Ethnographic Approaches: Contextual Religious Cosmopolitanisms in Mumbai

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Introduction

In a special issue of the journal *Ethnography* on South Asian cities, Ajay Gandhi and Lotte Hoek write about the feeling of bafflement and disorientation induced by cities from that part of the world in residents and visitors alike. The latter category includes researchers, who – equally perplexed – are striving through "ethnographic questions and labour" to make some sense of places so expansive and diverse, that they are "by nature impossible to fully understand."[1] This aptly described premise applies also to most of us who engage in studying one of the world's largest and culturally most diverse cities, Mumbai (until 1995: Bombay). For the past five years, together with colleagues from various disciplines (the study of religions, anthropology, sociology, political sciences, and South Asian studies), I have been involved in a research project exploring contemporary aspects of religion in Mumbai.[2] The subprojects in this endeavor shared an important and to a certain extent also innovative characteristic in that they did not investigate specific, clearly delineated religious groups or communities. Instead, they applied a spatial perspective, focusing on places and movements, aiming to avoid an unnecessary homogenization of different religions or groups as clear-cut entities. And, given the difficulties of a comprehensive approach to the socio-religious dynamics of major South Asian cities in general and of Mumbai in particular, zooming in on selected, much more limited socio-geographic spaces seemed a practicable way of dealing with the city's continuous transformation and increasing diversity. With its focus on the dynamics of composite spaces, on socio-religious constellations and interactions in various settings in Mumbai, the project contributes to ongoing broader discussions of cities as "sites of distributed

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[1] Ajay Gandhi and Lotte Hoek, "Introduction to crowds and conviviality: Ethnographies of the South Asian city," *Ethnography* 13/1 (2012): 3-4.
[2] The project "Dwelling and Crossing: The socio-cultural dynamics of religious spaces in Mumbai" was initiated by Michael Stausberg (University of Bergen), included eight subprojects, and was generously funded by the Research Council of Norway over a period of four years (2014-2018).

multiplicity and relationality; of practices and trajectories embedding several identities, geographies, and histories."[3]

In my own subproject I initially proposed to inquire into the role of religion in the mutual perception and everyday interactions of residents in selected Mumbai neighborhoods. Delineating the scope of my planned research in the larger project application I emphasized that – given this city's unique religious diversity – it was the ideal setting to study the ways in which religious factors contributed to the forging of neighborly structures and relations. More than five years and numerous incursions into the field later, this (over-) confidently asserted initial objective has morphed into a number of loosely connected research questions and thematic frameworks, another example for the transformations and shifts of focus that often occur as a direct consequence of fieldwork dynamics. Before elaborating on the stages of my research and the circumstances in the field that contributed to the diversification of the project's objectives, I begin with a very brief (and inevitably incomplete) introduction to Mumbai's socio-religious complexity from the 16th century onwards.

From 'Bom ba(h)ía' to Bombay to Mumbai

When in 1509 the Portuguese first raided villages on the grove-covered islets that formed deep natural harbours (Port.: *bom baía*, 'good bay') and became later known as Bombay, they encountered fisherfolk, rice and coconut farmers, and small traders.[4] Twenty-five years later Bahadur Shah, the Muslim ruler of Gujarat, ceded the islands to the European invaders after they took control of Bassein fort (today's Vasai). The Sephardi Jewish physician and herbalist Garcia da Orta, who from 1555 onwards lived for some time on one of the islands, mentions among the inhabitants of the area the Hindu Kolis (fishing and farming communities), Kunbis (agriculturists), Bhandaris (toddy tappers), Prabhus (accountants) and Banias (merchant communities), as well as Konkani Muslims (Naitias), Parsi Zoroastrians, and a few Portuguese families. In the second half of the 16th century, and with the support of the civil authorities, Jesuits and Franciscans built churches and converted parts of the population to Roman Catholicism. In 1661 Charles II of England married the

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[3] Smriti Srinivas, *A Place for Utopia: Urban Designs from South Asia* (Seattle and London: University of Washington Press, 2015), 160.
[4] For a history of Mumbai and the following brief overview see Gyan Prakash, *Mumbai Fables* (New Delhi: HarperCollins India, 2010) and Naresh Fernandes, *City Adrift: A Short Biography of Bombay* (New Delhi: Aleph, 2013).

