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Feeding the City Work and Food Culture of the Mumbai Dabbawalas

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Conclusions: Tastes and Cultures

The sphere of taste [...] is stratified. The first level is located towards the periphery of our mental life, where we find the various qualities of taste, which may be associated to a feeling of pleasure or unhappiness. At a second level, which is much deeper and cannot be assimilated to the sphere of simple sensorial qualities, we will find our personality and the unique, specific value it glimpses in the life around it.

— Eugène Minkowski¹

The little *dabbas* that travel daily through the crowded streets of Mumbai can be thought of as narrative devices that describe the cultures of the city.² They are also a gauge of the transformations at play in urban food supply and acculturation that have always characterised Mumbai—a *masala* of ingredients, flavours and commensality. As ethnographic research has taught so successfully and as Homi K. Bhabha has pointed out, “It is in the emergence of the interstices—the overlap and displacement of domains of difference—that the intersubjective and collective experiences of [...] or cultural value are negotiated”.³ The *dabba* can also be seen as “the god of small things”, an expression of a world of tiny things, ordinary things,

1 Eugène Minkowski, *Vers une cosmologie. Fragments philosophiques* (Paris: Aubier-Montaigne, 1936), it. trans. *Verso una cosmologia* (Turin: Einaudi, 2005), pp. 184–85. English translations of this and subsequent quotes from French and Italian sources are by the author.

2 I would like to mention an interesting installation by an Indian artist Bose Krishnamachari in the exhibition *India arte oggi: l'arte contemporanea indiana fra continuità e trasformazione* (2007–2008), hosted at the Spazio Oberdan in Milan. The artwork included several *dabbas* hanging on wires to represent the many voices of Mumbai.

3 Homi K. Bhabha, *The Location of Culture* (London: Routledge, 1994), pp. 1–2.

daily events that seem unimportant but in fact overflow with meaning, apparently embracing a large symbolic heritage.⁴

A humble epistemology

When my fieldwork was completed, I tried to remember the first thing I noticed when I arrived in Mumbai and immediately the memory was of the impact of different, unfamiliar smells and tastes. It is no coincidence that this impact represents a classic case of exoticism and alienation. People are so used to these sensorial stimuli, experiencing the city and its expressions daily, that they influence “social organisation, conceptions of oneself and the cosmos, control of emotions and other areas of the corporal experience”, interpreting sensorial decentralisation as a fundamental law of humble epistemology.⁵ It is not always easy, however, to recognise what is concealed in a taste or smell, because food flows are as extensive and complex as they are invisible. They are, however, recognisable and inscribed as secondary forms in every human body: the traces are seen in leanness or strength; the rejection of certain foods or conversely their adulation; the practices of sharing food that presume a socialisation based on the visibility of the body and its attributes; and, lastly, in the aromas of some cuisines that infiltrate and “spice” the bodies of those who consume them. Perceptions of daily habits and practices often repeat seemingly enduring stereotypes.

4 The reference is to the hologram principle invented by Edgar Morin, who says: “The third is the hologrammatic principle. In a physical hologram, the smallest point in the hologram image contains almost all the information of the object depicted. Not only is the part in the whole, but the whole is in the part”. See Edgar Morin, *Introduction à la pensée complexe* (Paris: ESF Éditeur, 1990), it. trans. *Introduzione al pensiero complesso* (Milan: Sperling and Kupfer, 1993), p. 74.

5 Paul Stoller, *The Taste of Ethnographic Things: The Senses in Anthropology* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1992), p. 5. On sense of taste see David Le Breton, *La Saveur du Monde: une anthropologie des sens* (Paris: Editions Métailié, 2006). In recent years there have been several publications on the sense of smell and its socio-cultural implications. Annick Le Guérer states that “the same smell that marks an individual as belonging to a group and promotes cohesion, marks the individual as alien to other groups and erects a barrier between the individual and the groups”. Smell then becomes the tool, justification or simply the emblem of racial, social or even moral rejection. See Annick Le Guérer, *Les pouvoirs de l'odeur* (Paris: Odile Jacob, 1998). Further references are found in Gianni De Martino, *Odori. Entrate in contatto con il quinto senso* (Melzo: Apogeo, 1997); Alessandro Gusman, *Antropologia dell'olfatto* (Rome: Laterza, 2004); and Alain Corbin, *Le miasme et la jonquille. L'odorat et l'imaginaire social aux XVIII^e et XIX^e siècles* (Paris: Flammarion, 2005).

On closer analysis, representations of food, channelled into the materiality of the body, seem to reflect successfully the dilemmas of modern times and the globalisation processes that affect our everyday lives. Often these dilemmas become dichotomies: slow food versus fast food; local food versus global food; traditional versus modern; organic versus processed.⁶ These polarisations express the primal fears that humans have always had when introducing different foods into their bodies. Once again the theme of cultural diversity is presented with its inherent polysemy: what is familiar is the expression of what it is—summed up in the title of Carlo Petrini's work on these issues, *Buono, pulito e giusto* [*Good, Clean and Right*]—while what is unknown, and therefore different, is dangerous and ambiguous.⁷

Food has always been potentially harmful, so recourse to tradition, and therefore to the syllogism with authenticity, attempts to be a protective measure against possible risks. Which principle, however, do we apply in inventing the protective measures that we use? Ludwig Wittgenstein answers thus: "the principle by which all hazards are reduced, because of their form, to several that are very simple that are surely visible to humans".⁸ This means finding the links that connect global food practices to those of individuals. Food becomes an indicator of cultural changes because the sequence of globalisations that has occurred throughout history created local cultures and new forms of identity, which are expressed through food, language, fashion and tangible signs of continuous, reiterated acculturation processes.

Globalisation is a relatively differentiated transformation process (or set of processes) that historians call a "differential of contemporaneity".⁹ Its local manifestations are not always identical, since they are expressed by mixing indigenous elements with others foreign to the territory. Food can express the diversity of forms that globalisation has assumed and continues to adopt, especially if it can be connected to the dynamics of large scale

6 Richard Wilk, *Home Cooking in the Global Village: Caribbean Food from Buccaneers to Ecotourists* (Oxford: Berg, 2006).

7 Carlo Petrini, *Buono, pulito e giusto. Principi di una nuova gastrosemantica* (Turin: Einaudi, 2005). It is not only a dichotomous polarisation: facets of food are far more indistinct.

8 Ludwig Wittgenstein, "Bemerkungen über Frazers The Golden Bough", *Synthese*, 17 (1967), 233–53.

9 See, amongst others, Zygmunt Bauman, *Globalisation: The Human Consequences* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1998); Ulrich Beck, *Was ist Globalisierung* (Berlin, Suhrkamp Verlag, 1997); and Mike Featherstone (ed.), *Global Culture* (London: Sage, 1990).

international trade.¹⁰ Thus the forms that seek to reduce, reject or introject the impact of globalisation on food also acquire a less incomprehensible connotation. These forms fall into three main reactions:

- *resistance*, in other words the refusal that may be expressed by restricting use of products and foods arriving from abroad, or identified as symbolising a culture extraneous to one's own;
- *hybridism*, in other words a system whereby cultural diversities interweave continuously and generate new culinary traditions. A creative act that allows elements of different expressions of food to come together in a creolisation process; and
- *appropriation*, in other words a culture's capacity to absorb external influences and convert them into something that becomes part of its own history.¹¹

Richard Wilk's model makes it possible to observe the gastronomic details of the diverse forms that ingredients assume in a recipe when different cultures come into contact:

- *blending*: one of the most elementary methods for developing new forms of food creolisation. Ingredients, methods, techniques, and cooking procedures are combined to obtain new combinations;
- *submersion*: a unique way of mixing foods whereby an ingredient is submerged and absorbed until it disappears into the fusion to the point that its flavour identity is totally eliminated;
- *substitution*: a technique that replaces a specific ingredient in a recipe with a new, local component. Consequently, the original dish can be simulated even when the original raw materials cannot be found for the dish;
- *wrapping and stuffing* (adapting a filling): introduction of a local ingredient into an unfamiliar dish, allowing the final dish to be identified through the "personal" flavour;
- *compression*: the decision to elect a single recipe as the icon of an entire society. The different flavours present in a civilisation are compressed and simplified. The menu of any restaurant translates the cuisine of a territory through cultural compression;

10 One of the best overviews of this aspect can be found in Sidney W. Mintz, *Sweetness and Power: The Place of Sugar in Modern History* (New York: Viking, 1985).

11 Wilk (2006).

- *alternation and promotion*: indicates the way in which unknown foods begin to be sampled at different times and in ways that differ from the original context. For instance, dishes usually served as main courses are presented as snacks.¹²

Consulting cookbooks will provide an understanding of the changes occurring at the gastronomic and social levels. From this point of view, cookbooks are documents, “barometers of the society that generated them”, valuable indicators that can translate a territory and the life of its community at a cultural level.¹³ A cookery book will describe native plants, changes in taste brought by new ingredients, treatments for illnesses, body management, food taboos, or religious requirements. The summary provided shows only some of the many ways in which different ingredients combine to create dishes in the context of a culture different from where it originally developed.¹⁴ The preparation of food is not stable but related to social changes, themselves linked to sensorial classifications that acquire new meanings through flavour. The new flavour is rooted in collective memory and produces shared new languages and relationships, expressing transformed socialisations and business practices. The interrelationship of these spheres in turn reinforces the new flavour and expressions connected to it.

An interesting case is the expansion of Indian restaurants in Britain: the first takeaways made their appearance in the 1950s, after a large wave of immigrants arrived from the subcontinent. Indian food was associated with curry, a spice that suggested a long history of trade and relations between India and Britain.¹⁵ Curry became synonymous with cheap Indian food and

12 Ibid., pp. 114–21.

13 See P. Caccia, “La cucina nei libri. Brevissima storia dei ricettari di cucina italiani dalle origini ai giorni nostri”, *Eat:ing*, September 2008. Available at <http://www.eat-ing.net/attach/lacucinaneilibri.pdf> [accessed 18 July 2012].

