

# Ethical Practice, Trade, and Food: Muslim Restaurants in South Mumbai

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## Abstract

The production, consumption, and distribution of food is central to many religious practices and often considered distinct from the capitalist imperative to market, commodify, and profit. Yet, even scholarship that overcomes the now outdated binary of morality or religion versus the immoral market, continues to represent religion as a distinct sphere of life, with a moral content contrasted or compared to market practice. It is considered an achievement to note how religious practice exhibits affinities with market developments. There is little recognition of how religions as discursive traditions are inseparable from questions of consumption, trade, and exchange, which render the very distinction of religion versus market as an obstruction to analysis. Through an ethnography of the narratives and material practices of two Muslim-owned restaurants in the old Muslim quarters of South Mumbai, I show how different calibrations of Islam are materialized in restaurant spaces and trade practices in the city. Within the context of increasing marginalization of Muslim bodies and food practice in Mumbai, I argue that the restaurants constitute a complex and differential moral economy of food, poverty, care, and aspiration.

**Keywords:** Food, ethics, Islam, moral economy, religion

## ‘Sufi Food’ or ‘Just Business’? The Materiality of Food and Care

One evening in September 2014 in Dongri, Mumbai, I had just visited Arshad Bhai at his well-known Taj Mahal restaurant and then proceeded as per my

usual fieldwork routine to visit ‘uncle’ at his *ittar* (perfume) store. ‘Uncle’, as I usually addressed him, is an elderly man in his early 60s who was a regular fieldwork discussant, always eager to hear of my research activities. He was familiar with my interest in Muslim food practices in the old Muslim quarters of South Mumbai and my focus on two prominent restaurants in the area, Taj Mahal and Bukhara. Greeting ‘uncle’, I mentioned that I had just been in an interview with Arshad Bhai. Instinctively, shaking his head, he advised me not to go there or eat their food, since it was all ‘just business’. In contrast, he explained that Bukhara restaurant served ‘Sufi food’ and is thus a better option for both culinary consumption and research.

I was intrigued by his judgment wherein the term ‘Sufi’, variously reserved, venerated, or ridiculed as a form of Islamic devotion and practice, was here articulated as an adjective for the quality of food. ‘Uncle’ is a conscious and self-proclaimed follower of the Deobandi school of thought that is well known for its critique of popular Sufi practice. He is well-versed in basic theological discourse and certain legal debates and often warned me jokingly on Thursday evenings that I should avoid visiting the nearby Dargah (sufi shrine). For him it was a place of distraction and not of prayer, where all kinds of strange things happen (*ajeeb cheez*). Now, however, his categorization neither signaled sectarian debates and concern, nor a desire to define or defend the true Islam against supposedly deviant forms. Instead, his articulation of ‘Sufi’ indexed a linguistic and material economy of personhood and food through questions of quality, care, and character. Allowing him to continue, he explained that the ‘Sufi food’ at Bukhara restaurant referred to the ethical integrity of the founder (Haji Sahib), materialized in the quality, taste, and fragrance (*khushboo*) of the food. The Bukhara restaurant employed ‘balance’ between the quantities of chili, masala, and oil used in the food preparation. In contrast, Taj Mahal was for ‘uncle’ a place of ‘just business’ with a dubious reputation of utilizing excessive amounts of chili and low-quality oil. He compared masala (spices) as a source of taste, fragrance, and medicinal value (*faidamand*) to green chili, a cheap everyday ingredient, widely understood in South Asian cooking as the preserve of the amateur cook. The judgment of ‘Sufi food’ versus ‘just business’ thus reveals how quality, cost, integrity, taste, and fragrance are in complex ways integral to the economy of food preparation and trade in Mumbai.

The balance that ‘uncle’ articulates, is an ethical judgment that navigates between the pursuit of profit and the imperative of care and taste that he

and others associate with the consumption of food. In South Asia it is well known that questions of food consumption and personal caste status are intimately related (Dumont 1981; Chigateri 2008). Among Muslim communities, food is an opportunity for sharing, celebration, and the transfer of *barakat* (Khare & Rao 1986). Food is after all a substance that links the body, place, the senses, and memory in crucial ways such that taste, place, technology, and people are always entangled (Sutton 2013). The urban context of Mumbai does not deplete ethical questions in favor of anonymous forms of urban consumption. The networks and relations that sustain life in the city also give rise to judgments of value and quality that link the materiality of food and restaurant space to ethical business practice. Approached pragmatically, ‘uncle’s’ categorical judgment is an index of how ethics and business practice intersect in Mumbai, a city renowned both as a medium of aspiration and immense wealth and immeasurable poverty and squalor. In this essay, I therefore focus on the narrative and material practices of two restaurants in the old Muslim quarters of the city for a view of the differential calibration of ethics, Islam, and the materiality of food and profit in the city. How do the ethical and material practices of space, food, and memory calibrate in each restaurant? What does an ethics of care and profit say about the politics of need and aspiration among Muslims in Mumbai? How does attention to ethical practice disturb assumptions of *morality* and *religion* in thinking the moral economy?