Portuguese Infanta Catharina of Braganza, receiving the islands as dowry and leasing them seven years later to the East India Company. Gerald Aungier, the Governor of Bombay from 1669 until 1677, decisively shaped the early development of the city by attracting trading and artisan communities to the islands and promising them equality before the law regardless of ethno-linguistic or religious affiliation. This was the starting point of a long development that brought many Hindu and Muslim communities distinguished by geographical origin, language, and religious custom into the area, along with Jews, more Zoroastrians, and Jains. From an estimated 10,000 in 1661 the city's population rose to 60,000 already by 1675.[5] Over time, relations of trade and commerce in the area intensified and developed into networks that extended to kingdoms in inland India and the area around the Indian Ocean and Persian Gulf, contributing decisively to increased work opportunities and further influx of population. The number of inhabitants continued to rise, from 113,000 in 1780 to 162,000 in 1826, 236,000 in 1836 and then, spectacularly growing to 566,000 in 1849 and 816,000 in 1862.[6] Following the establishment of the first cotton-spinning mill in 1854 the cotton industry grew rapidly, attracting thousands of migrants from the Deccan, Konkan, and the United Provinces. The spectrum of ethnic, regional, religious, and occupational diversity in the second half of 19th century-Bombay is impressive,[7] including a small layer of British and other Europeans in the

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[5] Sharada Dwiwedi and Rahul Mehrotra, *Bombay, the Cities Within* (Bombay: Eminence Designs, 1995), 31.

[6] Steam navigation, trade with China, the gradual establishment of a railway network, the demand for cotton during the American Civil War were some of the decisive factors contributing to the city's growth. Also, considerable capital generated through opium trade formed the basis for a number of banking and industrial undertakings. See Amar Farooqui, *Opium City: The Making of Early Victorian Bombay* (Delhi: Three Essays Collective, 2006). "Bombay's opium traders were a cosmopolitan group: they included Parsis, Konkani Muslims, Gujaratis, Goan Catholics and Baghdadi Jews." In: Naresh Fernandes, *City Adrift*, 45.

[7] Govind Narayan writes in 1863 about the many communities in the city: "A local proverb talks about a land with 'fifty-six languages and eighteen casts with different head-dresses'. However in Mumbai one is unable to fathom the number of languages which are current usage, nor the number of castes which reside there. [...] Among the Hindus there are over a hundred castes – Marwadi, Multani, Bhatia, Vani, Joshi, Brahmin (once again, approximately 25 to 30 castes of Brahmins can be encountered in this city), Kasar, Sutar, Jingar, Lohar, Kayastha Prabhu, Dhuru Prabhu, Ugra Prabhu, Shimpi, Khatri, Kantari, Jhare, Paanchkalashe, Shetye, Lavane, Kumbhar, Lingayat, Gawli, Ghati, Mang, Mahar, Chambhar, Hajam, Teli, Mali, Koli, Dhobi, Kamathi, Telangi, Kannadi, Kongadi, Ghadshi, Purbhaiya, Bangali, Punjabi, *et cetera.* There is no end to differences and variations within these castes. Moving on to the other castes – Parsi, Mussalman, Moghul, Yahudi, Israeli, Bohra, Khoja, Memon, Arab, Kandhari; these are the castes identified by the eighteen different head-dresses. And

administration, military, and education; Parsi, Hindu, Jain, and Muslim (Bohra and Khoja) mercantile groups from Gujarat; Marathi-, Gujarati-, Hindi-, and Urdu-speaking laborers and mill workers, domestic servants, artisans, cultivators, and small traders such as grocers, peddlers, tailors, and barbers.

Over the next decades, immigration continued to fuel the city's growth. Of the almost one million inhabitants around the turn of the twentieth century, only little more than a quarter had been born in Bombay.[8] People from every corner of India arrived in the city and blended into its ethno-linguistic and cultural fabric: Tamils, Goans, Konkanis, Malayalis from the South; Hindi- and Urdu-speaking farmers, as well as Sindhis, Nepalis, and Pathans from the North. Importantly, as seen earlier, in terms of social class neither the financial elites nor the working class nor the social groups in between have been monolingual or monoreligious. Today, in addition to the various groups already mentioned, Mumbai is also home to a large number of Ambedkarite Buddhists. The Catholic population remains strong, and Mumbai is the main center of the Parsi Zoroastrians.

Tensions between various ethnic or religious communities were not absent from Mumbai's history. Protests against Christian missionary activities, Parsi-Muslim conflicts, a series of Hindu-Muslim conflicts and riots especially from 1893 onwards and throughout the late colonial period[9] were among the most notable instances. Complex economic and political developments after Partition, the reorganization of the Indian states according to language (with the city becoming the capital of Maharashtra), and the ongoing massive migration contributed to the difficult economic situation in the late 1960s. Immigrants from South and North Indian rural areas remained economic refugees living in slums. Founded in 1966 and named after the 17th-century Maratha ruler Chhatrapati Shivaji Bhonsle, the regional political party Shiv Sena ('Shivaji's Army') aggressively propagated at first linguistic, and later also religious, monoculturalism, playing a major role in a historical process that has

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then come the hatted races, including the English, Portuguese, French, Greek, Dutch, Turkish, German, Armenian and Chinese." In: *Govind Narayan's Mumbai: An Urban Biography from 1863*, transl. Murali Ranganathan (Delhi: Anthem Press India, 2012), 51-52.

[8] "Religious and linguistic diversity marked this teeming immigrant population. The Hindus were dominant, constituting 65 percent of the population in 1901, and Muslims made up 20 percent, followed by smaller percentages of Christians, Zoroastrians, Jains and Jews. The gross figures on religion, however, conceal the city's true diversity, for religious communities were made up of different linguistic groups." (Gyan Prakash, *Mumbai Fables*, 43).