14 Great flexibility and creativity in the approach to food are not a recent phenomenon. For Giuseppe Rotilio this phase established gradually in the course of human evolution and culminated 10,000 years ago with the conversion of many populations to agriculture and stock rearing. In the contemporary world there are still isolated human groups who have adapted perfectly to their ecosystem as in the arctic and subarctic tundra, Amazon rainforest, South African, and Australian deserts. Giuseppe Rotilio, “L'alimentazione degli ominidi fino alla rivoluzione agropastorale del neolitico”, in *In carne e ossa. DNA, cibo e culture dell'uomo preistorico*, ed. by Gianfranco Biondi, Fabio Martini, Olga Rickards and Giuseppe Rotilio (Bari: Laterza, 2006), pp. 83–145 (p. 85).

15 It is interesting to note that the spice synonymous with Indian food worldwide is actually an English word whose origin has been attributed to several sources. Curry probably derives from a South Indian word, *kaikaari*, or its shortened version *kaari*, indicating

Indian restaurants associated with places where the working classes could eat lunch for a few pounds. The Indian restaurant was seen as a colossal entity where India's vast gastronomic repertoire was compressed into this single ingredient, curry. Until the 1970s, "going for a curry" had a special meaning, indicating where people went after the pub closed, to eat and sober up—possibly being sick in the process. Indian restaurants exploited the ignorance of British customers, who had no awareness of the difference between one type of Indian food and another. Later, a greater knowledge of food persuaded some consumers to seek more "authentic" food, where "authentic" was associated with tandoor ovens, later ousted by the wok. Then, in the 1990s, came the *balti*, a container used in Pakistan to carry bathing water and whose original meaning was actually "bucket", but over time came to mean "metal container", then pan, usually in iron or steel, for cooking *mirpuri* dishes.

In this way, the role of the Indian restaurant in British society changed, acquiring a new class of customers following fantasies of exotic, original flavours. Restaurant names were proof of this shift. In the 1960s, names like "Maharaja" or "Last Days of the Raj" were common, an expression of the recently-lost empire; later "Taj Mahal" and "The Red Fort" conjured up India's rich history prior to years of British colonisation; and then names like "Bombay Brasserie" revealed a relationship with European culture and the influence of new cosmopolitan connections. Now, the most recent phase shows a preference for names like "Soho Spice" and "Café Laziz", where it is no longer necessary to refer to "ethnic" food and there is evident familiarity with this place where Indians have now been living for decades.¹⁶

The multiplicity of forms assumed both by ingredients and by places where food is served shows how globalisation has not regimented sensorial categories of taste, nor has it conformed to a uniform—mostly

vegetables cooked in *kari*, spices mixed with coconut. Another suggestion is that the root of the word curry is *karai* or *kadhai*, indicating the wok used in Indian cuisine. Finally, since the British occupation began in Bengal, where some dishes are called *torkari*, the name may have been shortened, anglicised, and used as a synonym for Indian food.

- 16 See Ziauddin Sardar and Borin Van Loon, *Introducing Cultural Studies* (Cambridge: Icon Books, 1999). In Italy, Indian restaurants began to open in the 1980s and benefited immediately from the repositioning that had occurred in other European countries. The target is a middle to upper class patron and only recently have small delis started to sell cheaper Indian food for consumption on the premises or as takeaway. On "ethnic" catering see Enzo Colombo, Gianmarco Navarini and Giovanni Semi, "I contorni del cibo etnico", in *Cibo, cultura, identità*, ed. by Federico Neresini and Valentina Rettore (Rome: Carocci, 2008), pp. 78–96.

industrial—culture that imposes likes and dislikes. Instead it has adapted to the uniqueness of each place, because globalisation is a process of continuous change worldwide, feeding on the stimuli that enter the bloodstream locally. Furthermore, the ways in which people interpret the interactions between global and local also continue to change.¹⁷ Each social group adopts its own eating style, typical of the world around it. Without underestimating changes in consumer tastes induced by advertising, mass marketing and other global stimuli—which introduce new experiences and food preferences through a slow, gradual process—food remains tied to the taste that everyone recognises as part of their cultural heritage.¹⁸ The taste that develops over the course of a generation or a lifetime is intimately linked with childhood, family and intergenerational relations, but also changes through the different experiences everyone acquires. Taste belongs not only to impulses triggered by sensory perceptions, but also to the order of signification, the way we interpret and shape the world. Moreover, it develops as part of historical processes that change incessantly, to the point that the importance of taste seems capable of permeating the moral sphere of individuals or the tools with which it is expressed.¹⁹

Mumbai and its processes of food diversities

In the twentieth century various anthropologists studied nutrition, contributing to decoupling the concept of food from its basic meaning of “nourishment” as the fulfilment of a physiological need. The nature of food as a cultural construct was developed by human communities over the centuries: what people eat is the result of human history. Our species learned to use fire, to experiment with cooking techniques, to recognise poisonous foods, to develop multifaceted dishes, and to travel and export tastes and ingredients to different places. Historical anthropology highlights the importance of the so-called “plants of civilisation”, which are the food foundations necessary for the development of complex cultures: wheat in Europe and the Middle East; maize in Mexico; the potato in the Andes;

17 Wilk (2006).

18 See Marion Nestle, *Food Politics: How The Food Industry Influences Nutrition and Health* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2002). For a better understanding of agri-food marketing, see Antonio Foglio, *Il marketing agroalimentare. Mercato e strategie di commercializzazione* (Milan: Franco Angeli, 2007).

19 Matty Chiva, *Le doux et l'amer* (Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 1985).

and rice in Asia.²⁰ The evolution of human eating practices was a lengthy historical process in which knowledge and experiences related to obtaining food (hunting, fishing, gathering, stock-rearing, agriculture, etc) and transforming what was procured, became rooted in generations of human social customs. Foods, as well as the processes that shape their edibility and usability, become the cornerstone of extensive cultural relations affected by social, economic and political dynamics.

Fernand Braudel observes that food never ceases to travel around the world and revolutionise people's lives.²¹ Indeed, many of the foods we consume daily are the result of large and small migrations, historical and political changes, and infinite human curiosity.²² This is another reason why, in the first part of this book, I emphasised the close relationship that bound Bombay food culture to the perennial flow of migrants who chose the city as a temporary or stable destination to live and work. This relationship has not changed now that the city has become Mumbai. The cohabitation of multiple ethnic groups, languages and cultures shapes the specific Mumbai migratory model. This model confers a connecting role on the figure of the migrant from the rural hinterland, who adapts to metropolitan life in such a way that they become the go-between among different lifestyles. The constant—and not always peaceful—dialectic between the city and the rural roots of most migrants promotes new social and consumption structures that appear to make Mumbai a paradigmatic global city.²³

20 Alessandra Guigoni, "L'alimentazione mediterranea tra locale e globale, tra passato e presente", in *Saperi e sapori del Mediterraneo*, ed. by Radhouan Ben Amara and Alessandra Guigoni (Cagliari: AM&D, 2006), pp. 81–92.

21 Fernand Braudel, *Civilisation matérielle, économie et capitalisme, XV–XVIII siècle. Les structures du quotidien* (Paris: Armand Colin, 1979).

22 For the history of food, see Massimo Montanari and Françoise Sabban, *Storia e geografia dell'alimentazione*, 2 vols. (Turin: Utet, 2004); Christian Boudan, *Géopolitique du goût* (Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 2004).

23 The study of cities as epicentres of global cultural and economic exchange developed in the 1980s and 1990s, as part of globalisation studies. Large urban centres have always been the subject of study, regardless of the nation states and the "global city" concept developed concomitantly with key contemporary phenomena: the end of bipolar geopolitical order; the emergence of new methods of global governance; and post-modern condition theories. See Jordi Borja and Manuel Castells, *Local and Global: The Management of Cities in the Information Age* (London: Earthscan, 1997); Manuel Castells, *The Information Age: Economy, Society and Culture. The Rise of the Network Society*, vol. 1 (Oxford: Blackwell, 1996); Saskia Sassen, *The Global City: New York, London, Tokyo* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1991); and Saskia Sassen, *Cities in a World Economy* (Thousand Oaks, CA: Pine Forge Press, 1994).

The city's food is also the expression of an acculturation process reiterated over time, hallmarked by its constant dynamism.²⁴ The clear-cut food distinctions in Mumbai's various communities reflect the changes occurring on a global scale, where migrating people bring the ingredients and recipes of their home to the city, alongside a "migration of cultural models [...] in the absence of migrant humans".²⁵ In other words, a migration of cognitive, behavioural and even technological models that characterise different backgrounds: rural contexts; other Indian megalopolises; diasporic places. Another tangible testimony of this complex process is found in the phenomena of food reinterpretation and revisitation pursued by Indians living outside India.

Mumbai looks like the perfect food workshop, the destination of ingredients and culinary reworking from all over the world. This is also attributable to its geographical status as a commercial port with permanent availability of typical raw materials for different diets, thanks to goods arriving from across Asia, Africa and Europe. Migratory processes have thus helped to nurture Mumbai's food prosopography, a gastronomic physiognomy that is also the result of strategies applied by the immigrant population for adaptation and economic integration. These strategies, as already seen, also delineate "parables of identity", narratives that create, enhance, or reinvent a collective identity.²⁶ In the first phase, migrants retain the food profile of their birthplace, preserving eating habits and seeking out places where this diet is honoured as the quintessence of a specific group identity.²⁷ The later stage develops over the years, with the

24 The "acculturation" concept developed in the USA during the difficult period preceding the 1929 global crisis. Awareness was growing of the problems of the colonised on one hand, and on the other the problems of a society that had been thriving and in continual growth. In anthropological sciences this term indicates the complex processes of cultural contact through which societies or social groups assimilate from or are imposed with elements or groups of elements by other societies. To reconstruct the wide spectrum of ethnographic and anthropological reflections on the term see Pierre Bonte and Michel Izard (eds.), *Dictionnaire d'ethnologie et d'anthropologie* (Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 1991), pp. 1–2; and Alphonse Dupront, *L'Acculturazione. Per un nuovo rapporto tra ricerca storica e scienze umane* (Turin: Einaudi, 1966).

25 David Paolini, Tullio Seppilli and Alberto Sorbini, *Migrazioni e culture alimentari* (Foligno: Editoriale Umbra, 2002), p. 12.

26 Stefano Allovio, "La 'vera carne' dei pigmei: parabole identitarie e strategie alimentari in Africa centrale", paper presented at the conference *Piatto pieno, piatto vuoto, prodotti locali e appetiti globali*, Università Statale, Milan, 2 April 2008.