### **The Moral Economy: Food, Ethics, and Exchange**

Discussions on moral economy once posited a binary opposition between small-scale, intimate, and ‘traditional’ exchange versus large-scale, impersonal, and capital-intensive trade (Mauss 2002). The romantic notion of a small, pre-capitalist, intimate, and therefore moral community (*Gemeinschaft*) against a large, complex, impersonal, immoral, modern industrial society (*Gesellschaft*) is central to the work of both Marx and Simmel (Keister 2002:40), rooted in the idea of modernity as rupture. In this ‘Western folk theory’ of the great transformation wrought by capitalism, exchange previously rooted in gender, age, rank, and status has given way to impersonal forces of commensuration, abstraction, and quantification (Maurer 2006:17). Moral considerations rooted in individuals and place are now replaced by technical concerns aimed at profit, progress, and growth.

While the binary theory of rupture and transformation is illuminating for pointing to the distending effects of modern market rationality on everyday lives and environments, it fails to account for two crucial aspects of morality and economy. The first is that the morality or ethics of the non-capitalist world is considered devoid of any specific content, emergent from practice rather than discursive or historical (Guyer 2004:174). The second is that the intrusion of capitalist market practices of commensuration, abstraction, and quantification in non-capitalist worlds is often presumed to be uniform, inevitable, and total (Maurer 2006:19-24). There is thus a need to consider the specific ways that profit, trade, and calculation are invested with ethical concern, consideration, and value in practice. In this essay, I contribute to the latter by bringing to view how notions of personhood, relation, and profit are differentially calibrated in two restaurant spaces in the old Muslim quarters of Mumbai, with specific attention to how the ethical as discursive, debated, contextual, and emergent is materialized and enacted.

Religion is an important resource for theorizing the content of the ethical and offers a potentially different historical and discursive beginning from the modern. A recent productive move by Daromir Rudnyckyj and Filippo Osella on the question of religion, economy, and morality, begins by recognizing that the Weberian and modern assumptions ‘concerning the progressive secularization and autonomization of the social...set the stage for questions about the direction and intensity of the relationship between religion and market’ (Rudnyckyj & Osella 2017:13). This, they argue is an ‘epistemological impasse’ that has inspired research on compatibility and resistance between religion and the market, that reinforce the Weberian and modern fiction of ‘spheres of life’. They instead aim to show how ‘transformation in economic thought and practice has inspired changing forms of religious practice, just as religious moralities have been deployed in new ways in the market’ (Rudnyckyj & Osella 2017:10).

Remobilizing the Weberian notion of affinity, they situate ‘religious expression’ and ‘religious communities’ in ‘assemblage’ with what they call the ‘logic of the market’ (Rudnyckyj & Osella 2017:7). Although important in provincializing reductive arguments that posit religion as an effect of market practice (Comaroff & Comaroff 2000), their theorization fails to escape the compartmentalization of religion and economy as separate spheres, central to theories of modernization. This is in part, I argue, due to their conception of religion as a ‘powerful means for motivating human action’, and

‘making sense of the world and providing instruction on how to act ethically within it’ (Rudnyckyj & Osella 2017:20) that objectifies religion as somehow outside of the world and human action, then entangled with ‘the logic of the market’ or ‘market forms’.

If, however, we recognize religion as a discursive tradition that is embodied in particular contexts in complex ways, always in the world (Asad 1986), then we have to take seriously the ways that religious thought and practice have always been entangled with questions of trade, exchange, calculation, and reward. In Islamic history, for example, the Prophet Muhammad was before revelation, renowned as a particularly trustworthy trader. Questions of trade and exchange permeate Islamic history and notions of salvation in myriad ways (Mittermaier 2019; Moumtaz 2021). Added to these, the discourses, values, and assumptions of what we label ‘religion’, make claims on questions of trade, exchange, interpersonal, and human-animal relations that exceed its modern articulation and confinement as belief (Asad 2003:181-183). Religion as a discursive tradition is embodied. It is not a way of making sense of the world, it is the very mode through which the world is understood, inhabited, and shaped. Religion is not merely a ‘means for motivating human action’ (Rudnyckyj & Osella 2017:20), it informs and shapes the very way that motive, intention, and meaningful action is imagined, theorized, and embodied.