[9] Meena Menon, "Chronicle of Communal Riots in Bombay Presidency (1893-1945)," *Economic & Political Weekly* 45/47 (2010): 63-72.

been described as an ethnicization of the city.[10] The party's initial agenda was to secure jobs and economic opportunities for the Marathi-speaking population, targeting the large numbers of Tamils who were working as clerks and in lower management positions in the industrial and commercial sector. This Maharashtrianism (directed later also against Hindi-speaking cabdrivers, Sikh businessmen, or Malayali street vendors) was paired with intense social activities on the neighborhood level, the fight against the influence of socialist ideas in the labor unions, and a strong commitment to Hindutva, Hindu nationalism, aimed not only against Muslims but also Buddhist Dalits. This militant attempt at ethnicization and Hinduization played a major role in the massive riots and anti-Muslim violence of December 1992/January 1993 after the destruction of the Babri mosque in Ayodhya. These events and the retaliatory serial bombings that took place two months later in different parts of the city had long-lasting reverberations. In 1995 the Shiv Sena became part of the ruling coalition (together with the Bharatiya Janata Party, BJP) in Maharashtra, and Bombay was renamed into Mumbai. The new official name was meant to be a direct reference to the local female deity Mumba worshiped in the region's fishing villages since the time before the advent of the Portuguese. In use already earlier in the Marathi and Gujarati languages, in addition to being the replacement of a name associated with colonial rule by an indigenous designation, the renaming of Bombay into Mumbai was perceived by many as an attempt to erase the memory of Bombay's cultural diversity, carrying in its subtext the image of an ethnically-culturally cleansed city.

In the field in the city: Stages of research

As stated in the application submitted to the Research Council of Norway, my proposed project targeted selected multi-religious neighborhoods as "composite spaces of socio-religious dynamics." Research on these culturally diverse spaces was to be undertaken under several related aspects: patterns of cross-religious communication, the perception of opportunities of multi-religious dwelling, cultural forms of everyday peace, the role of religion in complex neighborhood relations. The planned study was described as "a comparative urban ethnography that provides insights into contemporary urban life in a multilayered, multi-religious society."

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[10] See, for example, Arjun Appadurai, "Spectral Housing and Urban Cleansing: Notes on Millennial Mumbai." *Public Culture* 12/3 (2000): 627-651, here 630.

This kind of approach to religious phenomena in urban environments was quite new to me at the time. In the study of religions, anthropologically-minded scholars often focus in their fieldwork on specific religious sites, movements, groups, or institutions. This was the case with my own previous ethnographic explorations too, some of which were situated (entirely or partly) in urban contexts. After contributing as a graduate student to a sociological ethnography of a Pentecostal group in a South German university town in the early 1990s, I embarked on an extensive, multi-methodic project on the worship of the Hindu deity Hanuman in the pilgrimage city of Varanasi. The resulting monograph has distinct ethnographic, historical and sociological components. An ongoing, long-term study of two new religious movements in Asia included repeated stays in Tokyo and Mumbai, participant observation at religious events, documentation of religious sites, and numerous open-ended interviews with members at temples and in private homes. Another project, aimed at the Yogini cult and its contemporary transformations, was partly based on urban fieldwork in Delhi, Hamburg and, once again, Varanasi. This focus on relatively clearly delineated objectives, a common denominator in previous research endeavors in urban contexts, was missing in my most recent work in Mumbai, with considerable consequences especially for the initial stages of research, in which I first needed to identify potential sites and conversation partners, as described below.

Another observation concerns the problematization of the relationship between religion and city. It has been stated in the specialized literature[11] that urban ethnography is distinguished from work in other settings by the recognition of the importance of urban life for the researchers' interlocutors, including its changing nature and specific conditions such as (hyper-) diversity/heterogeneity, large size, high density, anonymity, inequality, and interdependency.[12] In the ethnographic study of religions in cities the relationship between urbanity and religion, and the urban

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[11] See, for example, Rivke Jaffe and Anouk Koning, *Introducing Urban Anthropology* (London and New York: Routledge, 2015), 1.

[12] Two examples for definitions of the city that include some of these conditions: "[F]or sociological purposes a city may be defined as a relatively large, dense, and permanent settlement of socially heterogeneous individuals" (Louis Wirth, "Urbanism as a way of life," *American Journal of Sociology* 44/1 (1938): 1-24, here 8); " a space for the densification of the heterogeneous" (Helmuth Berking, Jochen Schwenk, Silke Steets, "Filling the Void? – Religious Pluralism and the City," in *Religious Pluralism and the City: Inquiries into Postsecular Urbanism*, eds Helmuth Berking *et al* (London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2018), 7.)

situatedness of religious life-worlds ("topographies of faith")[13] play an important role and deserve special attention. While the fieldwork I had previously conducted in the aforementioned urban contexts does not always fit this description of urban ethnography, the project on multi-religious dwelling in Mumbai paid from the outset much more attention to the urban contextualization of the phenomena to be studied.