27 Those who migrate with the family find that meals eaten at home assume a crucial symbolic value, as do those shared with compatriots at work, or even those consumed in the small eateries run by fellow countrymen. It is also true that being able to eat food

arrival of second generations who often modify the overall migrant project and evolve it to include a wider participation in various aspects of city life, eventually also conferring a different value on food. Eating practices progressively hybridise, interacting with local ingredients and customs.

Through the continual contribution of migrations that transform and redefine Mumbai constantly, the city shows that this hybridisation process is neither linear nor diachronic. Each day it is re-lived differently, depending on the regional and caste origins of the city's migrants, and on the special values attributed to their practices. The city moves like a body, exhibiting its food needs, and in so doing draws its own cultural map, in line with the major challenges that Tullio Seppilli defines as the "planetary globalisation of the food market".²⁸ This complex interplay allows a glimpse into one of the possible outcomes for eating habits in global cities. The younger generations are accustomed to eating in different ways. On one hand, at home they eat the food of their family's origins, served on holidays and at get-togethers. On the other, they eat in collective contexts—at school, at work, in public spaces—where they consume "urban food", in which the combination of different traditions is enriched by the individuality of Mumbai.²⁹ In view of this multifaceted interaction, young Mumbaites tend to become accustomed to the incorporation of a food model that finds its truest expression in this fusion of tastes.

The relationship with the territory articulates the character that society constructs for taste.³⁰ Access to certain ingredients shapes our likes and

from one's own home enables interior control that is impossible with exterior reality. Through the food control is exercised over the body, which conversely is difficult to reproduce in the society to which one has emigrated.

- 28 Paolini, Seppilli and Sorbini (2002), p. 27. In Mumbai this is glaringly evident in the presence of huge global chains like McDonalds and Pizza Hut, as well as brands like Coca-Cola.
- 29 It is also possible to consider two different levels: on the one hand "eso-cuisine", for non-family; on the other, "endo-cuisine" for the family.
- 30 There are three meanings for taste: the first is linked to the sensory-perceptual dimension and sees it as one of the senses that characterise subjective perceptions (along with smell, touch, sight and hearing); the second is an aesthetic judgment that translates individual preferences for a certain object or object class; the third refers to a social dimension and defines a given preference or trend of socially defined groups. See Giorgio Grignaffini, "Estesia e discorsi sociali: per una sociosemiotica della degustazione del vino", in *Gusti e disgusti. Sociosemiotica del quotidiano*, ed. by Eric Landowski and José L. Fiorin (Turin: Testo & Immagine, 2000), pp. 214–32 (pp. 215–16). Beyond these distinctions, the three cases can be traced back to a perspective of taste belonging to the order of signification, in other words a construction that transforms and gives meaning to the world even as it evolves socially and culturally.

dislikes, developing into a system of distinctions, discriminations, class and gender.³¹ Taste is probably the most visible expression of ethnocentrism. According to Sidney Mintz, the foods we eat, the criteria by which we distinguish what is edible from what is not, and what we feel when we consume them, are interconnected and contribute to our perception of ourselves in relation to others. Thus, people who eat different foods or even similar foods but in a different way, are seen as fundamentally different and, sometimes, not even human.³² Recently this “ethnicising” dimension of food in Mumbai (and elsewhere) has been the subject of political claims rooted in far more ancient historical and social contexts.

On the subject of ethnicity

In recent years political movements have emerged in Mumbai supporting pureness of identity based on specific regional, linguistic and caste factors. These movements have triggered a “de-cosmopolitising” process that highlights the increasing value placed on ethnicity. The adoption of the term “ethnicity” in social sciences is relatively recent and, as Glazer and Moynihan pointed out in their famous mid-1970s study, it is in “one sense a term still on the move”.³³ It is applicable to “situations and processes in which the cultural difference between groups is classified, organised and communicated”,³⁴ which derives from the concept of the “ethnic group” and means “a linguistic, cultural and territorial unit of some magnitude”.³⁵

Historically, the concept of the “ethnic group” or “ethnicity” proved useful for meeting colonial intellectual and administrative demands. It enabled European colonialism to achieve a definition for the various subjugated communities that differed from terms like “peoples” or “nations”, taken to mean subjects of a historical destiny that was long considered a European state prerogative, and who were seen to acquire “the right to self-determination” from the time of Wilsonian diplomacy.³⁶ The designation “ethnic group” in

31 Pierre Bourdieu, *La distinction. Critique sociale du jugement* (Paris: Les Éditions de Minuit, 1979).

32 Mintz (1985).

33 Nathan Glazer and Daniel P. Moynihan, “Why Ethnicity?”, *Commentary*, 58 (1974), 33–39. I am quoting A. L. Epstein, *Ethos and Identity: Three Studies in Ethnicity* (London: Tavistock, 1981), p. 167.

34 U. Fabietti and F. Remotti (eds.), *Dizionario di antropologia* (Bologna: Zanichelli 1997), p. 271.

35 Bonte and Izard (1991), p. 321.

36 At the end of World War I, the US president in office, Woodrow Wilson, gave a speech

the era of European imperialism was more or less explicitly a subordinate status to communities, often meaning they were split up and restricted to specific territories.

In the 1960s, the work of Fredrik Barth, also subsequent to historical decolonisation processes, redefined the concepts of ethnicity and ethnic groups, restoring them as basic categories that allow social players to decide on a personal status and means of identification. Barth argues that ethnicity is “a category of ascription whose continuity rests on the perpetuation of boundaries and the codification constantly renewed of cultural differences between neighbouring groups”.³⁷ The boundary is a physical and symbolic place where social interaction between groups is channelled and where the sense of identity is perceived.

Over the last twenty years, in particular for minorities and decolonised countries, the terms “ethnicity” and “ethnic group” have acquired new meanings, connected to the rediscovery of “identity roots” that colonial rule had hidden, blurred, or repressed. Ethnicist movements (in particular African-American) appropriated the terms to condemn the socio-economic injustice and exploitation that had targeted individual “ethnicities”. Historical anthropologists highlighted the processes of political and economic domination of a number of social groups over others. This led several sociologists and anthropologists to identify the use (and abuse) of ethnicity as a weapon in the power struggle between variously defined groups (in which “ethnic” features considered distinctive can vary quite extensively) who are active in the promotion of their own community interests and claims to collective rights.³⁸ Ethnicity thereby acquires a competitive significance that alters social reality by reifying the delimitation of cultural traits such as language, religion and physiognomy, and rendering social divisions unresponsive. Behaviour with ethnic implications cannot be deemed mere rational calculation, however, because it also includes an

to the US Congress acknowledging the validity of the self-determination principle as a fundamental element in the new international post-war order. It was the first globally positive sanction of a collective right, a “people’s” right, able to change state boundaries along lines of supposed ethno-national uniformity. In fact, these borders ended up stranding some thirty million people on the “wrong side” of the frontier and became the harbinger of conflicts that are still to be resolved. See René Gallissot, Mondher Kilani and Annamaria Rivera (eds.), *L’imbroglio etnico in quattordici parole-chiave* (Bari: Dedalo, 2001).

37 Bonte and Izard (1991), p. 322; see also Fredrik Barth (ed.), *Ethnic Groups and Boundaries* (Oslo: Oslo University Press, 1969).

38 See Glazer and Moynihan (1974); and Abner Cohen, *Custom and Politics in Urban Africa: A Study of Hausa Migrants in Yoruba Towns*, rev. ed. (London: Routledge, 2004).

important emotional component. A mono-faceted approach to the analysis of such a dense concept risks reducing its expressive potential to a mere trivialisation of the reality it seeks to interpret.

The plurality of applications of ethnicity-related terminology highlights the cultural nature of the evolution that the various players bring about, colouring it with different meanings and encompassing complex intra-psychic and social interaction processes.³⁹ This construction can be seen as a classification system that allows the population to be separated or grouped into specific categories, and is generally rooted in an emotional dimension.⁴⁰ In the Indian debate on the definition of ethnic groups, sociologist Gopa Sabharwal described them as:

... socially defined groups based on notions of shared culture which accounts for their distinctiveness. These groups are stable and have continuity over time since they perpetuate themselves. They also often possess a distinct name by which not only do the people of the group recognize themselves but are recognized by others as such. The shared cultural components could be drawn from among the following elements: region, language, religion, caste, sect, tribe, race or some of these in combination. These identities are as is evident, affiliations of birth or ascriptive identities. These cultural identities thus are those that people are born with and are not acquired or achieved. Self-awareness of identities based on these cultural criteria is an essential component in describing ethnic identities.⁴¹

A cornerstone of India ethnicity is the politicisation of language because, as André Béteille points out, the definition of ethnic identity on the basis of sharing a specific language produces both cultural and political effects.⁴² Modern India is organised according to linguistic demarcations that often give rise to disputes amongst dominant and minority language groups, like the issue of a national standardised language as opposed to various regional or state languages within the Indian Union; the choice of which script system to use at national level; individual territorial divisions; whether or not to recognise/promote bilingualism or multilingualism in contrast with the adoption of a lingua franca like English; the characterisation of the

39 Epstein (1981).

40 Ibid.

41 Gopa Sabharwal, *Ethnicity and Class: Social Divisions in an Indian City* (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2006), p. 249.

42 André Béteille, *Society and Politics in India: Essays in a Comparative Perspective* (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1992).

official language of the political class; the tensions between domestic and public language; and so on.⁴³

Language-based differentiation alone is not sufficient to justify the adoption of a renewed sense of “ethnic purity” as the symbolic basis for replicating certain social categories, and the question of the creation of the Maratha “caste” (explained in Chapter Two) is a prime example. To make these differentiating regimes legitimate, a Foucaultian-type governability must be introduced. In other words, a governability that can guide human conduct by regulating its expression, whose “political language drew on the rationalities of modern bio-power regulating health, reproduction, and bodies”.⁴⁴

It is in this perspective that the study of dietary practices and representations of them, even in a political context, may be useful for sounding out the less explicit dimension of this bio-power, which also feeds on symbols of identity that these practices and representations wish to embody. Ethnic groups and ethnicity must be understood as symbolic constructions, as the “product of specific historical, social and political circumstances”, which indicate not a static but a ductile reality, able to bend to change according to the circumstances.⁴⁵ Through these cultural devices a collective definition of the self and the other occurs, which enables groups to acquire an internal homogeneity, highlighting the differences between them.⁴⁶

Bombay-Mumbai, collector of cultural diversities

For Salman Rushdie, Bombay epitomises the diversities of India: it’s the point of convergence for winds that blow from west to east, north to south, and vice versa.⁴⁷ For my research it became a focal point in the analysis of interpretations of cultural diversity. Mumbai, melting pot of peoples, languages, religions and cultures, is highly typical of the great cultural

43 Sabharwal (2006), p. 26.

44 Thomas Blom Hansen, *Wages of Violence: Naming and Identity in Postcolonial Bombay* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2001), p. 218. For more on the governability that can guide human conduct, see Michel Foucault, *Naissance de la biopolitique. Cours au collège de France, 1978–1979* (Paris: Gallimard-Seuil, 2004), it. trans., *Nascita della biopolitica. Corso al Collège de France, 1978–1979* (Milan: Feltrinelli, 2005), p. 154.