To appreciate the question of moral economy in Muslim society is to consider the debated, contested, and always embodied discursive tradition of Islam. With regards to food permissible for Muslim consumption, halal dietary law is concerned with the purity and permissibility of ingestion. The dominant concern is what to eat, where, and with whom. In practice, this means establishing networks and forms of relation, trade, and exchange, through which purity and permissibility are assured and maintained. Halal practice thus entails communal notions of trust, doubt, and salvation that foreground a community of shared values and the *niyyat* (intention/orientation) of the consuming individual (Tayob 2020:78-79). The production, trade, and exchange of halal food articulate questions of sustenance, quality, personal integrity, and reputation. Halal dietary laws, far from simply a set of instructions for making sense of the world, are a resource for speculation and action. Within Muslim enclaves and majority contexts, halal is not an explicit concern, since consuming within a community of shared value, ensures compliance.

Yet, questions of reputation and quality remain. This is crucial, since halal is primarily about the consumption of food, while the consumption of food is always about networks of trade and trust. Yet, the shape and form of ethical life, in particular religious communities, are far from guaranteed. ‘Uncle’s’ judgment on the quality and integrity of the ‘Sufi’ food at Bukhara indexes the way that reputation, space, and taste are materialized in practice. I argue therefore that the question of religion and the moral economy should not be viewed as intersecting spheres, as if the complexity of life can ever be reduced to categorical judgment. It is instead about the nuanced ways in which value and virtue are materialized at the intersection of the historical and discursive, and the biographical, contextual, and emergent.

My focus on two restaurants in Mumbai is as accidental as significant. I first met Amin Bhai of Bukhara through a reference obtained via a friend. He was intrigued by my research and happy to welcome me into his space. One afternoon, as I discussed the question of food practice in the city and the history of long-established restaurants, he offered to introduce me to his friend, Arshad Bhai of Taj Mahal. Jumping on his motorbike, we drove over to the Taj Mahal restaurant where he explained to Arshad Bhai that I was a friend, interested in the restaurant practice and family history. The introduction was aimed at introducing me to a competing restaurant, founded by friends from a similarly humble background, who had since established a significant position and reputation in the area. The comparison affords an insight into the differential ways in which Islamic ethics, food, profit, and space are calibrated, and also, how the ethics of care and aspiration, so central to the history and topography of Mumbai is enacted and materialized. Importantly, these two cases in comparison reveal the limits of imputing and inserting abstract notions of religion and morality into analysis, offering instead a view of how ethical narratives are materialized and enacted in divergent but also complementary ways.

## **Capital and Care: Situating Bukhara and Taj Mahal in the Religious and Political Geography of Mumbai**

The Muslim-dominated market areas at the center of my ethnographic work are of historical significance in the colonial formation of Mumbai. The Manichean urban geography of the colonial city designated and demarcated spaces

for natives and Europeans (Kidambi 2007:32-40). The colonial town that begins at the fringe of this area (two km south) is marked by wide boulevards and Victorian and Victorian-Gothic architecture. In the colonial town, the colonial state facilitated European standards of planning and infrastructure development such as sewers, accessible roads, and piped water. In contrast, the old native town that begins with the market areas of Crawford Market, Muhammad Ali Road, and Dongri are cramped, congested, and for much of the city's history, have been sites of infrastructural neglect. Only with the outbreak of the Bubonic Plague during the 1890s – a contagion that affected both native and English elites – did the political and economic will for a public sewage and sanitation infrastructure develop (Chandavarkar 2009). Even then, it remained rudimentary. In the late 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> century, the native areas of Bombay were synonymous with crowds, congestion, and ill-repute. Colonial state concerns about depraved and congested native quarters, and the dangers of crowds and congestion as portents of communal strife (Kidambi 2007:117-127) and potential anti-colonial sentiment, dovetailed with scenes of infrastructural neglect such as open sewers and stagnant water that disproportionately affected the urban poor (McFarlane 2008:431).

Yet, native squalor existed alongside spectacles of native capital. Bombay (the former name for Mumbai) is a city that, since the late 18<sup>th</sup> century attracted Indian merchants and traders, including Muslims of Gujarati as well as Konkani origin. Given the infrastructural neglect by colonial authorities, the civic infrastructure of the native town was very often provided by native capital. Chawls (urban labor tenements) were constructed for the thousands of laborers, employed at the famous native-owned mills, while water, education, and religious infrastructures were constructed by different communities for their constituents.

