
In *Mumbai Fables*, Gyan Prakash has written a lyrical yet incisive account of the city that has beckoned to him over the course of his life. The call of the city is not incidental to the arguments and organization of the book. Indeed, Prakash seeks to understand how and why the city has emerged as an object of desire and yearning. Invoking Jonathan Raban’s idea of the “soft city” and thus accepting the historiographical proposition that the city of myth and fable and aspiration is as real as the city of facts and statistics, Prakash does not try to “strip fact from fiction” but seeks instead to write histories of “what permitted the telling of certain stories and not others” (23). In doing so, he challenges the conventional narrative of the city, one that paints a downward arc in the city’s fortunes in the course of its passage from prosperous and cosmopolitan Bombay to slum-ridden and communally polarized Mumbai. If the proliferation of slums and the outbreak of communal violence in the 1990s shattered the city’s image as a “shining, cosmopolitan city,” then Prakash’s quest “took [him] to the shards of Bombay’s shattered image” (346).

Understanding such shards on their own terms is the method used by Prakash. Eschewing a conventional monographic narrative structure, the book reconstructs the shards themselves and thus shows how the city’s fables were produced. Not only does this approach tell us about those whose experiences were silenced to create the city’s fables, but it also offers readers the opportunity to rearrange the shards in different ways and thus gain new and interesting perspectives on the city’s past. *Mumbai Fables* offers an extraordinary panoramic perspective of the city over the last 150 years, spanning the divide between the colonial and the postcolonial periods and offering insight into the continuities and disjunctures between the two. Read differently, the book makes possible different histories. Prakash notes in his brilliant study of antiques in Chor Bazaar that the ephemera on sale there “offer us a heretical archive of Mumbai’s commodity life” (344). Similarly, the deconstruction and reassembly of Mumbai’s fables makes possible heretical histories of the city’s past and present.

Of the book’s nine chapters, the first and last chapters are of introductory and concluding nature respectively while also reflecting on the city of myth and dream. The seven chapters in between move from examining the emergence of the “colonial Gothic” city in the second half of the nineteenth century, marked by an unequal modernity, to investigating the mythic present-day city of gangsters, real estate and movies. In between are chapters on the land reclamation scandal of the 1920s, two chapters on the city’s cosmopolitan middle class of the 1930s
and 1940s, a chapter on the Shiv Sena’s takeover of the city’s streets from the Communists by the late 1960s, and a chapter on the (mis)planning of the twin city of New Bombay/Navi Mumbai in the 1960s and 1970s.

The changing nature of popular mobilization in Bombay is one heretical history made possible by Mumbai Fables. Who are “the people” of Mumbai? While critiques of the colonial state’s controversial Backbay Reclamation in the 1920s involved a newly enfranchised middle class claiming to speak for the public at large, the radicalized middle class intellectuals of the Progressive Writers’ Association and the Indian People’s Theatre Association of the 1930s and 1940s sought to mobilize the city’s underclasses. Meanwhile, as Prakash shows in a chapter on the famous Nanavati case of the late 1950s, the newspaper Blitz under founder-editor Russi Karanajia unleashed a powerful new form of populist rhetoric with skillful use of media imagery. Yet if Karanjia’s invocation of “the people” heralded the arrival of the cosmopolitan urban middle class into its own, then the form of populist politics pioneered by Karanjia challenged the dominance of that very class. Prakash shows how the passage of the city “From red to saffron” implied a profound shift in the nature of non-elite mobilization. While Communist activity from the 1920s onward was confined to the city’s working-class districts, the party’s tussles with the Shiv Sena from the 1960s onwards and the interconnection of city politics with regional and national affairs meant that Communist-Shiv Sena battles for the hearts and minds of the city’s underclasses spilled over into the city at large. Deploying images of Shivaji and Maharashtra lent vigour to the mobilizing efforts of Comrade Dange and other Communist leaders over the course of the 1950s, but also unwittingly provided the vocabulary for the Shiv Sena, which wrested control of the city’s streets by the early 1970s in the name of the Marathi manoos.

Yet this is no simple account of a passage from elite to middle class to plebian agency in the city’s politics. All along, Prakash presents a variety of competing and overlapping agendas that complicate attempts to impose a singular narrative on the city’s past, including anticolonial nationalism, the class struggle, the battle for Samyukta Maharashtra, and the nativist agenda of the Sena. Indeed, rearrange the shards differently and another story comes into focus: the politics of urban lands, an important yet hitherto understudied aspect of the city’s fabled existence. A city whose land was literally wrested from the sea through reclamation, Mumbai is a place where, unsurprisingly, land has been a source of contention. Yet, as Mumbai Fables argues in upending a still-regnant fantasy among the city’s elites, there was never any golden period of efficient and uncorrupt colonial urban administration, now sadly replaced by inefficient and corrupt rule by the city’s empowered plebian classes. The city’s modernity was two-faced from the beginning: efficient and well-functioning in the Gothic colonial precincts that emerged from about the 1860s onward,
but increasingly dystopian in the emerging industrial districts and slums that were part of the very same modernity. If the Backbay Reclamation scheme of the 1920s was the effort of a rapacious colonial state seeking to exploit land values, then the well-meaning efforts of Indian planners to create the satellite city of New Bombay in the 1960s were thwarted by the machinations of the city’s distinctively indigenous variant of buccaneer, the Bombay Builder. The latter, in conjunction with corrupt politicians and figures from the underworld, have taken advantage of the demise of the city’s textile industry to unlock the potential of urban land as real estate, selling a new dream of luxury housing. Prakash assesses some responses of those left out of such fantasies of property through a skillful reading of a Hindi comic strip featuring a masked vigilante avenger, appealing presumably to migrants from north India who increasingly make up the city’s underclasses.

Accounts of the city’s people and its lands are but two of the heretical histories that Mumbai Fables makes possible. Ultimately, the book’s contribution lies in the way in which it shows how the city came to be constituted as an object for its people, while at the same time constituting those people. While a valuable and lasting contribution to the study of Mumbai, Mumbai Fables advances our appreciation of the lives of cities more generally.

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NIKHIL RAO


Joel Brinkley, a Pulitzer Prize-winning former New York Times correspondent now teaching at Stanford University, has taken a fresh look at Cambodia, the first of its kind for the general reader in a decade. But this is a disturbing book, both in its content and in its bleak portrayal of the current situation and rather hopeless outlook for the future. Brinkley’s previous engagement with Cambodia was in 1979, when he reported on conditions in refugee camps in Thailand after the collapse of the Khmer Rouge regime. He returned in 2008 and spent two years travelling and engaging in a wide range of interviews: with current and former US ambassadors, government and opposition figures, international organizations, civil society advocates and ordinary Cambodians, among them the most marginalized rural and urban poor. He has evidently concluded that Cambodians fall into two classes: a passive, exploited underclass, denied adequate nutrition, education, health care, political freedom and property rights, and a privileged kleptocracy that subsists