45 Ugo Fabietti, *L’identità etnica. Storia e critica di un concetto equivoco* (Rome: NIS, 1995), p. 18.

46 Ibid.

47 Sujata Patel and Alice Thoner (eds.), *Bombay: Mosaic of Modern Culture* (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1995), p. xxiii.

themes that pervade contemporary global thought. It actually seems like the most suitable backdrop, not dissimilar to other metropolises, for celebrating the diversity that characterises the groups that live there, as well as the particular personality the city has acquired through the coexistence of these groups. India has always had a composite and pluralist character, nurtured by a multitude of different sources: the Vedic period, a fusion of Aryan and non-Aryan populations; the rise of the Hindu religion as a mosaic of cults, gods and goddesses, and inspirations; the presence of tribal peoples; the birth of Buddhism and the Jain religion. Not to mention the Bhakti movements of spiritual renewal within Hinduism; Sikhism; the arrival of Turko-Iranian peoples and Muslims (with relative differing schools of religious thought and exegesis); English colonisation; and subsequent colonial liberation movements.

The Indian subcontinent has therefore always expressed a strong syncretic tension that combines an enormous range of regional, music, food, language and social traditions.⁴⁸ As Das points out, India is home to 4,635 different communities, most of which have their own cultural traits: dress, language, prayer, food, customs, and so on.⁴⁹ Its 325 languages rely on twenty-five different alphabets, which derive from various linguistic families: Indo-Aryan, Tibetan-Burmese, Dravidian, Austro-Asian, Andamanese, Semitic, Indo-Iranian, Sino-Tibetan, etc. Most inhabitants are bilingual or polyglot and have religious beliefs that over time have interwoven the cultural and spiritual traits of various faiths. Thus, united India has always been based on interrelations among different spoken and written cultural traditions that communities have evolved through history. It is precisely this interrelationship that constitutes the country's most fruitful legacy.

Bombay-Mumbai is the collector of this cultural, economic and legal heritage, and as such is not immune to negative reactions as seen in the recent episodes of group violence that led to bloody clashes between Muslims and Hindus in the 1990s and 2000s. This violence is not so much

48 Clearly this is a summary history; a more detailed reconstruction of India's history is in Michelguglielmo Torri, *Storia dell'India* (Bari: Laterza, 2000).

49 N. K. Das, "Cultural Diversity, Religious Syncretism and People of India: An Anthropological Interpretation", *Bangladesh e-Journal of Sociology*, 3:2 (2006), available at <http://www.bangladeshsociology.org/BEJS%203.2%20Das.pdf> [accessed 17 July 2012]. For an interesting picture of India's cultural diversities, see Gurpreet Mahajan, "Indian Exceptionalism or Indian Model: Negotiating Cultural Diversity and Minority Rights in a Democratic Nation-State", in *Multiculturalism in Asia*, ed. by Will Kymlicka and Baogang He (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005), pp. 288–313.

the result of a longstanding and deep-rooted hatred among different social groups (even if they do sometimes claim responsibility for actions whose symbolic roots lie in a history of abuse or enduring discrimination), but rather a reaction to the state's equality-promoting policies and external pressure resulting from global challenges. According to Arundhati Roy, there is a direct link between the current global economic structure and the birth and rise in India—as in many other poor countries—of a right-wing nationalist political class with strong racist and fascist connotations.⁵⁰ Roy's opinion is shared by sociologist Ashis Nandy in an article on the theme of anti-Islamic hatred in contemporary India: "It is the rage of Indians who have decultured themselves, seduced by the promises of modernity, and who now feel abandoned. With the demise of imperialism, Indian modernism—especially that subcategory of it which goes by the name of development—has failed to keep these promises".⁵¹

In this context Muslims are perceived as easy scapegoats. Claims of collective rights on grounds of purported cultural differences frequently exploit communal hatred, legitimising it as a deeply ingrained, essential feature of human nature. In fact, such claims have little or nothing to do with an alleged clash of civilisations, but are rather the offshoot of warped intra-cultural dynamics of political conflict and social strife.⁵²

Rashmi Varma makes an interesting observation that, despite Saskia Sassen's argument that Mumbai is one of the cities where the geography of international finance is mapped out, the metropolis actually only penetrated the global studies panorama after its progressive "provincialisation".⁵³ Varma uses this term to denote a process that Arjun Appadurai calls "decosmopolitanism" and is reflected in a series of key events in Mumbai's recent political and social evolution. This includes the formation of Shiv Sena ("Shiva's Army"), a political movement based on the *bhumiputra* ("sons of the soil") concept. The Shiv Sena claims broader collective rights for the Maratha than those offered to the non-Maratha population.

50 See Arundhati Roy, "War Is Peace", *Outlook India*, 29 October 2001, available at <http://www.outlookindia.com/article.aspx?213547> [accessed 17 July 2012]; and Arundhati Roy and David Barsamian, *The Checkbook and the Cruise Missile: Conversations with Arundhati Roy* (Cambridge, MA: South End Press, 2004).

51 Ashis Nandy, "The Twilight of Certitudes: Secularism, Hindu Nationalism and Other Masks of Deculturation", *Postcolonial Studies*, 1 (1998), 283–98.

52 In this case, Arjun Appadurai speaks of "primordialism".

53 See Sassen (1991); and Klaus Segbers (ed.), *The Making of Global City Regions: Johannesburg, Mumbai/Bombay, Sao Paulo and Shanghai* (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2007).

The demands are accompanied by a strong Hindutva (Hindu fundamentalist and anti-Muslim) inspiration.⁵⁴ Varma also stresses the importance of exaggerated Hindu nationalism and modification of the Hindu religion in Hindutva terms as an underlying ideological strategy for this political evolution—or rather devolution. The quest for alleged ethnic purity has gradually overshadowed the city's image as the Indian capital of hope and diversity.⁵⁵ In order to catalyse this process, the neo-racist logic of absolute cultural differences—which is to say the irreducible inability to communicate among different social groups—has been used deliberately to conceal the growing and increasingly less reversible impact of economic imbalances. Historian Romila Thapar notes:

The new Hinduism which is being currently propagated by the Sanghs, Parishads and Samajs is an attempt to restructure the indigenous religions as a monolithic uniform religion, rather paralleling some of the features of Semitic religions. This seems to be a fundamental departure from the essentials of what may be called the indigenous Hindu religions. Its form is not only alien to the earlier culture of India in many ways, but there is also a disturbing uniformity that it seeks to impose on the variety of Hindu religions.⁵⁶

Food is precisely the link and key filter between the outside world and the body, a daily practice that places humans in systems of significance, offers the perfect setting for the explosion of feelings triggered by uniform neo-archaic food evocations, which demand ancient, authentic food as the

54 The term “Hindutva”, coined in 1923 by Vinayak Damodar Savarkar in his pamphlet entitled *Hindutva: Who is a Hindu?*, is composed of the Persian word “Hindu” and the Sanskrit suffix “-tva”. According to Savarkar it indicates the characteristics of being Hindu, of “Hindu-ness”. The founding rules of Hindutva see India as the homeland of the Hindus, who are defined as “those who recognise India as a sacred homeland”. In the 1980s and 1990s the Bharatiya Janata Party produced a review of the entire history of India in order to outline the characteristics of “true Hindu culture”, highlighting the features of continuity with the ancient tradition and oppression by Christians and Muslims. The Sanskrit texts, especially the Vedas, were taken as the basis of “real Indian-ness”, excluding all other traditions, for instance Buddhism, those of tribal peoples, and, of course, Islam and Christianity, whose presence in India is centuries old. The main purpose of this false historical reconstruction—which made use of textbooks, maps, images and videos, distributed in schools and on the streets—was to leverage the votes of the frustrated lower classes. For more detailed information, see *Ethnic and Racial Studies*, Special Issue: Hindutva Movements in the West: Resurgent Hinduism and the Politics of Diaspora, 23:3 (2000).

55 See Rashmi Varma, “Provincializing the Global City: From Bombay to Mumbai”, *Social Text*, 22:4 (2004), 65–89.

56 Romila Thapar, “Syndicated Moksha?”, *Seminar*, 313 (1985), 14–22.

supreme symbol of a single defined identity.⁵⁷ There is, in fact, a relationship of circular causality between food and identity. When identity is reified, and thus fossilised, in search of the paradise lost of its origins, food is also re-interpreted, scrutinising the same maps. Norbert Elias argued that there was a shift in the threshold of sensitivity, in other words the violence of the public sphere shifts to the subject's inner self and left there to implode, because – and it seems almost overkill to remember – food always includes an imaginary, spiritual, symbolic and social power that is applied according to “the principle of incorporation”.⁵⁸

This principle has two meanings: psychological and social. The psychological significance is seen in the moment of eating something and incorporating the qualities of the food. Some researchers use this key of interpretation to analyse disgust for certain foods and preference for others; in other words they start from the primordial fear of being contaminated by pathogenic organisms or the fear of acquiring the characteristics of the food eaten. This theory has two aspects: one that has a health-hygiene matrix and is based on the modern concept of illness, whereby certain foods are consumed on the basis of their nutritional characteristics; the other refers to the magical-religious thought that James Frazer classified according to two laws of sympathetic magic, one of similarity and one of contact.⁵⁹ The law of contact posits that when contact is made with a particular food, its essence is absorbed. This is particularly applicable to the Indian context when pure food, *sattvic*, is consumed with its ability to act as the channel for spiritual growth, but also to the consumption of *rajasic* or *tamasic* (for example, meat) food, which inhibits that growth. It is believed that, if certain animals are eaten, their physical or mental traits may be acquired by the consumer, so particular caution is required.