Preeti Chopra, arguing for the entanglement of Indian and European elites in the making of British Bombay (Chopra 2011), employs a distinction between native philanthropy as the expenditure of donations for the common public good such as public hospitals, as compared to charity, which was usually donated by native elites for their own particular community (Chopra 2019:175). Philanthropy earned native elites' intimacy with the colonial state, while charity was crucial to the basic civic amenities, health, and education infrastructure for much of the urban poor. Charity as a communal project may well have contributed to a communal urban topography of the city, yet it is a mistake to characterize Mumbai as an ethnic/caste/religiously enclaved space.

The intimacy and dense urban topography mean that at both elite and lower levels, Bombay became a space of cosmopolitan interaction and sociality across class and ethnic/religious lines. As Jim Masselos (1993) has argued, unlike urban development elsewhere in the world, the geography of Mumbai does not map neatly onto social stratification (Kidambi 2019:1-12). Traders and wealthy residents built homes and apartment blocks often a stone's throw away from chawls and informal slums, while religious festivals such as the Muharram commemoration of the death of the Prophet Muhammad's grandson Hussain, attracted both Hindu and Muslim participants as well as the ire of the colonial state as a potential source of civic unrest (Masselos 2007; Green 2011).

The history of Mumbai can be discussed as a narrative of capital accumulation and care. As a gateway to the Indian ocean and the primary city of British trade, Bombay both attracted and produced vast fortunes. The city continues to be a place of aspiration, and an embodiment of social mobility and overnight fortune. But it is also a place renowned for a dense topography of urban squalor and vast inequality (Mehta 2005). Spectacles of capital and poverty that mark the city, give rise to a contrasting ethics of aspiration and care. My interlocutors in the city, being from various walks of life, were very often engaged in aspirations of 'getting ahead' while cognizant of the imperative of care towards the less fortunate, be it through special terms on credit purchases at a butcher store, or small handouts offered to street beggars. This is not to say that the city is marked by a unique philanthropy, since the indifference to blatant suffering in urban India is stark (Van der Veer 2016). It is simply to point out that despite an empirical topography of inequality, there is also a geography and ordinary ethics of concern and care acted out in various ways (Green 2011; Gupta 2019).

Sometimes my Muslim interlocutors explained this as a *sadaqa* ethics of circulation, whereby fortune impels gifting, and gifting inspires return. In Mumbai, this Islamic notion of circulation and return is intimately tied to the contingencies of livelihood and fortune that permeate the city. It is in this context of capital and care, aspiration and need, that both the Bukhara and Taj Mahal restaurants emerge as instances of a differential Islamic moral economy of food in the city.

The founders of both restaurants stem from lower-caste communities of poor and rural Uttar Pradesh. Migrating to Mumbai in the late 1920s and early 1930s, they entered a city in the midst of political agitation and over-



whelmed by the mass migration of the rural poor, away from rural distress brought on by colonial integration and a changing economy (Chandavarkar 1994:1). For those excluded from formal labor employment in the factories and mills, usually understood as the working class, employment was of course sporadic and difficult to come by. As Jan Breman has pointed out, to think of a formal working class, makes little sense in Mumbai where the informal economy accounts for up to 90% of all employment (Breman 1996:4-5). This ‘footloose labour’, as he calls it, is precarious and uncertain. The predominance of single male migration to the city, housed in cramped single-room tenements or slums, usually without internal plumbing, means that the provision of cheap food was both an urgent urban necessity and an opportunity for livelihood with relatively low barriers to entry.

Even today, Muslim food practices such as halal slaughter, street food markets, and culinary establishments that serve meat, are a crucial opportunity and location for earnings and employment, while being stigmatized by the Hindu-Nationalist imagination as disgusting, repulsive, and symbolic of the Otherness of Muslims and Islam (Ghassem-Fachandi 2012:11-14). As such, the two restaurants in this essay must be situated within a moral economy of Islam, caste, labor, and food in the city, as institutions that materialize an ethics of aspiration and care that permeates the unequal and aspirational city.

As we will see, ‘Uncle’s’ exhortation about the beneficial properties of food at Bukhara is key to an ethics of care for the precarity of laboring bodies. In contrast, at Taj Mahal, care and concern are articulated through an ethics of aspiration. The articulations of food, care, and profit in these two restaurants thus reveal the limit of homogenizing Islam or morality as a type of ethical embodiment or as a sphere of activity. Instead, I argue that as much as Mumbai can be understood as a city of capital and care, we must appreciate the moral economy of Islam and Muslim food in the city as one of need and aspiration.