Before starting the "actual" work, the part I used to begin with in previous urban projects with clearly circumscribed fields and a potential pool of research participants (establishing rapport and trust, conducting preliminary interviews, refining research questions etc.), I needed first to identify relevant neighborhoods where research was potentially meaningful and possible. Locating mixed-religious areas in Mumbai was not too difficult. I had been in the city a number of times before and was aware of potential field sites. Maps (virtual and printed) and guidebooks were helpful, too: The range and spatial constellations of places of worship represented on detailed area maps gave an indication for where to look further on the ground. Extensive (and intense) explorations of these areas followed, applying pedestrian methods of inquiry[14] at first, then informal interactions, observations, conversations and interviews of various lengths. Research in different parts of the city evolved gradually: I stayed in rented rooms in residential buildings, walked repeatedly through areas of potential interest, spent time in selected places (shops, parks, tea-stalls, religious sites) making contacts and aiming for more thorough explorations of mixed-religious dwelling. All this led to numerous interactions with residents of the respected areas, including many conversations in my interlocutors' homes.

In the course of the first weeks of fieldwork my focus of inquiry gradually changed. In the initial stages of my exchanges with residents in Mumbai neighborhoods[15] I did not include direct questions about religion, except perhaps in cases when conversations took place at a religious site. I tried to avoid for as long as possible explicitly cueing my interlocutors into speaking about religion, hoping that at some point or other the topic would come up, and if it did, I was interested in the

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[13] Irene Becci, Marian Burchardt and José Casanova (eds), *Topographies of Faith: Religion in Urban Spaces* (Leiden and Boston: Brill, 2013).

[14] Srinivas, *A Place for Utopia*, 29-30, 160-61.

[15] For a discussion of "neighborhood" and "locality" see Arjun Appadurai, *Modernity at Large: Cultural Dimensions of Globalization* (Minneapolis and London: University of Minnesota Press, 1996), 178-99.

contexts in which it would surface. I talked with residents in culturally (ethnically, linguistically, religiously, socially) diverse neighborhoods about all kinds of things: Their biographies, family history, occupations and aspirations for themselves and their children, their perception of the neighborhood, and their interactions with other residents. Not all interlocutors touched on all these points, and with some of them I talked about other topics as well, topics that were later added to the list of themes to be included in interviews. And, whenever it came up in the flow of our conversations, and it often did, we discussed about the interlocutors' religion and religiosity.

Religious sites were again not something I prioritized during the initial phase of fieldwork in Mumbai, trying instead to cover a wider range of places in a street or neighborhood, looking at spatial constellations in which religion may be one of many variables in the interplay of factors in multi-layered social spaces. At the same time, this does not mean that I avoided temples, shrines, dargahs, mosques, or churches. Contacts were also made sipping tea with devotees at temples on leisurely afternoons, or by being approached by curious churchgoers after evening masses. Moreover, for example, when a retired schoolteacher told me that he prayed every afternoon at the Irani mosque not far from his home as part of his daily routine, and offered to show me around there, I happily agreed. When another interlocutor mentioned that his father played an important role in establishing and maintaining a neighborhood shrine that had been recently demolished by the city administration and soon afterwards partially re-established, I went and documented the site. When during a conversation somebody living in a high-rise described how drivers employed by the residents in the building had set up an image of a deity on the wall of the car park, with the building committee subsequently deciding to having it removed, I rushed to the scene. There were numerous other such and similar situations. Issues related to the spaces in private homes that were either dedicated or could be somehow connected to religion (house shrines, religious paraphernalia, art with religious connotations) were – whenever this was opportune – made into conversation topics. All in all, it can be said that spaces (and micro-spaces) with explicit connections to religion were very much relevant, but not the main focus my work.

As a consequence of this approach, the scope of my inquiry became broader. My attention shifted from interreligious perception and communication in culturally multilayered urban areas, and the importance of religious factors in complex neighborly relations to the more wide-ranging potentialities of intercultural perception

and encounters, and the field of everyday multiculturalism.[16] New research questions were aimed at the ways in which individuals more generally perceive their culturally diverse surroundings, at their openness in relation to culturally different others, and the extent to which they engage with neighborhood residents from ethnic, cultural, religious, linguistic groups different from their own. These questions addressing cross-cultural communication, the perception of and reactions to cultural difference, and interactions of various kinds and intensity levels proved fruitful and generated their own dynamics and ramifications in later stages of my research. One of the outcomes was an inquiry into the self-positioning of individuals in specific mixed-cultural urban settings of Mumbai, or in other words, a closer look at selected individual variants of "Mumbai cosmopolitanism," their relationality, and the ways in which they were embedded in ongoing situative processes and situated individual epistemologies.[17]