The second variation of the incorporation principle implies that when food is eaten, its *cultural connotations* are acquired: the social rules and cooking techniques connected to it and the appropriate manners required with guests while the food is consumed. In short, all the sense elements that

57 Jean-Pierre Poulain, *Sociologies de l'alimentation, les mangeurs et l'espace social alimentaire* (Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 2002).

58 Norbert Elias, *Über den Prozess der Zivilisation. I. Wandlungen des Verhaltens in den Weltlichen Oberschichten des Abendlandes* (Basel: Verlag Haus zum Falken, 1939). See also Claude Fischler, *L'Homnivore* (Paris: Odile Jacob, 1990).

59 James George Frazer, *The Golden Bough: A Study in Magic and Religion* (New York: Macmillan, 1922).

make food “sociable”.⁶⁰ Humans identify themselves and others through a classification system enacted for feeding themselves.⁶¹ In a context where this sort of food diversity reigns, is it possible that this potentially implosive incorporation is guided by fear of the Other? One possible answer comes again from Fischler, who explains that to understand the contemporary eater, it is necessary to consider the *eternal eater* who, throughout history, has always had to deal with shortage of food.⁶² Managing scarcity of food for centuries has programmed our bodies to respond to certain stimuli almost automatically. Although food is now available in abundance in contemporary affluent societies and, to some extent, even in most of the less affluent, the suspicion and the need arise to reject the superfluous. The anguish applies both to the excesses of modernity and to the choice of food, a choice inherent to the omnivore’s condition.⁶³

However, there is not only the option of refusal: responses can also be hybrid or of appropriation, as we have previously seen. Depending on the choice made, both the nature of social groupings and forms of individual actions are delineated, especially in big cities. This is because—beyond the specificities of urban life that every civilisation has developed in response to diversity of climate, religion, customs, etc—urban areas generally develop from the need to import food from outside, a necessity that changes in relation to the characteristics of the organisation of society itself.⁶⁴

In the great metropolises, the supermarket supply chain requires standardisation of foodstuffs. This can be seen in the progressive

60 By “sociability” I mean the creative way in which humans put into practice acquired social and cultural resolutions, called “sociality”. Sociability demands a choice in the use of forms of communication and exchange with other individuals.

61 See Fischler (1990).

62 A chapter in Paolo Sorcinelli’s book has the significant title “I mali della fame e i segni del corpo” [the evils of hunger and the body’s signs]. See Paolo Sorcinelli, *Gli italiani e il cibo. Dalla polenta ai cracker* (Milan: Bruno Mondadori, 1999). Much has been written on hunger, among others see Piero Camporesi, *Il paese della fame* (Milan: Garzanti, 2000), and Sharman Apt Russell, *Hunger: An Unnatural History* (New York: Perseus, 2006). In addition, in a relatively recent Indian novel, the protagonist describes the signs of hunger on the bodies of the destitute with these words: “A rich man’s body is like a premium cotton pillow, white and soft and blank. ‘Ours’ is different. My father’s spine was a knotted rope, the kind that women use in villages to pull water from wells; the clavicle curved around his neck in high relief, like a dog’s collar; cuts and nicks and scars, like little whip marks in his flesh, ran down his chest and waist, reaching down below his hip bones into his buttocks. The story of a poor man’s life is written on his body, in a sharp pen”. See Aravind Adiga, *The White Tiger* (New York: Free Press, 2008), p. 22.

63 Elias (1939).

64 The reference is to Henri Pirenne’s classic *Les villes du moyen-âge. Essai d’histoire économique et sociale* (Brussels: Lamertin, 1927).

restriction of offering to a few main brands, in constant food stocks (and thus preservation in large quantities), in the need to guarantee consequent food safety and also mass production of food, which limits genetic variety in favour of production efficiency. In Mumbai, citizens are still mostly supplied with food by independent stores, because big supermarket chains are usually located in shopping centres out in the suburbs. Unlike most first world cities, food in Mumbai is still closely tied to street sale, in small markets—a supply system that is still pre-modern to some extent.⁶⁵ Despite the diversity of food supply chains, there is tension between the globalised dimension of food flows, and therefore meaning, and the city's specific local dimension. This tension is also expressed by the social movements which—also due to the disappearance of the traditional forms of work that accompanied the birth and development of industry—now express, above all, a reactive resistance of identity type, a possible carrier of new forms of democracy, but also of outbreaks of xenophobia and religious fundamentalism.

So it seems that there is close correspondence between the expression of violence and food anguish. As Elias writes, “changes in eating behaviour are part of a broader change of human attitudes and sensibilities”.⁶⁶ The incorporation of food, which is the “founder of collective identity and, similarly, of otherness”, thus becomes a vehicle for reactive responses to globalisation, because to ensure the maintenance of a culturally-oriented food system, the collaboration between similars and their distinction from the Other are required.⁶⁷

This tension between polar opposites, between “us” and “them”, clearly expressed and reproduced by food consumption, is leveraged by processes of universalisation and particularisation, homogenisation and differentiation, integration and fragmentation, juxtaposition and cultural syncretism. These dichotomous positions seem to fit in well with the gastronomic order of food rules that presupposes the endorsement or prohibition of certain classes of foods. If these rules, absorbed at a subconscious level and reproduced socially as a natural order, are violated, the ensuing offence suspends the sense of community based on shared

65 For an overview of forms of urban food procurement, see Carolyn Steel, *Hungry City: How Food Shapes our Lives* (London: Chatto & Windus, 2008).

66 Elias (1939).

67 Fischler (1990), it. trans., *L'onnivoro. Il piacere di mangiare nella storia e nella scienza* (Milan: Mondadori, 1992), p. 52.

identities. Consequently punishment may—or will—be demanded for those who move towards the Other or who, precisely because of this offence, are perceived and stigmatised as the Other, guilty of passing the threshold of repugnance. The offending subject is then qualified as contaminated, as disgusting, and therefore is to be cast out from the sphere of humanity to which they thought they belonged.

Mumbai: relations, form, body

Mumbai's networks are an interesting way to trace back the idea of ethnicity inspired by the city's fabric of diverse citizens. In the light of Barth's supposition that a shared culture is generated by the process of maintaining boundaries, Mumbai appears potentially united—since it is crossed constantly by markers of ethnic plurality like language, clothing and food—and yet eternally divided because those boundaries simultaneously break down and pulverise the city. The two processes are dialectically opposed, but have a theoretical synthesis in Michael M. J. Fischer's definition of ethnicity as: "a part of the self that is often quite puzzling to the individual, something over which he or she is not in control. Insofar as it is a deeply rooted emotional component of identity, it is often transmitted less through cognitive language or learning (to which sociology has almost entirely restricted itself) than through processes analogous to the dreaming and transferences of psychoanalytic encounters".⁶⁸

Perhaps this is the dimension that is reflected in "private ethnicity"—the manner in which the family structure and intimate relations initiate codes, languages, expressions and physiognomies. I would call it a sort of "cultural genetics" that "feeds the entire communication of cultural difference".⁶⁹ Social and collective articulation of this "intimate" meaning of the concept of ethnicity interprets the ethnic difference as "a complex, ongoing negotiation that seeks to authorize cultural hybridities that emerge in moments of historical transformation":⁷⁰ a process in which the private and public dimension permeate and drive each other.

68 George E. Marcus and Michael M. J. Fischer, *Anthropology as Cultural Critique: An Experimental Moment in the Human Sciences* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1986), p. 173.

69 Matilde Callari Galli, Mauro Ceruti and Telmo Pievani, *Pensare la diversità. Per un'educazione alla complessità umana* (Rome, Meltemi, 1998), p. 179.

70 Bhabha (1994), p. 2.

The point therefore is not so much to make an inventory of the “ethnic” traits of the various components of Mumbai’s metropolitan universe, but rather to direct the topic back to two important starting points for an anthropological analysis of the city: ethno-historical imagination and bio-political governance. Indeed, if the construction of ethnicity is mostly cultural, it is equally true that once imagined it becomes very significant for the groups that claim it as a defining trait of their social or even personal identity.

Bombay can be viewed from many perspectives. According to the British, the city was a symbol of progress and prosperity, the gateway to India, a home away from home, an offshoot of England. The Marathi-speaking peoples—who were the majority in Bombay but who always occupied inferior roles and places compared to the city’s other minorities—had a totally different perspective. For them Bombay was in Maharashtra but not part of it:⁷¹ it was a foreign body, a city to be admired for its architecture, for study and business, a catalyst for social change, but nonetheless deeply alien. Rooted in this were the tensions that developed in this city, which Rushdie had seen as a celebration of “hybridity, impurity, intermingling, the transformation that comes of new and unexpected combinations of human beings, cultures, ideas, politics, songs, movies”.⁷² Rushdie also said that Bombay “rejoices in mongrelisation, fears the absolutism of the Pure” and represents the new that penetrates the world, while in Mumbai the reality of “mixed tradition is replaced by the fantasy of purity”.⁷³

The change of name claimed the power of ethnicity in the wake of an ethno-historical review process. As we saw in Chapter One, the change came from a desire to make the city Maharashtra again, both symbolically and culturally. Bhabha sees “The ‘right’ to signify from the periphery of authorised power and privilege does not depend on the persistence of tradition; it is resourced by the power of tradition to be re-inscribed through the conditions and contradictoriness that attend upon the lives of those who are ‘in the minority’”.⁷⁴ The doubt arises as to whether the community of Marathi speakers, who always speak for the majority in Bombay, was actually able to perceive itself as a “minority”.

71 Patel and Thoner (1995), p. 4.

72 Salman Rushdie, *Imaginary Homelands: Essays and Criticism 1981–1991* (New York: Viking, 1991), p. 394. He was speaking of *The Satanic Verses* (New York: Viking, 1988).