## **Bukhara Hotel: Sufi Becoming, Space and Ingestion as a Materiality of Care**

The Bukhara restaurant was founded in 1957 by Haji Sahib, after spending close to 30 years in Mumbai. He is well known in the area as a Sufi and holy-

man who passed away in the late 1980s. His son, Amin and grandson Muhammad currently run the restaurant, overseeing the procurement of ingredients and food preparation. They have since also entered other businesses including a housing development in a nearby hill station and a small solar farm. Amin Bhai welcomed me frequently as a guest to his office and was happy to retell stories of his father and the restaurant. In the narrative, it is clear that Haji Sahib's journey of Sufi becoming is articulated as inseparable from the food and space of the restaurant.

The life narrative of Haji Sahib begins at a young age. When faced with his fathers' premature death, he was forced to find employment. His first job, at the tender age of eight, was on the construction site of a local Mosque in the family village, the proceeds from which were spent on some lentils and rice to feed his starving family. As told, this was the beginning of a long career that links food, Islam, labor, and care. Later he apprenticed as a cook under a master cook (*ustadh*) in Bareilly, and then worked as a tandoori roti-maker at the nearby British military encampment, before starting his own roti-making business. The tandoori roti-making industry is very common in North India, where households deliver flour to local vendors, who then for a fee, return a fixed quantity of cooked rotis per kilogram of flour provided. It was at his roti business that he attracted the ire of the competition by revealing to customers that his competitors were both charging a fee and skimming some flour. Instead of the market agreed price of 10 rotis per kilogram, he offered them 11. As told to me, this was proof of Haji Sahib's business integrity. Yet it was clearly also a competitive market practice, offensive to the guild-like structure of the industry.

The controversy that emerged over his practice, forced Haji Sahib out of town, upon which he decided to pursue his fortune in Mumbai. He arrived in Mumbai in 1933 where, through village networks, he was able to procure a small premises and basic utensils and equipment to begin cooking. He found immediate success and over the next two decades established numerous stores in the area, catering to different culinary needs. This includes roti making, milk products, and the still famous mutton bhuna and *paya* (trotters).

In 1954, while on an annual visit to the *khanqah* (Sufi lodge) of his Sufi *pir* (Sufi master or teacher) near Bareilly in Uttar Pradesh, he became caught in a state of love and rapture (*deewana ho gaya*). He made the decision to leave his business and family behind in Mumbai and remain at the *khanqah* as a disciple. He spent the next three years at the *khanqah*, returning

occasionally to Mumbai to dispose of businesses, the proceeds of which he donated for maintenance and upkeep of the Sufi lodge. In 1957, he had but one business remaining, at which point his *pir* said to him, 'You have only one hotel (restaurant) remaining, you go. Go look after your business'. This is an ordinary narration of the practice of *ijazat* (permission), whereby a Sufi Shaikh deems a pupil ready for the world, now capable of imparting knowledge and wisdom to others. Upon receiving these orders, he returned to Mumbai, whereupon he procured the property directly opposite his last remaining restaurant and started the Bukhara restaurant.

Bukhara is inseparable from the Sufi character development that Haji Sahib had undergone. The space is articulated as an extension of his new-found *hamdardi* (sense of feeling for fellow human beings), cultivated during his Sufi training. This he practiced through the preparation of food and medicine for those in need, by offering *samjhake baat* (speech and words that were full of understanding) to those that began to surround him. He emphasized that the common man would have good food and at a cheap price, as he was willing to prepare cheap food for everyone. Haji Sahib's dual passion for food and medicine are closely linked in South Asian Islamic medical traditions, since many of the masala used for fragrance and taste in food preparation are also medicinal ingredients. The use of high-quality masala thus earned the food a reputation for taste and care since...people used to put such things inside the food so that the food was physically beneficial for people (*faidamand*). The Bukhara restaurant thus became known for tasty, good quality, nutritious, and healthy food, inseparable from the person and enlightened character of Haji Sahib.

Important was his commitment to low prices and to maintain a simple aesthetic of space as linked to an ethics of care and salvation. The restaurant currently operates at a markup of between 20 to 25 percent, a low figure for the retail food industry. This was explained by his grandson Muhammad, as linked to a prophetic tradition that Haji Sahib would often repeat, where care and feeding are emphasized: 'So according to his hadith (prophetic tradition) is that as we are Muslims we have to see for our neighbor; if he is hungry, we have to feed him. So, in that manner we have to feed our community also'<sup>1</sup>.