Cosmopolitanism in Mumbai

At some point or other of their work in the city, those engaged in Mumbai-related cultural research are likely to encounter the term "cosmopolitanism" (or "cosmopolitan") in their interactions with residents. In my case it happened for the first time in the early stages of fieldwork, in December 2014. While exploring a neighborhood in the southern part of the city, I came across three middle-aged women on a bench chatting in the spacious courtyard of a school near a temple compound. We struck up a conversation about the site and the area around it, and they were quick to point out how diverse the neighborhood was when it comes to language, ethnicity, and religion, with Gujarati, Maharashtrian, and South Indian residents, Hindus and Muslims, Christians, Jains, and Parsis. At some point, one of the women casually remarked (in English): "Yes, we are quite cosmopolitan here." In the course of our conversation it gradually became clear what she implied by this, namely the fact that the neighborhood was culturally diverse, characterized by conviviality, open-mindedness, awareness of the other residents' different culture, language, customs, cuisine, religion. In other words, it seemed to be an expression of a certain attitude

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[16] Amanda Wise and Selvaraj Velayutham (eds), *Everyday Multiculturalism* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009).
[17] See Nina Glick Schiller and Andrew Irving (eds), *Whose Cosmopolitanism? Critical Perspectives, Relationalities and Discontents* (New York and Oxford: Berghahn, 2015).

with regard to diversity and difference, and also perhaps of possessing a set of skills for not only acknowledging but also engaging with this difference.

As outlined earlier, the roots of this Mumbai brand of cosmopolitanism are strong, reaching back to the very beginning of the city's modern history. Ingrained in the city's culture, it was called by Arjun Appadurai "Mumbai's self-governing cliché," usually not associated with "self-cultivation, universalism, or with the ideals of globalism with which it is historically linked in Enlightenment Europe," but with "cultural co-existence, the positive valuation of mixture and intercultural contact."[18] Despite the activities of the Shiv Sena, the anti-Muslim violence in 1993, or the train bombings by Muslim radicals in 2006, all of which contributed to mistrust between religious communities, Mumbai's cosmopolitanism survives, both "as a powerful memory and an aspiration. On the streets and in everyday life, you can observe the living presence of the city's history as a place of interactions between different communities, languages and religions, even if this practice does not ascend to an Olympian philosophy of life."[19] In the opening chapter of his *Mumbai Fables*, Gyan Prakash describes the emotional resonance and fascination the city has been eliciting for a long time, with its "promise of exciting newness and unlimited possibilities." Unlike other major Indian cities such as Kolkata, Chennai and Delhi, Mumbai "flaunts its image as a cosmopolitan metropolis by transcending its regional geography," with its "dazzlingly diverse" population, its myriad languages, and many different faiths.[20] Prakash and other authors strongly connected with Mumbai describe how cities one loves and cares about are to a large part products of creative imaginative processes in which myths and narratives from distant or not so distant pasts become mosaic stones in the larger picture. The idea of Mumbai as *the* cosmopolitan Indian city, with a long history of ethnic and religious diversity, seems to be an important integral, lasting component of such a larger imaginary, in spite of often sobering diagnoses provided by contemporary writers, historians, or sociologists. Naresh Fernandes states that "[a]mong the truths Bombay holds to be self-evident is the fact that it is cosmopolitan," and cites – for a first occurrence of the term in the city – an article from *The Times of India* from 1878, which describes Afghans visiting

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[18] Arjun Appadurai, "Cosmopolitanism from Below," *The Johannesburg Salon: Volume Four* (2011): 34.
[19] Prakash, *Mumbai Fables*, 348.
[20] Prakash, *Mumbai Fables*, 10.

'"the cosmopolitan bazaars of Bombay."[21] In later chapters Fernandes reflects on the alienation, re-islandization, ghettoization, the mono-cultural tendencies, and the vegetarianization that have affected Mumbai lately. After highlighting selected aspects of the history of the erstwhile island city, he writes: "Bombay is experiencing [...] the emergence of new islands, whose edges are sharply defined by religion and class [...], enclaves of privilege and exclusion that undermine Bombay's deep-seated idea of itself as a progressive, cosmopolitan metropolis."[22]

And still, the idea persists on many levels. In a number of conversations I had over the past years with residents of various neighborhoods across South and Central Mumbai, the designation "cosmopolitan" came up quite frequently, in an adjectival, adverbial or substantival form, in connection with the linguistic and religious diversity of these residents' social environments, or when they talked about their personal, affirmative attitude with relation to this diversity. In other cases, even when not expressly uttered, this same idea of cultural openness was showing through in much of what my interlocutors said about their biographical pasts and about their day-to-day lives. To a lesser extent expressions of a cosmopolitan vision encompassing an entire city, these were articulations of a vernacular cosmopolitanism[23] on the individual level. As the social anthropologist Pnina Werbner correctly states, "it cannot ever be said that a whole city, including all its residents, is cosmopolitan. It is *within* the city that certain activities, sites and milieus are more cosmopolitan than others."[24] As can be said for individuals, I would add, who all differ when it comes to the extent to which they are aware of or appreciate cultural and religious difference.