73 Ibid., pp. 394 and 76.

74 Bhabha (1994), p. 3.

How did it come about that a social group that had always had the power of numbers in the city was pervaded by a desire to reclaim space through “the borderline engagements of cultural difference” anchored to a specific original identity or a particular tradition inherited or represented as such?⁷⁵ By virtue of which processes was this city (which grew thanks to its ability to “embark multiplicity without endangering its own identity”) able to dispose knowingly of its own cosmopolitan metropolis essence?⁷⁶

For a better understanding of the development of these socio-political dynamics, I would like to reconstruct a shift that begins with the terrible Hindu-Muslim clashes of 1992 and 1993—in the wake of the destruction of Ayodhya’s Babri Masjid—and which are considered to be the most serious post-Partition episode of ethnic conflict in Mumbai. The Hindu-Muslim conflict dates back to 1528, when the Mughal Sultan Babur ordered the construction of a mosque on the precise spot where the Hindu population believed a temple had been erected in homage to their god, Rama. In 1853 clashes erupted at the site, so much so that a few years later the British colonial authorities built a fence around it, allowing Muslims access to the building’s inner courtyard and Hindus access to the outer courtyard. In 1984, the Hindu fundamentalist group Vishwa Hindu Parishad (VHP) founded a committee to liberate Rama’s birthplace and build a temple in his honour. Later, Lal Krishna Advani, leader of the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP), took over leadership of the campaign. The tone of the debate became increasingly heated until, in 1991, the BJP won the elections in the state of Uttar Pradesh, where Ayodhya is located. The following year, the mosque was rased by a crowd of 150,000 militants, triggering clashes between Hindus and Muslims across the country. Bombay, like Delhi and Hyderabad, was in the midst of this terrible violence that caused the death of an estimated 3,000 people.

The clashes recurred in March 1993 when a series of bombs placed in strategic areas of the city killed and maimed hundreds. The responsibility for the attacks was claimed by the D-Company criminal organisation, led by the Bombay mafia boss Dawood Ibrahim, and was explained as an act of retaliation for the massacre of hundreds of Bombay Muslims in the previous year. Since then, there has been repeated fighting and bloodshed across the country.⁷⁷ These actions were the result of ideologies that deliberately sought

⁷⁵ Ibid.

⁷⁶ Francesco Remotti, *Contro l’identità* (Rome: Laterza, 1996), p. 21.

⁷⁷ In February 2002 a train full of Hindu pilgrims burst into flames in Godhra, Gujarat. Muslims were accused of starting the fire and thus became the target of a pogrom,

to cause rifts among the Hindu and Muslim communities, and which may be considered an expression of a “virtually worldwide genocidal impulse towards minorities”.⁷⁸ They have been described by Jim Masselos as the outcome of a “polarization of attitudes among communal lines”.⁷⁹

In a process that began in the 1960s and strengthened in the 1980s, the communities residing in Bombay were categorised on the basis of religious affiliation. Hindus were considered Indian, whereas Muslims were characterised to be outsiders, non-Indians, and therefore to be excluded. The symbolic and political construction of these two opposite categories was due not only to the Shiv Sena’s strategy but also to the way in which Bombay developed in the 1960s to 1980s, and the social and economic changes that affected the city during that period. The ethnic conflict revealed the fragility of tacit social norms that defined daily interactions between the city’s residents.⁸⁰ The unifying energy of popular neighbourhoods—which were a main factor in Bombay’s open and cosmopolitan character—dissolved. Violence left the city prey to the bare form of its urban body, a conglomeration of villages separated by relationships destroyed beyond repair by the blood spilled by their inhabitants.

Bombay’s social networks of urban proletariat had long supported the principle of collective participation in city life; throughout the period in which industry was the principal employer of this social class, they had been an important stabilising force in the coexistence of castes, ethnicities and languages. The industrial labour crisis progressively eroded the

which killed some 2,000 people and led to the evacuation of 50,000 persons. In 2006, the explosion of seven bombs planted on the Mumbai urban rail network left 186 dead and seven wounded. Responsibility for the attack was claimed by Al Qaeda Jammu and Kashmir. Although there was no certainty that the different events in various parts of the country were related, violence continued until November 2008 when terrorists in Mumbai left 190 dead and 300 wounded, and a month later when police discovered two bombs—fortunately unexploded—planted on the city’s railway line. Sadly, as we were translating this book into English, a new attack took place on 13 July 2011 that killed twenty-one people and injured 140. See Ramachandra Guha, *India After Gandhi: The History of the World’s Largest Democracy* (London: Macmillan, 2007); Acyuta Yagnik and Suchitra Sheth, *The Shaping of Modern Gujarat: Plurality, Hindutva, and Beyond* (New Delhi: Penguin, 2005).

78 Arjun Appadurai, “New Logics of Violence”, *Seminar*, 503 (2001), available at <http://www.india-seminar.com/2001/503/503%20arjun%20apadurai.htm> [accessed 19 July 2012].

79 Jim Masselos, *The City in Action: Bombay Struggles for Power* (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2007), p. 364. In current Indian political language, “communalism” is a generic term for political strategies hinged on belonging to a community or caste, and in some cases the local requirements prevail over national.

80 *Ibid.*

interdependence among the different segments of the weaker population, in part due to ties with class solidarity and due to the simple aspirations for social improvement that drive a migrant proletariat. These widespread solidarities were replaced by particularist affiliations and a progressive social and political ethnicisation, whose potential for disruption was revealed when an important symbolic crisis incited daily social conflict into an extended collective violence.

More than ever, the body became the mirror of ethnic affiliations and intake of culturally-oriented food acquired a symbolic and political significance.⁸¹ Food preferences are an expression of social self-identification because: “food is a world experience; the human being is constructed through eating”.⁸² Nonetheless, the food chosen for nourishment is also the product of territorial policies that govern its admissibility, availability and desirability. It is no coincidence that the Shiv Sena has urged young Marathas to become street-food vendors. In this way they not only promote vegetarian Hindu food but also occupy urban land physically and symbolically, integrating business with an active street politics. Moreover, Hindu activists have repeatedly attacked *udupi* restaurants—typical of southern India but widely present in Mumbai—because they represent the growing importance of Malayalam migration. These restaurants are also publicly associated with the danger of communist infiltration, since the Kerala Communist Party has many supporters.

Yet food in Mumbai today, above all in fashionable restaurants, also offers a type of conviviality and eating that differs from Hindu traditions. It is “sociable” food that often “speaks” English, with people meeting in smart places where men and women eat dinner together, where the middle class shows off its status symbols—all of which sits uncomfortably with the rustic rural values expressed by Maratha mythology.⁸³ Yet even as middle-class Mumbaitees appear to be gradually embracing cosmopolitanism, they nonetheless do so without challenging their need for status demarcation.

81 Fischler (1990).

82 Eleonora Fiorani, *Selvaggio e domestico. Tra antropologia, ecologia ed estetica* (Padua: Muzzio, 1993), p. 17.

83 Here a paradox in Indian nationalist policy seems to be established on the Maratha perception of the body. While one of Britain’s key instruments of colonial consolidation process was the classification, enumeration, and discipline of the Indian body—seen as dirty, soft, brittle and effeminate—the Shiv Sena’s nationalist, differentiating politics re-cast the Mumbaite’s body, demanding a clean, masculine body for men who want to be in the movement. See Arjun Appadurai, *Modernity at Large: Cultural Dimensions in Globalization* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1996).

And for the bulk of the urban population, the effort to define boundaries and separate communities seems to have become the true *leitmotiv* of how they perceive their city's globalisation: an obsessive drive to make their food, their bodies, and the city itself adhere to a concept of purity that is truly at odds with the history of Bombay. The city is thus forced to redefine its social identity in terms of opposites, and to adopt a logic that separates and discriminates, includes and excludes. This dialectic has always been present in the city but over the past forty years has come to express an urgency of identity that also involves a politicisation of the body, its needs and its pleasures, expressed and reinforced through the adoption of distinctive eating and social practices.⁸⁴

On the edge of cultural movements

Against this background of political unrest, food could be seen as one of the "flows" analysed by Appadurai, which enables an interpretation of the global cultural landscape.⁸⁵ Appadurai has identified five dimensions with which to describe the disjunctions between economy, culture and politics—ethnoscapes, mediascapes, technoscapes, finanscapes and ideoscapes.⁸⁶ Here it is possible to add a sixth "flow": foodscapes.⁸⁷ In this perspective, food can be detached from its "territoriality" and the

84 Identity claims of this nature can perhaps be read like the type of cannibalism of the Other mentioned by Francesco Remotti. Here cannibalism is a metaphor that implies opposition and accord in two societies—Maratha and non-Maratha—to the extent that one is the other's food; yet at the same time, this metaphor envisions food and related practices as a ritual that perpetuates and renews daily choices of self-representation, claiming each group's entitlement to aspiration and even cultural monopoly and elimination of what is different. See Remotti (1996), p. 77. See also W. Arens, *The Man-Eating Myth: Anthropology and Anthropophagy* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1980).

85 Appadurai (1996).

86 *Ibid.*, p. 46. "Ethnoscapes" specifically refers to the increasing mobility of persons, although this does not mean that there are no stable communities (rather, these are increasingly crossed by flows of people on the move); "finanscapes" bind increasingly fluid relationships between flows of money, politics, investment, and capital; "technoscapes" refers to the rapid diffusion of technology; "ideoscapes" are concatenated images and ideas that propose a narrative of diaspora thanks to electronic information diffusion; and finally "mediascapes" examine the electronic diffusion of ideological and political images. These offer to the viewer a world and a narrative where signs and meanings of different cultural contexts are mixed, and which—thanks to the effect of imagination—encourage construction of imaginary worlds and narration of possible lives of the Other.

87 See Alessandra Guigoni (ed.), *Foodscapes. Stili, mode e culture del cibo oggi* (Monza: Polimetrica, 2004).

value attributed to it at the local level. Food expresses a bifocal vision because it is both a material flow (ingredients and raw materials used in meal preparation) and an intangible flow (feelings of identity, nostalgia, identity, claims, membership, etc evoked by food).⁸⁸ This does not necessarily lead to cultural homogenisation because, when there is a transfer of cultural material from one place to another, it is reworked in accordance with the notions of local societies, who indigenise the transferred materials and practices. Pasta is an example. It is a dish that Italians consider to be their national glory, but during its widespread global diffusion it has been radically modified to meet local tastes.⁸⁹ Food's experiential traits change over time and transformation processes do not modify only the use but also the significance, related precisely to context meanings.