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<sup>1</sup> Jonathan Benthall mentions a hadith, stating that 'he who sleeps with a full stomach while his neighbour goes hungry will be deprived of God's mercy' (Benthall 1999:29-30).

For Muhammad this includes both Hindu and Muslim laborers in the area who frequent the store. Yet, like the earlier roti business, the provision of quality at affordable prices also ensures the family business success.

An important moment arose during the 1970s by which time Bukhara had become very popular and where both laborers and better-off clientele frequented the restaurant, eating at the same tables, at the same rates. A friend suggested that the restaurant undergo a complete renovation to capitalize on the emerging dual market that had accompanied the increasing wealth in the area. In Mumbai and elsewhere, a common practice is to apportion a section of the restaurant as an AC (air-conditioned) section where wealthier clientele eat in relative comfort and quiet, at higher rates. The reply of Haji Sahib to his friends, appeals to conscience and shame in refuting the proposed plan: ‘If we sell such expensive food that we do not sell to the poor, then how will we show our face to Allah’?

Segregation would mean that a certain part of the restaurant would become inaccessible to many of the clientele. It threatened to introduce a materiality of hierarchy in the space. Appealing to a sense of conscience and shame (*kaise mun dikhayenge*) is a rhetorical statement that evokes a trope of ultimate salvation where on the day of judgment, all of one’s good and bad deeds and intentions (*niyyat*) are laid bare.

In addition to charging a low mark-up and the commitment to an ethics of simplicity in the restaurant, Amin and Muhammad taste each dish daily as a quality control practice, and regularly serve guests portions of the famous *keema* (mince), mutton *bhuna* (braised meat), or new Chinese-style chicken. Initially the practice of eating and feeding guests did not strike me as unusual. In Mumbai, however, restaurant food is often an object of suspicion concerning the use of stale ingredients and poor-quality oil. Taste, of course draws people back to regular haunts, but it is never without complaints about digestion and concerns for bodily health.

One evening, during a discussion between Amin and a few friends about ‘those people’ that do not eat their own food, the ethics of the family food consumption practice became clear. The conversation had begun with a general discussion about food purity and wholesomeness and reached the rather somber conclusion that nothing was pure (*shudh*) any longer. According to the friends, science and corporate profit had spoiled everything. The discussion prompted Amin Bhai to narrate a story of a visit to a friend’s farm where, after a tour of the property they proceeded to the farmhouse for a

meal. Directly beside the house was a small area that had been cordoned off. The friend explained, ‘this is ours’. Amin was perplexed, since he had just seen many hectares of farmland which was also ‘theirs’. The friend then clarified, ‘No no, that is for sale, this is for us’! The story immediately drew gasps of shock and disapproval from those listening. Amin continued, ‘They eat only that for the whole year, the rest is for selling, imagine? That which you sell you must eat!’ he exclaimed. Everyone agreed that it was a great shame that business people were selling products which they themselves did not eat.

Hearing the story, one of the friends commented on how rich people (*ameer log*) like the Ambanis were probably only eating the best quality food, while they left poor-quality products for the local markets<sup>2</sup>. In this chance encounter between Amin Bhai and his friends is an ethical discussion where differences in wealth do not warrant differences in bodily value. ‘That which you sell, you eat’ (*jo bhejtehe, wo khatehe*), is a powerful statement that evokes a moral economy of care, simplicity, ingestion, and necessity. This is particularly important since the Bukhara Hotel is not a charity establishment, but a for-profit restaurant that materializes an ethics of care through pricing, space, and the materiality of the food.

### **Taj Mahal: ‘Hi-Fi’ Film Stars and AC-Comfort as Aspiration**

The Taj Mahal restaurant is owned by Arshad Bhai, whom I often met in his office behind the restaurant, where portraits of his father and grandfather adorn the walls. The latter were poor laborers who originally came from the Moradabad district in Uttar Pradesh and once operated a *halwa-paratha* stall (flaky flat bread served with sweet semolina-based dish) at the Annual *Urs* (saints day celebration) at Kaliyar Shreef in Uttarkhand, a major Sufi-shrine of the Chishti Order. After little success in finding employment in Delhi, Arshad Bhai’s father and grandfather arrived in Mumbai in 1923 in search of work. Failing to secure employment, they decided to start a small stall on the sidewalk. They began preparing and selling *Nalli Nihari* (shin stew) to the

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<sup>2</sup> The Ambani family members are the majority shareholders of the large Indian conglomerate, Reliance Industries Limited. One of the brothers, Mukhesh Ambani had become infamous in the city for building a 27-story home, at a cost of 1 billion dollars.

passing trade of laborers in the area. Following some initial success, they eventually managed to obtain the restaurant premises directly behind their location on the pavement. Arshad Bhai attributes the family's financial success in Mumbai to a blessing received at the shrine in Kaliyar Shreef.