The women on the bench all nodded approvingly when one of them pointed out how cosmopolitan their neighborhood was. Similar conversations in later stages of my fieldwork in selected multi-religious areas of the city led me to think that, on the one hand, this reiteration of Mumbai's openness on an individual level is more than a mere reflex and expression of an imagination, memory, or utopian aspiration. What also became clear during many encounters was that these instances of

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[21] Fernandes, *City Adrift*, 56.
[22] Fernandes, *City Adrift*, 88.
[23] See, for example, Homi Bhabha, "Unsatisfied Notes on Vernacular Cosmopolitanism," in *Text and Narration*, eds Peter C. Pfeiffer and Laura García Moreno (Columbia, S.C.: Camden House, 1996), 191-207.
[24] Pnina Werbner, "The Dialectics of Urban Cosmopolitanism: Between Tolerance and Intolerance in Cities of Strangers," *Identities: Global Studies in Culture and Power* 22 (2015): 569-587, here 571.

cosmopolitanism needed to be properly qualified and situated in their own discursive contexts. The following voices of residents of Mumbai, each with their own "pragmatics of living with difference"[25] in multicultural, mixed-religious settings, serve to illustrate my point.

Two case studies

The protagonist of my first vignette is a life counselor and astrologer.[26] This latter occupation, astrology, has been in this Maharashtrian family for generations, being passed on from grandfather to grandson at least three times, leaving out the respective fathers. A series of extremely unhappy events in his life left my interlocutor, who was working as an accountant at that time, at an existential crossroad. He sought and found help, experienced improvement after seeing an astrologer, and decided then to try and make a living by helping others solve *their* life problems. Framed diplomas and course certificates on the wall of his small office document the various stages of his training. He quickly built a reputation and was able in his new career not only to support his family of four, but also to pay for his children's college education. In his early sixties at the time of our conversations, he was still enjoying his work and was grateful for what he had achieved for himself and his family.

We were talking about everyday life in the South-Mumbai neighborhood where he had had his office for more than 30 years, an area with Muslim, Hindu, Jain, Christian, and Jewish residents, when he used the English term "cosmopolitan" in a Hindi sentence to describe the prevalent atmosphere in his neighborhood. I asked him to elaborate on what he meant. There were many different kinds of people living together in this neighborhood, he said, and they all supported each other on many different occasions. He went on to recount episodes of interreligious co-operation, some of which occurred in rather banal, others in more exceptional circumstances – for example when Jewish residents protected one of the area's prominent Hindu temples during the 1993 riots. He also described in vivid detail his safe passage through the adjacent Muslim neighborhood during those same events, accompanied by one of his Muslim acquaintances. He pointed out that the 1993 conflict was in his

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[25] Greg Noble, "Everyday Cosmopolitanism and the Labour of Intercultural Community", in *Everyday Multiculturalism*, eds A. Wise and S. Velayutham, 46-64, here 46.

[26] In order to protect the identity of both my interlocutors whose cases are included in this essay, I altered some of their socio-demographic characteristics.

opinion fully orchestrated, and that normally there were no problems between the neighborhood's Hindus and Muslims, whose everyday lives were characterized by mutual understanding, and close business and personal relations. Then he talked about his Christian tenant living next door, a social worker committed to helping HIV patients by organizing various projects aimed at securing a basic income to those affected. Another relevant moment in our conversation was when – after hearing about my previous research on Hanuman worship – he first recited a devotional text dedicated to Shani (a deity mythologically connected to Hanuman), and then enthusiastically played on his mobile phone a rather unusual-sounding YouTube video of the most popular prayer dedicated to the simian deity, performed by a group I later identified as the Ukrainian electronic music band *Shanti People*.

My conversations with the astrologer took place at a later stage of my research when the directions of my inquiry had already considerably broadened but were still evolving. Interactions with interlocutors now regularly included questions regarding their perception of culturally different surroundings, their openness in relation to religiously/culturally different others, and the extent of their engagement with people who belonged to other ethnic, cultural, religious, linguistic groups. Gradually I became aware of another point worth pursuing, this being also the reason for my inclusion of both of these cases in this essay: namely the moments of uncertainty in certain constellations of intercultural encounters, and the potential instability of cosmopolitan claims, an instability that in most cases played out in complex ways and eludes simple characterization. I will return to this point (and to our astrologer) in a moment. Before that, a brief look at the second selected case complicates things a little insofar as it attempts to include mixed-religious or interfaith marriages into the picture, an "embodied cosmopolitanism"[27] not uncommon in contemporary Mumbai.