Adopting the perspective of a "foodscape" enriches a political debate that is more topical than ever: trying to find solutions to the need to protect different "local cuisines". Today the aim to safeguard the authenticity of products and flavours, while being aware of inevitable taste transformations related to contemporary social changes, involves small producers, venues, and institutions at the international level, hugging borders to define new biological and cultural food maps. The *Manifesto on the Future of Food* comes in the wake of this discussion, and proposes the international promotion of food's ecological sustainability.⁹⁰ The document condemns the inability of industrial agriculture to safeguard the planet's ecosystem adequately, because it has authorised the replacement of biodiversity with monocultures whose control is completely in the hands of a few global companies. Global-local tension in the modern food panorama turns into an increasingly clear-cut political conflict. The issue hinges on the difficulties encountered by indigenous and local cultures in obtaining sufficient guarantees not only for the availability of food, but also for public health, food and nutritional quality, and the preservation of traditional forms of subsistence tied to specific cultural identities. It is interesting that the International Commission for the Future of Food and Agriculture decided to emphasise how much agrobiodiversity depends

88 John Berger, *Ways of Seeing* (London: Penguin, 1972). The dual focus of modernity is the ability of social players to see near and far, the local and global, simultaneously.

89 Silvano Serventi and Françoise Sabban, *La pasta. Storia e cultura di un cibo universale* (Rome: Laterza, 2000).

90 International Commission for the Future of Food and Agriculture, *Manifesto on the Future of Food* (Florence: Arsia, 2006), available at http://commissionecibo.arsia.toscana.it/UserFiles/File/Commiss%20Intern%20Futuro%20Cibo/cibo_ing.pdf [accessed 19 July 2012].

on cultural diversity, sustaining the rights of communities to preserve their identity for future generations.⁹¹

The contemporary food landscape therefore reveals a precise sensitivity to the development of what Watson and Caldwell call the “cultural politics of food”.⁹² They are a type of politics that will integrate the collective, communal and institutional sphere with the personal and private. This politico-cultural synergy, which draws inspiration from local traditions and culture to build distinctive economies characterising territorial areas, is the tangible testimony of the *dabbawala* experience. Nor is it a coincidence that the *dabbawalas* are also activists at international level for the cultural politics of sustainable food. They regularly attend international seminars on these topics, including Terra Madre, a meeting held in Turin every two years.

Food as a gift, food as a marketable commodity

Delivering food for nearly 130 years is not a “culturally neutral” act, but a cultural phenomenon that is historically and symbolically in tune with Mumbai’s transformation into a global city. In addition to being an essential solution to the demand for quick meals in a metropolis whose schedule is cadenced by the working hours of the service industry, the *dabbawala* method is, implicitly, a way of ensuring the survival of the emotional and symbolic value of food prepared by loved ones, a “familiar food”. In this sense “familiar food”, insofar as it is able to enhance and maintain the importance of a certain type of taste that the eater does not want to give up, is one of the modern symbolic elements that contributes to the global discourse on the value of taste that assumes universal, almost cosmological, traits. Taste becomes not only a sensory experience, but a strong sense element capable of guiding choices in daily life and relationships. It can be seen as a positive result of globalisation, a process that transforms not only the world’s economic structures, but also its ethical and epistemological conceptions.

91 The International Commission for the Future of Food and Agriculture was established in 2003 by Claudio Martini, President of Tuscany Regional Authority, and Vandana Shiva, Executive Director of the Research Foundation for Science, Technology and Ecology, Navdanya. It consists of a group of prominent activists, academics, scientists, politicians and farmers from the north and south of Italy who work to make agricultural and food systems models socially and ecologically more sustainable.

92 James L. Watson and Melissa L. Caldwell (eds.), *The Cultural Politics of Food and Eating: A Reader* (London: Blackwell, 2005).

The food delivered by *dabbawalas* can be interpreted as a “gift” to the extent that it is able to integrate the economic dimension of barter with a complex phenomenology of a symbolic, religious, aesthetic, affective and legal order. As Marcel Mauss has argued, this food can be considered a “total social fact” because it sets in motion “the totality of society and its institutions”.⁹³ In the case of the *dabbawalas*, the value of the gift of food is expressed through the archaic conception that draws its inspiration from the recognised scriptures of classical Indian law. These laws state that:

The thing that is given produces its rewards in this life and in the next. Here in this life, it automatically engenders for the giver the same thing as itself: it is not lost, it reproduces itself; in the next life, one finds the same thing, only it has increased. Food given is the food that in this world will return to the giver; it is food, the same food that he will find in the other world. And it is still food, the same food that he will find in the series of his reincarnations. [...]. It is in the nature of food to be shared out. Not to share it with other is ‘to kill its essence,’ it is to destroy it both for oneself and for others.⁹⁴

These moral and legal foundations of the Hindu tradition are part of the spiritual architecture dictated by devotion to Varkari Sampradaya. This movement explicitly considers the gift of food as the essence of egalitarianism and of serving the Other, which is considered the equivalent of serving God. The fact of being an act of devotion capable of generating karmic rewards, the gift of food (whose delivery is ultimately a good approximation) serves as an ethical constant, capable of powering a scheme that generates adaptive behaviours and allows *dabbawalas* to adapt to change in their life and work, reproducing effective collective survival strategies from one generation to the next.⁹⁵

However, giving is not a disinterested action.⁹⁶ For the *dabbawala* the “gift-delivery (for a fee)” image constitutes a privileged symbolic resource

93 Marcel Mauss, *The Gift: The Form and the Reason for Exchange in Archaic Societies* (London: Routledge, 1990).

94 Ibid., pp. 72–73. Marcel Mauss refers to the *Code of Manu* and the 13th Book of *Mahabharata*, the great Indian epic poem.

95 I refer to the concept of “perpetual memory”, a mechanism that perpetuates a society’s fundamental behaviour patterns from one era to another. Moral values, religious beliefs and social structures are components of a perpetual memory that becomes the individual capacity for remembering collectively. I think this concept is useful when placed within a dynamic analysis in which a diachronic historic dimension can be associated with a synchronic and cultural dimension. 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).

96 In the preface to the English edition of Marcel Mauss, Mary Douglas explains the non-gratuity of the gift.

for preserving a mutually beneficial alliance with Mumbai. The interest of the *dabbawalas*, i.e. “the individual search after what is useful”, is collateral to the actual gift principle.⁹⁷ To understand this dynamic and also the “counter-gift”, it is useful to refer to Alain Caillé’s third paradigm which sees the gift as a promoter of social relations.⁹⁸ If people are to live to “produce society”, as Maurice Godelier argues, then the *dabbawalas*—through the relations within their group and with customers—generate an extended community that draws its strength from the continuous circle of giving, receiving and reciprocating.⁹⁹ This allows *dabbawalas* and customers to gain equally from the fulfilment of mutual needs. This implicit dialogue, which is the expression of a shared culture, overcomes “the opposition between the individual and the group, seeing people as members of a wider tangible circle” and conceives the gift not as “an economic system but as a social system of interpersonal relationships”.¹⁰⁰

Considering the food delivered by the *dabbawalas* to be an articulation of Mauss’s gift theory does not mean “branding the gift” like old ethnographic models, which saw Other societies as more likely to give.¹⁰¹ Paraphrasing Marco Aime:

Macro models [...] risk making reality too rigid. All of us, we ‘people of the Market’ and they ‘people who Give’, are makers of actions that can be

97 Mauss (1990), p. 96.

98 Alain Caillé, *Anthropologie du don. Le tiers paradigme* (Paris: Desclée de Brouwer, 1994), it. trans. *Il terzo paradigma. Antropologia filosofica del dono* (Turin: Bollati Boringhieri, 1998), pp. 8–11. The three paradigms referred to are: “utilitarian”, which sees the person as engaged in pursuing self-interest; “holistic”, which tries to explain all actions, whether collective or individual, as manifestations of the influence exerted by social totality on individuals (part of the current paradigm of social sciences such as functionalism, structuralism and culturalism); the “gift”, which attempts to overcome the limits of individualism and holism, and interprets the gift as the element that allows people to create society, namely as the former of covenants. The latter paradigm, proposed and supported by the founders of MAUSS (Mouvement Anti-utilitarist dans les Sciences Sociales), including Alain Caillé and Jacques T. Godbout, proposes to assign a value to the link between goods and services in producing social reports.

99 Maurice Godelier, *L’énigme du don* (Paris: Fayard, 1996).

100 Jacques T. Godbout, *L’esprit du don* (Paris: Editions la découverte, 1992), it. trans. *Lo spirito del dono* (Turin: Bollati Boringhieri, 2002), pp. 30 and 24.

101 Marco Aime, “Introduzione. Del dono e, in particolare, dell’obbligo di ricambiare i regali”, in Marcel Mauss, *Saggio sul dono. Forma e motivo dello scambio nelle società arcaiche* (Turin: Einaudi 2002), pp. i–xxviii (p. vii). See also Paolo Sibilla, *La sostanza e la forma. Introduzione all’antropologia economica* (Turin: Utet, 1996); Richard R. Wilk and Lisa Cliggett, *Economies and Cultures: Foundations of Economic Anthropology* (Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 1996); Edoardo Grendi (ed.), *L’antropologia economica* (Turin: Einaudi, 1972); and Marco Aime, *La casa di nessuno. I mercati in Africa occidentale* (Turin: Bollati Boringhieri, 2002).

economic or convivial, without being monolithically condemned to a given datum. It is therefore possible to live in the Market, but without being subject to or exploited by it every moment of our existence. At the same time, we live in a given society and respond to specific cultural rules, but this does not mean that there are no options outside those boundaries.¹⁰²

This food is certainly not outside the “neutral and impersonal” monetary mesh, nor is it just the inheritance of those who live outside of the market, as the *dabbawalas* themselves reflect so accurately. It is food that is part of supply and demand, capable of nourishing a class of workers who live in daily contact with Mumbai’s economic and social transformations. It is food transported by entrepreneurs who make use of diverse contractual forms governed by their capacity to deliver several meals in a public context increasingly structured by the politicisation of bodies and tastes.¹⁰³

If it is true that there is a historically new essence in the contemporary globalisation process, then the element that distinguishes it most from the preceding Fordist paradigm is perhaps the fact that the standardisation of production practices is accompanied by an increasing diversity of the symbolic worlds that interpret these practices. This diversity is ensured primarily by the close interdependence of social and cultural norms that support the forms of associative life and incorporate economic practices that give rise to specific labour organisations in specific territories.¹⁰⁴ Social relations, understood as expressive relationships whose intensity increases along with the growing complexity of labour division, are catalysts of this interdependence. This intensity depends greatly on the vigour of the sense systems that prevail in a given social corpus. Whether they are systems of kinship or expressions of personal ties of an affective nature, these relationships constitute “the deep psychic substance of the symbolic world of people who become subjects and not objects of economic relations and monetary economics”.¹⁰⁵

Culture—understood as a process that incessantly reproduces and rearranges materiality, beliefs, family systems, forms of learning, and related systems of meaning—reacts and interacts with market categories by taking advantage of shared moral and ethical codes. The specific case of the

102 Aime, *La casa di nessuno* (2002), p. 158.

103 Alfredo Salsano speaks of “polygamous forms of barter”. See Alfredo Salsano, *Il dono nel mondo dell’utile* (Turin: Bollati Boringhieri, 2008).