In discussing the family history and restaurant practice, Arshad Bhai shared a crucial lesson that his father had imparted to him: 'Son, decorations and things are not needed. That taste, the tongue – if your food is good then people will eat, sitting on the footpath'.

The restaurant was originally a sidewalk establishment. The lesson that emphasized taste over décor thus referenced both their humble beginnings and their original clientele – poor laborers who would indeed eat sitting on the footpath. However, Arshad Bhai did not heed his father's advice and had pushed for the addition of an AC-section upstairs where much higher prices are charged. Yet, in keeping with his father's wish, the downstairs section remains in its original form and the prices are low. Arshad Bhai thus navigates between an emphasis on his own contribution to the restaurant and an ethics of food, taste, and trade that his father emphasized. Through a language of heritage and innovation, Arshad Bhai aims to strike a balance between different kinds of clientele. Of interest is how he explains the changes that have been made, particularly how he emphasizes the aspirations and care for the poor laborers, who signify the family beginnings and their first clientele.

In describing the balance between heritage and innovation, Arshad Bhai points to the subjectivity of the urban poor and the financial implications of his decisions. Describing the AC section as a place where 'those celebrities...come and eat there' he is also quick to emphasize that 'downstairs, I have kept that old heritage look, so that even the one who wears a *lungi* can come and sit and say, "This is my restaurant"! Because what will happen if I make it "hi-fi"? It will cost only 20 to 50 lakhs maximum, probably 30 lakhs, but you will be able to sit there and eat, and celebrities will come and eat, but that *lungi-wala* (*lungi* wearer)?'

Hi-fi is a term regularly used in Mumbai to refer to very posh and prestigious places and things, but also to ridicule those who have betrayed their simple origins. Here, however, Arshad Bhai articulates concern for the subjectivity of the person of simple means (*lungi-wala*) who, in his estimation would both not be able to afford the high prices in a fancy restaurant, and who would 'feel' out of place. In evoking the term *lungi-wala*, he expresses

both a sense of care and consideration as well as pity, a distancing move that presents the object of care as ‘other’. Even as the reference to the poor as *lungi-wala* or *bechara* signals the family’s own humble origins, there is a sense of distance, pity, and abjection in the statement, since the family now owns a prominent and respected business. In my discussions with him, he emphasizes the ‘feeling’ of being out of place, but also the ‘feeling’ of knowing that one is eating at a place where ‘celebrities’ also visit. He alternates between distance (*lungi-wala*), care, identification, and aspiration. The repeated reference to the *lungi wala* or poor laborer (*bechara*) in the context of his own balance between ‘heritage and innovation’ indexes the family’s humble origins, first customers, and financial aspirations: ‘Ok, also there is another thing: They come to my place and bring 50 rupees. In one day they come three times, so in a month that is 4,500 rupees. So, for me they are more important. People like you – hi-fi people – they come, once a month, every 15 days, they eat for 1,000 rupees, take a parcel, but that poor thing (*bechara*) he comes three times, so he is very important’!

Arshad Bhai is of course exaggerating the consumption patterns of an ordinary laborer in Mumbai who would be hard-pressed to afford 150 rupees per day on food expenditure. Yet, he does capture the dynamics of the market supply and demand, that we already encountered at Bukhara, in that both businesses rely on the provision of cheap daily food for the thousands of laborers that work in the city. Care, profit, and aspiration are inseparable.

In emphasizing his own innovation, Arshad Bhai points out how he, in addition to upgrading the interior to accommodate an AC-section, also increased the restaurant’s visibility through advertisements and has begun manufacturing a product line of ready-made spice mixes. An international media outlet has featured the restaurant in its travel section, and a well-known Bollywood star, a regular customer during the 1980s, had officially opened the AC-section and contributed a branded menu item. Many of my interlocutors in the neighborhood ridiculed the dish as overrated and flavorless, but whenever I visited, it was clearly popular.

Another marketing practice is a framed drawing by M.F. Hussain in the restaurant. Hussain, a leading figure in Indian modernist art, had been born into a poor Muslim family in Maharashtra, later to become a founding figure of The Progressive Artists Group of Bombay (PAG) during the 1940s. He courted controversy through his depictions of the great Indian epics and was eventually exiled to Qatar (Samantara 2016). Arshad Bhai narrated the

incident of the evening he met Hussain in the restaurant for the first time: ‘One day I saw him and asked, “Sir, how is the food?” So he replied to me, “This is the first time you are seeing me, I always come here”. So I said, “No sir, but can you write something for me”? So he said, “Ok, two minutes”, and he scribbled a painting. I preserved that and framed it. I have it with me, it is in the restaurant. So, *Alhamdulillah* (praise be to god), they are celebrities’.