In the 1980s a young Hindu woman married a Parsi Zoroastrian man with whom she fell in love during her university studies. Interestingly, and as a side note, the mothers initially opposed this union, while the fathers did not object at all. The couple pursued their professional careers very successfully and raised three children, two of whom were married at the time of my visits in the couple's home. While I did not have the opportunity to meet the husband, his wife seemed to be enjoying talking to me over a cup of tea even after a tiring day at work. At some point, our

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[27] Ann K. Mellor, "Embodied Cosmopolitanism and the British Romantic Woman Writer," *European Romantic Review* 17, 3 (2006): 289-300, here 292.

conversation touched on the religious socialization of the children, and my host described how they grew up following both Parsi and Hindu religious traditions: They had the Parsi thread ceremony performed, celebrated the Parsi festivals Navroz and Khordad Sal, but also the Hindu Divali. The family visited Parsi fire temples (without their mother, who as a non-Parsi is not allowed to enter), and (with both parents) Hindu temples such as Mahalakshmi and others. They were also regular visitors to the (religiously more eclectic) Sai Baba shrine nearby. The family went on longer trips to religious sites: To the Parsi pilgrimage center Udvada, the Minakshi temple in Madurai, Ramana Maharishi's ashram in Thiruvannamalai, and to Shirdi, the place connected with the life of Sai Baba. She then told me about her children's university education, which took place in India and abroad, and led to the unintended consequence of one of her daughters marrying a Catholic and moving to Europe.

During the years of fieldwork in Mumbai I met a fairly large number of interfaith couples that shared with me the sometimes unexpected and not always conflict-free outcome of their decision to spend their lives with someone belonging to a different religion. In this case, too, while expressing a certain pride in her and her husband's fundamentally cosmopolitan attitude (she used the term "cosmopolitan" herself), my interlocutor went several times into a pensive mood when talking about the problems that came with this openness. Finding a spouse for her unmarried daughter was increasingly difficult, and her daughter and son-in-law had a hard time deciding on which religious tradition *their* son should follow: three months old at the time of our conversation, the Catholic-Hindu/Zoroastrian parents had not yet decided whether to baptize him or not.

Reflecting on this conversation (and on life situations described on other similar occasions), it again becomes clear to which discussion on cosmopolitanism this essay aims to contribute. It was not the universalizing, philosophical perspective, but a lived, socially situated, individual cosmopolitanism[28] that became the focus of my attention during fieldwork in Mumbai, with examples of "actually existing cosmopolitanism,"[29] additionally marked by the emic use of the term by interlocutors. Spending time in the homes of my conversation partners, I heard, saw, and tasted

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[28] The overarching question becoming then indeed the one asked by Glick Schiller and Irving in the title of their anthology: Whose cosmopolitanism?

[29] Bruce Robbins, "Actually Existing Cosmopolitanism," in *Cosmopolitics: Thinking and Feeling Beyond the Nation*, eds Bruce Robbins and Pheng Cheah (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1998), 1-19.

various forms of cross-cultural eclecticism. Starting with appearances, it was not difficult to perceive inklings of a consumerist cosmopolitanism in the kitchens and music rooms of well-to-do residents in various South-Mumbai neighborhoods, often paired with an aesthetic cosmopolitanism in the artwork displayed on the walls or in the combination of furniture in living rooms. In some cases, these instances of qualified cosmopolitanisms were part of an aesthetic-religious continuum. For example, one of the apartments in a South-Mumbai high-rise complex had on an antique dresser in the living room Sri Aurobindo's epic poem "Savitri" placed on an artful bookstand, in the immediate vicinity of a modern, minimalist Buddha image ("because everybody is fine with him, right?" remarked the mistress of the house), a Holy-Spirit representation in warm colors on stained glass ("bought in Venice"), a large handcrafted cross, two or three smaller Ganesha statues, and a framed photograph of the Mother (Aurobindo's collaborator and successor, "brought back from Auroville"). The house shrine in the Parsi-Hindu couple's apartment was less artistic, but it, too, reflected the family's religious cosmopolitanism. It included Zarathustra, the Hindu deities Ganapati and Hanuman, Sai Baba, pictures of Ramana Maharshi and Nityananda, Sarasvati, and here, too, the ubiquitous Buddha. However, in this case as well, several long conversations with my host revealed both openness towards cultural difference and cross-cultural discomfort.

Her excursus into the complexities of interreligious marital relationships was followed by statements showing communal and caste-related bias. My host pointed out that, when looking for a husband for her daughter, the only realistic target groups were liberal Parsis or liberal Hindus, while Muslims were no option at all. However, for Hindus – she said – a Parsi or half-Parsi girl was not the first choice. She went on saying that, similarly, a Parsi immediately puts down the phone when he hears that the girl in question is half Hindu. Marrying someone from a lower caste was ruled out as well, based on previous experiences during her studies and at her workplace. Low-caste and Dalit students, if they finished their studies at all, had difficulties finding a job, and when they found employment, they encountered considerable difficulties: as lawyers, they did not have clients, in medical professions patients were hesitant to visit them for consultations, making it difficult to establish a patient base, and so on. But many students with a low-caste background had character flaws, she said, in addition to lacking cultural education and a proper work ethic. They also had a rather strong fixation on money and material things in general.

