansion of the textile industry and the end of World War I.⁸ Of course, there were also times when this steady flow of people dropped, in particular at the time of the 1918 famine and influenza epidemic, but it never stopped completely. If a city's vitality can also be seen in its ability to attract, then Bombay has certainly never ceased to be the destination for the dreams of millions of people. This progressive demographic increase became a growth pattern characteristic of the city, a model that formed an urban cultural landscape with a policy of being open to migrants from different contexts, welcoming and integrating faiths, languages, and ethnic groups.

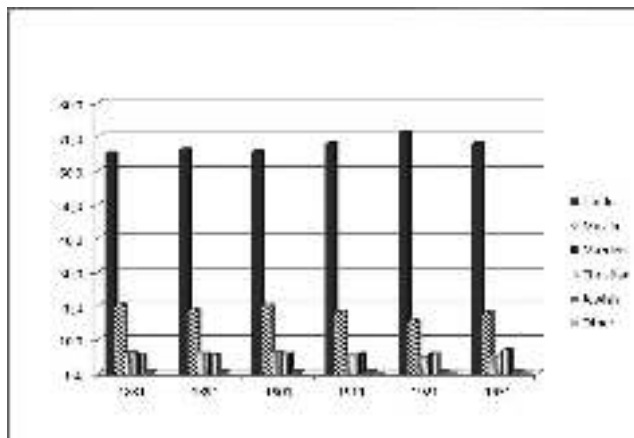


Figure 1. Percentage distribution of Bombay population classified by religion, 1881–1931.⁹

As is evident from the table above, in the years 1881 to 1931 the city was open to all types of worship but had a Hindu majority accounting for about two thirds of the resident population. Although not specified here, the

⁷ Chandavarkar (1994), p. 30.

⁸ Mainly thanks to the significant fortunes of the large Jamsetjee Jeejeebhoy Parsi and Sons mercantile agency, the leading exporter to China of opium produced in Malwa, Gujarat; see Peter Ward Fay, *The Opium War 1840–1842* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1975).

⁹ Source: Rajnarayan Chandavarkar, *The Origins of Industrial Capitalism in India: Business Strategies and the Working Classes in Bombay, 1900–1940* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994), p. 31.

category 'Hindu' embraces sister faiths like Jainism, Buddhism and Sikhism. Other religious groups were more or less minorities. The Parsees, for example, accounted for about five per cent of the population, but the role they played in trade and in business afforded them significant economic and political influence, despite their small number.

The Parsees originated in Persia and were descendants of the last Zoroastrians, migrating to India in the sixth century and settling in present-day Gujarat to escape religious persecution by the Muslims. Attipat Krishnaswami Ramanujan tells the story that, when the Parsees arrived in Gujarat, the region's ruler opposed their presence and sent them a diplomat holding a symbolic message: a glass filled to the brim with milk, indicating that the container could hold no more. The Parsees then sent the monarch back his full glass of milk in which a spoonful of sugar had been dissolved, expressing their intention to mingle with the native population as sugar does with milk: sweetly and taking up no space. The ruler was pleasantly surprised by this gesture and welcomed them.¹⁰ In the mid-1600s the Parsees moved from Surat to Bombay because the British Governor, Gerald Aungier, offered favourable conditions to those who wanted to come to the city.¹¹ One of the main requirements for settling in Bombay was that they agreed not to preach their religion, a pact still respected by the descendants of the ancient Mazdeists.

The most important religious community after the Hindus was that of the Muslims, who made up about one fifth of the population. What the numbers do not reveal is that the Muslims (like the Parsees and Hindus) were and remain a heterogeneous group. Socially they are a stratified population of various sects: Shiites, Sunnis and Ismailis of the most diverse denominations. In Bombay there were two main groups: the Khoja and the Bhora.

10 Attipat Krishnaswami Ramanujan, "Food for Thought: Toward an Anthology of Food Images", in *The Eternal Food: Gastronomic Ideas and Experiences of Hindus and Buddhists*, ed. by Ravindra S. Khare (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1992), pp. 221–50 (p. 238).

11 The complex history of the Parsees very briefly outlined here can be explored fully by reading Eckehard Kulke, *The Parsees in India: a Minority as an Agent of Social Change* (New Delhi: Vikas, 1978), or the excellent two-volume work by Dosabhai Framji Karaka, *History of Parsees; Including their Manners, Customs, Religion and Present Position* (London: Macmillan, 1884). John Armstrong defines Parsee migration as an archetypal diaspora, because the Parsees have succeeded in safeguarding the bonds with their ancient myths and their distinctive alphabet. See John Armstrong, "Archetypal Diasporas", in *Ethnicity*, ed. by John Hutchinson and Anthony D. Smith (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1996), pp. 120–26.