104 For economic and social practices, and cultural standards, see Giulio Sapelli, *Antropologia della globalizzazione* (Milan: Bruno Mondadori, 2002).

105 *Ibid.*, p. 115.

dabbawalas presents an economic activity embedded in a moral perspective that is both real and ideal, utilitarian and mutualistic—the empirical proof that “culture is not separable from economics, which is part of it and its rationality”.¹⁰⁶

Towards a unified cosmology of taste

This case-study of Mumbai’s *dabbawalas* illustrates how food practices, and the social relations that sustain them, contain traces of a far broader phenomenon—the development, in the unfolding of globalisation, of a *unified cosmology of taste* that transcends borders and incorporates differences. Rules associated with eating always reflect a general notion of the universe, a cosmology. The adjective *unitary* here does not imply the gradual standardisation of taste in a global food economy, but rather points out the need for a truly global discussion on the role of nutrition in a global context.¹⁰⁷ In order to lend deeper meaning to the concept of “global food”, some semiotic common ground is essential, and the notion of a shared cosmology is key to the project of a common social and cultural order. It also concurs with the formation and diffusion of universally accepted ethics.

Keying this “planetary discourse on food” into a discussion of an ethical nature can help safeguard its shared, open-ended approach, thus marking its distance from the imposed (and suffered) discourses that have historically shaped global taste in the previous stages of globalisation. This discussion is vital to the way local nutritional practices interact with each other and reinforce social practices and meanings that are rapidly projected on a global scale: it is, in fact, the dialectic interaction of different communities that brings about a common cosmology of taste.

The *dabbawalas*’ food delivery service reflects the drive to give shape and meaning to such a shared and “permeable” set of beliefs and practices.

106 Jack Goody goes on to state that the concept of culture cannot be used as a “residual category, a blanket term for the non-economic aspects of social life [...]. But we need to do so [*analyse*] not in terms of a global concept of culture but of the consideration of particular socio-cultural factors seen as endogenous to the system”. See Jack Goody, *Capitalism and Modernity: The Great Debate* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2004), p. 48, my italics.

107 Examples include the many movements active at a global level, offering diverse management of agricultural resources and different food distribution. See Raj Patel, *Stuffed and Starved: The Hidden Battle for The World Food System* (New York: Melville House, 2008).

A cosmology that is at once both the true expression and the most apt description of the city's diversity, a compass to navigate the complex plots woven into the fabric of a city like Mumbai. According to Eugène Minkowski the term "cosmology" should be understood as "an aesthetic and gestural happening" in which taste acts as the life-giving vehicle of meaning. Because *to taste* means disengaging "from the matter of our daily perceptions and preoccupations [...] taking on a singular attitude towards life and the environment" and lingering in this pleasure procures a particular attitude towards the surrounding world, a primordial attitude that is "an indispensable link between the inner and the outer world".¹⁰⁸

It is interesting to try to understand Mumbai's specific contribution on the evolution of this link between the individual and societal perceptions of taste. This city is one of those global urban macro-regions whose diversity seems to mimic the wider world.¹⁰⁹ At the same time, this diversity makes it a privileged scenario for the unfolding of India's specific way of thinking about food (see Chapter Two). This versatility, which reverberates in further layers of meaning, is also the reason for the difficulties that inevitably will be encountered in attempting to find a unified perspective for a theme as full of nuances and meanings as that of food. Thinking of an Indian food means taking into account its commercialisation, distribution and eating practices in large cities; yet it also means considering agricultural practices, livestock farming techniques and livelihoods in rural contexts. There is also the role of the ancient scriptures and the voice of the spiritual masters to be considered, not to mention global logic and the ways in which such logic is absorbed and processed by Indian nationals residing in India and abroad.

Recovering a unifying principle in all this diversity is far from simple, but it is useful to do so to avoid falling into the trap of obligatory standardisation, of convergence towards a "global culture", a definition too vague to have empirical value. The idea of a unified cosmology of taste does not end at a "global culture", but actually probes the possibility (and perhaps the need) of harmonising cultural specificities in a shared sensitivity to the protection of food integrity and eating practices. This serves to restore all the ethical, moral, spiritual and relational meanings of food, which otherwise has been reduced to its mere ingredients by a certain gastronomic trend (which is also a constituent element of the contemporary foodscape).

108 Minkowski (1936), pp. 187–88.

109 Segbers (2007).

Contemporary Indian thinking offers some important indications on the specific contribution that linguistics can offer for the development of a unified cosmology of taste. Indian Humanist Attipat Krishnaswami Ramanujan has argued that the ideal way to access the social and cultural context of a country is the grammatical study of its language. In many Hindu texts, grammar represents an indispensable model for thought.¹¹⁰ Anthropologist Alessandro Duranti expresses similar beliefs when he says “writing is a powerful form of classification, because it recognises some distinctions and ignores others”.¹¹¹ It is possible to talk of the “power of grammatical traditions” because the transcription of a language and consequently the rules underpinning its logic constitute clues on how its speakers think.¹¹² It is in this perspective that language—through the arbitrary taxonomies it creates—contributes to constructing culture, and that knowledge of a language allows us to understand its speaker’s values.¹¹³

Similarly, a fine understanding of the system of values and meanings of a specific food tradition can be achieved by interpreting its “grammars of taste”. Anthropologist Ravindra Khare identified three main cultural patterns in Hindu India, with three different corresponding gastrosemantics. The first, “ontological and experiential”, is related to cultural assumptions constrained within an earthly and material sphere, like the classification of food, the taboos, the intrinsic qualities of foods, daily lunch models, and dietary restrictions. The second, “transactional and therapeutic”, addresses how to maintain a healthy, beneficial union of body and soul (including the prevention and treatment of possible illness through diet and medicine), recognising a relationship of reciprocity between the intrinsic properties of the food and the person who consumes it. The third is the “criticism of the world”, showing the limits of the preceding patterns because it addresses reality or the illusion of the world, and the role played by food in increasing spiritual knowledge, interior contemplation, and the achievement of liberation.¹¹⁴

110 McKim Marriott (ed.), *India through Hindu Categories* (New Delhi: Thousand Oaks; London: Sage, 1992).

111 A. Duranti, *Antropologia del linguaggio* (Rome: Meltemi, 2000), p. 116.

112 *Ibid.*, p. 117.

113 G. R. Cardona, *La foresta di piume. Manuale di etnoscienza* (Rome: Laterza, 1985).

114 Ravindra S. Khare, “Introduction”, *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. 1–26 (pp. 7–9).

Beyond individual specificities, all three “grammars of taste” give order to the world and its future, foreshadow healing and happiness, and standardise paths of self-realisation and salvation. Each of these arguments develops specific practices, expressed in the Brahman-soul principle in the first gastrosemantics, respecting the food rituals organised according to the stages of physical and social life in the second, and pursuing the fasting, renunciation and austerity of custom of the third. But this division, which is so apparent in its written form, is not so clear-cut in Hindu life today, with all three gastrosemantics incorporated into everyday life and learned during childhood and later social interaction.¹¹⁵

It is the density of meanings that this conception of taste and food contains that make nutrition one of the fields where the greatest number of political strategies are advanced today, such as demands made in the name of Hindu identity. This relationship between identity policies and nutrition is evident during the recurrent (and increasingly common) food crises brought about by rising prices in basic commodities.¹¹⁶ For example, in 1998 the 5,000% increase in the price of onions became the key element in a populist political platform. The price of onions acted as an emblem of the difficulty for the poorer classes to ensure a decent diet in a globalised economy.¹¹⁷ So food, the underpinning of human existence, is now a symbolic site for political activists, and has been used to justify ideologies that are also based on the violent separation of religious-ethnic groups. The rhetoric of scarcity and the struggle to satisfy the needs of “their” citizens (co-ethnic, co-religious, etc) has been co-opted for political gain. Like any type of fundamentalism, Hindutva ideology tries to replace

115 Ibid.

116 The FAO summit held in Rome on 3–5 June 2008, emphasised the problem of the rapid, uncontrolled increase in food prices today. Although both developing and developed countries are affected, the consequences are far more devastating in the former. The increase in price of raw materials is linked to: business cycles in key markets; climate variability; conflicts in producer countries; exchange rate fluctuations; speculation; dumping. Other factors are the increase in prices of agricultural commodities, especially rice and wheat, which began in 2007 due to the contraction of cereals exports by major producing countries to cope with growing domestic demand; increased meat consumption in China and India, which in turn triggered a major need for cereals to feed livestock; and the growing demand for ethanol as a fuel for vehicles, which raised corn prices and gradually decreased water for crops. See the website www.masproscan.com; and Joachim von Braun, *The World Food Situation: New Driving Forces and Aquired Actions* (Washington, DC: International Food Policy Research Institute, 2007), available at <http://www.ifad.org/events/lectures/ifpri/pr18.pdf> [accessed 19 July 2012].

117 Vandana Shiva, *India Divided: Diversity and Democracy Under Attack* (New York: Seven Stories Press, 2005); and Patel (2008).

pluralism of ideas and practices with a focus on separation, although such a monoculture exists only in the minds of its proponents.

I believe, however, that the great wealth that Indian thinking can offer lies in its enduring attention to ecological diversity, cultural pluralism—an intellectual tendency that is not dichotomous because it addresses the unity of all things—and, finally, the intellectual flexibility that is directly proportional to the complex social relations that characterise the Indian way of life.¹¹⁸ The resulting plurality of social roles has a strong impact on the nature of actual cognitive processes and allows the development of infinite cultural expressions. Nonetheless, despite existing differences, food continues to be a component of expression, as well as an integrating identity, for the many faces of today's global citizens.

118 I drew inspiration from the work of Rose Laub Coser, who links modern intellectual flexibility and mental operations to the complexity of social relations. In urban contexts, where the individual is in contact with greater diversity, interaction helps to reflect on the plurality of worlds in the context. See Rose Laub Coser, *In Defense of Modernity: Role Complexity and Individual Autonomy* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1991).