

From Bombay to Mumbai

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Gyan Prakash's most recent book takes us on a journey through Bombay's history, focusing on the myths and fables that have shaped how the city is represented. His ambitious project fails, however, to explain Bombay's transition from a cosmopolitan city to one torn apart by ethnic conflict.

Reviewed: Gyan Prakash, *Mumbai Fables*, Noida/Harper Collins Publishers, 2010, 396 p.

Gyan Prakash's latest book belongs to what he described in one of his articles as the "urban turn."¹ Indeed, over the past two decades, urban studies have proliferated in an academic field previously dominated by studies of Indian rural life. The book's starting point is the same as many recent reflections on Mumbai/Bombay: the sentiment that, since the ethnic riots and bombings of 1992-1993,² a once cosmopolitan city finds itself increasingly torn apart by ethnic violence. Yet Prakash's book differs from other studies, which adopt an historical perspective that is primarily socio-economic, in its choice to reflect on the city's "fables." His seeks "to reveal the historical circumstances portrayed and hidden by the stories and images produced in the past and the present" (p. 23). He pursues this goal over nine chapters, which are for the most part arranged chronologically, while revisiting the city's history from the arrival of the Portuguese to the terrorist attacks of 2008.

The author addresses the city's colonial period by considering two historical landmarks of Mumbai's urban development: the imposing neo-Gothic edifices built by British authorities in the 1870s and 1880s (chapter 2) and the sea promenade built in the 1920s, Marine Drive, which became the city's best known avenue (chapter 3). Reiterating an analysis familiar since the work of A. King, Prakash interprets the "Gothic city" (p. 72) as an assertion of British power over the town at a time when it was undergoing significant commercial and industrial development, as evidenced in the opening of major textile factories. This modern Western urban planning had its downside: insalubrious, poverty-stricken working-class neighborhoods. While emphasizing the effects of colonial domination, which he believes was incapable of identifying the roots of the problem—misery resulting from industrial development—Prakash fails to address the other agents of this "urban horror" (p. 63), particularly textile factory owners, with their low salaries policy, and local urban elites, who run the city while refusing to pay for its poor.

Beginning in chapter 2, the author introduces new material, rather than contenting himself with borrowing from earlier work. Through an examination of the Back Bay water reclamation project, which resulted in the creation of Marine Drive, he offers a lively portrait of

¹ Gyan Prakash, "The Urban Turn," in *Sarai Reader O2: The Cities of Everyday Life*, Delhi, 2002, p. 2-7.

² These riots followed the destruction of the Babri mosque in Ayodhya (in the state of Uttar Pradesh) by Hindu nationalist groups. They pitted Muslims against Hindus, resulting in 900 deaths in Mumbai. The following year, in May 1993, thirteen bombings struck the city. The police investigation concluded that they were acts of vengeance perpetrated by the Muslim mafia.

local political life and elite culture in the 1920s and 30s. This vast project, initiated by British authorities, gave rise to a political scandal orchestrated by the Congress Party stalwart K. F. Nariman. The latter exploited the project's technical errors and the fact that it overran its predicted budget by 90% to denounce the colonial managers. During the 1930s and 40s, lots reclaimed from the sea were built up with art deco structures (notably residences and cinemas). Prakash interprets the adoption of this style as evidence of the industrial and commercial elite's desire to identify itself with globalized industrial modernity—in opposition to colonial neo-Gothic—and as a reflection of the cultural transformations then underway (the spread of jazz, the beginnings of the film industry, etc.).

Next, Prakash addresses the question of the Partition by tracing the careers of several representative figures of the city's multiethnic intellectual community, notably members of the Progressive Writers' Association, founded in 1936, who embraced social realism, and the Indian People Theatre Association, which was created in 1942 at the instigation of the Communist Party. The riots between Hindus and Muslims that broke out in Bombay following independence had a profound effect on these intellectuals. Prakash links this incident to the choice of some members of the Progressive Writers' Association to embrace the film industry. The social outlook of these writers-turned-screenwriters explains, according to Prakash, why the 1950s came to be seen as the golden age of Hindi film and a time when cinema still addressed the population's daily concerns.