The Khoja were a caste of traders established in the fourteenth century by a follower of the Agha Khan, spiritual leader of the Ismailis sect. The term Khoja is the Indianised version of the Persian word *Khvajah*, meaning “respectable, rich person, wealthy merchant”. Traditionally engaged in commercial activities, the Khojas are converted Hindus, who keep accounts in Hindi, and follow Hindu customs. In 1847, the Bombay High Court actually ordered that the Muslim law of succession was not to be applied to their communities. So, for instance, women are excluded from the right to inherit property. Moreover, the rules applied to marriage, divorce, birth and funeral rites are different, merging Muslim and Hindu practices.¹²

The Bhora, also known as “Bohara” or “Vohra”, whose name derives from the Gujarati *vohorvu* or *vyavahar*, from the verb “to trade”, are Shiite descendants of Hindus who had converted to Islam. The earliest communities can be traced back to Gujarat in the eleventh century and fall mainly into three distinct groups: Ismaili, Jafara, and Dawoodi. While the Ismailis swore loyalty to the Da’i Mutlaq in Yemen, the Jafara adopted Sunni Hanafi beliefs; after the schism, the Bhora Ismailis were heavily persecuted by local rulers. The Dawoodi, considered the best organised of the three groups, were the last to be formed by the two Da’i (the foremost being Tahir Sayf al-Din) and contributed to the shaping of the current community. The members of the Bombay Bhora community are chiefly small-scale itinerant vendors of bric-à-brac and trinkets or meat. Some became particularly wealthy by trading with China. As a consequence of this new-found wealth, some descendants of these families have had access to higher education, become judges or doctors, and are esteemed professionals in the city.¹³

Lastly, there are small communities of Christians and Jews who have distinguished themselves in the same way as the Parsees through the important role they have acquired in public and business life. Bombay’s Jewish community is currently found mainly in Thane and it falls into three key groups: the Bene Israel (meaning “Children of Israel”), who are the most numerous and consider themselves the descendants of the first Jews who arrived in India about 2,000 years ago; the Malabar or Sephardic Jews, also still called “black Jews”, whose ancestors came to India from Eastern Europe, Spain and Holland about 1,000 years ago, settling in Cochin; finally

12 Reginald E. Enthoven, “Kojah”, in *The Tribes and Castes of Bombay*, ed. by Reginald E. Enthoven, 3 vols. (Bombay: Government Central Press, 1921), vol. 2, pp. 218–30.

13 Asaf A. A. Fyze, “Bohoras”, in *Encyclopaedia of Islam*, 12 vols. (Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1960–2005), vol. 1, pp. 1254–55.

there are the Iraqi Jews, called the “Baghdadi”, who arrived in the late eighteenth century from Iraq, Syria and Iran, fleeing political and religious persecution; they expanded the trade network by setting up economic contacts with Singapore, Hong Kong, Kobe, Aleppo and Baghdad. The Bene Israel group is the biggest of the three Bombay groups and it built the first synagogue, Shaare Rahamim, in 1796. The community acquired particular prestige during the British Raj, when it emerged by developing its businesses and working for the British military corps. While maintaining eating (kosher food), religious (observation of the Sabbath) and hygiene (circumcision) practices typical of their faith, the Indian Jewish community has assimilated local customs and practices like language (predominantly Marathi and English) and the social caste divisions.¹⁴

The Christian-Catholic community has been present since the settlement of the first Portuguese in the seven-island archipelago, founded by the Franciscan friars who arrived on the ships coming from Europe. Historical evidence suggests that they landed as early as the first century AD, with St Thomas Apostle, who began his preaching from the southern coastal areas. The Syro-Malabaric church is one of Kerala’s main Christian denominations and bases its liturgy on the Thomayude Margam (the law of Thomas). In the early period, Bombay Catholics soon built churches and monasteries, converting the local Koli tribes of fishermen.¹⁵

When the city was ceded to the British, missionary work was continued through the Church of Goa. The historical vagaries of this order are long and complex, and it is sufficient to remember that in 1720, members of the Goan clergy were expelled from the city for political reasons and the Vicar of Great Mughal (formerly Vicar of Deccan) was invited to protect the Catholic community with the Vatican’s approval. Despite this, the Goan clergy always tried to recover its position within city government and in 1764 it established a “double jurisdiction” which took the name of the

14 See Nathan Katz, *Who Are the Jews of India?* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2000).

15 The term *koli* actually means “spider” and in Marathi “the weaver of a web”, a meaning derived from the work performed by this tribe. See Vinaja B. Punekar, *The Son Kolis of Bombay* (Bombay: Popular Book Depot, 1959), p. 5; Kavita Rane, *An Observational Study of Communication Skills Involving Fish Retailers in Mumbai* (unpublished MA thesis, University of Mumbai, 2005); and Sanjay Ranade, “The Kolis of Mumbai at Crossroads: Religion, Business and Urbanisation in Cosmopolitan Bombay Today”, paper presented at the 17th Biennial Conference of the Asian Studies Association of Australia, Monash University, Melbourne, 1–3 July 2008, available at <http://artsonline.monash.edu.au/mai/files/2012/07/sanjayranade.pdf> [accessed 20 July 2012].

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