After having talked with the astrologer about the generally conflict-free and open atmosphere in his neighborhood, and after he illustrated with stories and anecdotes about his cosmopolitan stance with regard to residents belonging to differing faiths, we spoke about his children's education. One of them went to a school where the language of teaching was English, and my interlocutor said that learning English most certainly contributed to getting a good employment. At the same time, he was highly critical of the ever-growing importance of the English language in schools, emphasizing the need to increase the role of the regional language, Marathi, both in education and public life. He greeted the move by the Maharashtra government to make Marathi a compulsory subject in schools, and also the proposal to include a more comprehensive presentation of the Maratha ruler Chhatrapati Shivaji in history textbooks. He later remarked that while the local political representative from the Congress Party was doing a good job, it was important and a very good thing that the city administration was run by the Shiv Sena, and he was hoping that the party would stay in power for a long time. Looking back at the Shiv Sena's record in the past decades, he said he did not condone the violence committed, but that he agreed with most of the party's program.

Concluding remarks

The study of multiculturalism and cosmopolitanism in different contexts has led scholars to view individuals' self-positioning in mixed-cultural settings increasingly as relational and as part of ongoing situative processes. This critical approach to cosmopolitanism[30] allows us to take individual cosmopolitan claims to a certain extent at face value, even when our conversation partners make statements that seem to relativize or contradict earlier affirmations of appreciation of those who are

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[30] For the following, see Amanda Wise and Selvaraj Velayutham, "Multiculturalism and Everyday Life," in *Everyday Multiculturalism*, eds. Wise and Velayutham, 1-17, and Nina Glick Schiller and Andrew Irving, "What's in a Word? What's in a Question?" In *Whose Cosmopolitanism*, eds Glick Schiller and Irving, 1-22. "The term 'critical cosmopolitanism' (...) signals a rejection of universalizing narratives of cosmopolitanism and an affirmation of a stance toward human openness that is processual, socially situated, aspirational, self-problematizing and aware of the incomplete and contested nature of any cosmopolitan claim" (Glick Schiller and Irving, "Introduction," 5). On critical cosmopolitanism see also two of Gerard Delanty's many contributions to the topic: "The Cosmopolitan Imagination: Critical Cosmopolitanism and Social Theory," *The British Journal of Sociology* 57, 1 (2006): 25-47, and "The Idea of Critical Cosmopolitanism," in *Routledge Handbook of Cosmopolitanism Studies*, ed. G. Delanty (London: Routledge, 2012), 38-46.

culturally different. Both the astrologer's clear endorsement of mono-cultural politics in Mumbai, and my other interlocutor's description of an exclusivist marriage economy and of what she felt was characterizing low-caste students' work ethic were expressions of composite personal stances that are relational and processual, and can thus appear fragmentary and unstable. In our exploration of the possibility of cosmopolitanisms (and I am deliberately using the plural here) and their relationship with religious identities and affiliations, we need therefore to take into consideration that openness and shared understanding do not always exclude moments of uncertainty and negative generalization. The study of lived cultural difference in multicultural urban environments elicits many narratives about the various degrees of individual engagement with the culturally and religiously different other. From wholeheartedly sharing in and embracing the other's culture, to cosmopolitanisms (contextual and otherwise), tolerance and "light-touch rubbing along,"[31] to reserved skepticism and cross-religious discomfort and prejudice, and other stances in-between and beyond: Much of this was palpable when speaking with residents of South-Mumbai neighborhoods over the past few years.

The body of literature on cosmopolitanism is rich and complex. The concept's visibility in social and political theory as well as in a range of academic disciplines (including anthropology) has increased considerably over the recent decades. Attempts to systematize the various perspectives on cosmopolitanism,[32] while numerous and useful, still leave open possibilities for refining existing approaches and room for alternative paths of enquiry. The two case studies briefly presented here add a further nuance to the discussion of lived, socially situated cosmopolitanism by drawing on the emic use of the terms "cosmopolitan/cosmopolitanism" in multicultural Mumbai neighborhoods. Many other interactions with residents of selected Mumbai neighborhoods also revealed attitudes with regard to cultural (ethno-linguistic, religious, social) difference that can be described as composite and fragmented, relational and processual. Designating some of these stances as eclectic or contextual cosmopolitanisms complements other already existing "adjectival

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[31] Wise and Velayutham, "Multiculturalism," 2.
[32] See the volumes (listed in the bibliography) edited by Vertovec/Cohen, Werbner, Delanty, Rovisco/Kim, Caraus/Paris, Glick Schiller/Irving, and others.

cosmopolitanisms" [33] and will prove useful for the analysis of individuals' self-positionings in mixed-cultural urban settings. While simultaneous articulations of cultural openness and cross-cultural discomfort may seem inconsistent at first, approaching them as parts of ongoing situative processes characterized by relationality and eclecticism allows us to integrate both individual cosmopolitan claims and uncertainties or anxiety in relation to cultural otherness.

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[33] David Harvey, "What Do We Do with Cosmopolitanism?" In *Whose Cosmopolitanism?* eds Glick Schiller and Irving, 49-56, here 50.

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