Chapter 5 brings the reader into the late fifties, with a judicial affair known as the Nanavati trial. It involved a naval officer who, after killing his wife's lover, a wealthy merchant, pleaded that the death was accidental. Prakash describes tabloid *Blitz*'s campaign to acquit the accused, whom the magazine turned into a symbol of a nation betrayed by the wealthy. Though the officer had acknowledged his guilt, he was ultimately pardoned by political authorities after spending less than three years in jail. For Prakash, this incident, which became a major media story, marks the beginning of the era of populist politics. Yet based on the materials he presents, this line of argument is difficult to follow. Because his analysis is focused on articles published in an English-language newspaper (which, consequently, were less widely distributed), Prakash is not able to demonstrate the affair's political significance and media implications beyond the spheres of the elite and informed public opinion.

Next, the book addresses the rise of Shiv Sena, the far-right Hindu party created in 1966. As the chapter title "From Red to Saffron" indicates, Prakash is primarily concerned with explaining communism's decline in the city's working-class neighborhoods, which had been their bastion until the 1950s, and its replacement by Shiv Sena. The latter's success would appear to lie in its ability to create new political subjects—the "sons of the soil"—and a new urban culture, based on direct action and violence. The starting point of this narrative is the assassination in 1970 of the highly popular communist leader, Krishna Desai, by members of the Hindu party. Yet by choosing to consider only working-class neighborhoods, Prakash overlooks an important part of Shiv Sena's history, which first appealed to the city's Maharashtrian middle classes. To make inroads among workers, the Hindu party had to take control, like the communists did in the 1920s and 30s, of various forms of working-class sociability and be able to provide work to some of its members. Unfortunately, Prakash, in trying to explain Shiv Sena's rise in cultural terms, omits these factors, which are crucial to understanding its local roots.

In chapter 7, the book returns to architectural myths by contrasting two urban projects: Navi Mumbai, a planned community built in 1970, and the resumption of the Black Bay water reclamation project. The first symbolizes the hope that urban planning would develop an efficient and organized metropolis, “a space of industrial capitalism” (p. 261), while the latter offers a rather stark example of liberal democracy’s shortcomings. The resumption of water reclamation resulted in a political scandal when the government sold lots to major industrialists and businessmen without holding an auction, as the law required. Prakash’s analysis of the resulting trial is one of the most illuminating in his book, as it allows him to present issues that are critical to understanding contemporary developments in Mumbai, where affairs involving collusions of interest between politicians and real estate moguls symbolize a form of urban management dominated by speculation at the expense of the majority of the population. The author returns to this theme in chapter 9, when discussing the plan to dismantle Dharavi, Asia’s largest shantytown.

The angle through which Prakash analyzes the city’s recent history is Doga, the dog-masked superhero who first appeared in 1993. Unlike his counterparts in American comic books, Doga violently dispatches criminals rather than handing them over to the judicial system. According to Prakash, Doga is a product of the urban crisis to which Mumbai has succumbed since the 1980s as a result of factory closings, the rise of ethnic violence culminating in the 1992-1993 riots, and the growing importance of the mafia, which the 1993 bombings, ordered by the gang boss Darwood Ibrahim, made brutally apparent. Doga presents himself as a champion of the anti-ethnic struggle, in contrast to the authorities and particularly the city police which, during the riots, either closed its eyes or actively participated in anti-Muslim violence.

Ultimately, Prakash’s attempt to write a comprehensive history of the city by studying its myths proves unconvincing. This has much to do with the lack of a preliminary definition of what the author means by “fable.” Consequently, he is led to place discourses of very different natures and with very different posterities on an equal footing. If Bombay’s image as modern, beautiful (etc.) city spans its entire history, this can hardly be said of the Nanavati affair. It is regrettable, moreover, that the book does not discuss at greater length the ways in which these myths are produced, disseminated, reappropriated, and used by particular urban groups, showing that they fully participate in the city’s political and cultural life—instead of setting itself the somewhat naïve goal of “undo[ing] the fables to lay bare the history of the city *as* society” (p. 24). This lack of rigor results in an often highly caricatured vision of Bombay’s history, in which some social groups, such as local elites during the colonial period or working classes (whose view of the city is, curiously, only discussed in chapter 9 through the prism of an artist’s work, without addressing the rich diversity of their urban culture) are mostly absent, despite their central role in shaping urban life. Because he fails to convey the complexity of urban society and the myths it produces and refrains from historicizing certain phenomenon (ethnic rioting did not begin with the Partition, but in the mid-nineteenth century, with the beginning of labor market rivalries), Prakash does not successfully deconstruct the narrative of a transition from a cosmopolitan to an ethnically divided city—thus falling short of his own stated goal.

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