For Arshad Bhai, the blessings received from the shrine continue to permeate through the profit and fame that the restaurant has earned, now signaled by the celebrities that visit the restaurant. The capaciousness of *barakat* in bringing good fortune is here literally translated into money and fame, indexes of material wealth and success in Mumbai. This is not a matter of different registers of blessing, as if the religious and secular are easily distinguished. They testify to the entanglement and inseparability of notions of God, blessing and grace with financial, monetary, and livelihood concerns.

For Arshad Bhai, the celebrity presence testifies both to his own sense of genius and innovation, and to the way his restaurant is a place of care and aspiration. He thus complements his father’s lesson on simplicity and taste with his own practice of what he calls ‘balancing between heritage and innovation’. The language of heritage is of course a neoliberal marketing discourse where originality is packaged and sold to a middle-class audience, far removed in place and taste from the ‘original’ (Gandhi 2016), achieved in the restaurant through the AC section that attracts a relatively wealthy and middle-class clientele from across the city. Yet, as he explains, the importance of heritage exceeds the neoliberal framing, suturing a consideration of the subjectivity of his poor everyday customers to an ethics of ‘feeling’ that considers both their comfort, budget, and aspiration. The family had after all started as poor laborers, on the footpath, and their early financial success is due to that trade. Speaking as a profit-oriented trader, he considers the subjectivity of his primary and enduring clientele through an ethics of care and aspiration that indexes the family’s own trajectory and a dominant mood of life in the city.



## **A Moral Economy of Muslim Food in Mumbai: Mediating Care, Necessity, and Aspiration**

Mumbai is a city of vast fortune and vast inequality. Marked by the contradictions of capital and care, it is a place that continues to be known for its cosmopolitan spirit and civility as well as communal politics, a powerful underworld and an increasingly violent anti-Muslim public sphere. The restaurants discussed here are situated within an area that is known as a Muslim ghetto (Gupta 2015), marginalized through civic infrastructural neglect, yet also a place of safety and refuge for Muslims in the city. In this context, the narratives and practices at these two restaurants are crucial for appreciating a moral economy of food, profit, care, and aspiration in the old Muslim quarters of Mumbai.

In these two spaces, an Islamic ethics of Sufi becoming and *barakat* (blessing) is inseparable from everyday practices of food preparation, procurement, and trade. Amid an increasingly neoliberal city, the restaurant practices testify to the entanglement of religious ethics with trade and exchange. Even at Bukhara, where ethical virtue is prioritized as both language and material practice, trade, profit, and gain are an important incentive. The restaurant is not a charity establishment (*langar khana*) and the family has become fairly wealthy through the decades-long provision of affordable and good quality food. Low mark-up, high volume trading is after all a sure tactic for success in a crowded and voluminous market such as Mumbai. At stake are the complex ways in which profit, trade, service, and care are materialized in practice.

I argue therefore that these restaurants are crucial for appreciating a moral economy of food and care in the city, rendered even more significant, given the intimacy of neoliberal economic policy and aesthetics with the rise of right-wing nationalists in India and around the world. Neoliberal aesthetics in Mumbai imagine a cleansed and shiny cityscape, devoid of Muslim bodies (Appadurai 2000:644), highlighting how supposedly ‘rational’ economic practice and growth-led discourse is often a thin veneer for processes of capital accumulation, inequality, and minoritization.

Within a neoliberal discourse, the body and subjectivity of the *lungi-wala* or *bechara* as Arshad Bhai patronizes the urban poor, is not a figure of concern or consideration. The poor are rendered abject subjects to be removed, eradicated, and cleansed from view. The moral economy of aspiration

and care, highlighted in these spaces is thus crucial for appreciating an ethics of relation. That is the recognition of ‘the myriad ways in which the potential and outcome of a life always and already unfolds in relation to that of another’ (Govindrajan 2018:3), even in the context of profit-oriented trade. It reminds us that the pursuit of profit is not removed from moral concern, as beneficiaries of extraordinary growth and wealth often want to claim. It also brings to view a world of relation, where profit and earnings are never untethered from a concern over quality and customer wellbeing. After all, as Amin Bhai is so clear to explain, ‘That which you sell, you eat’.

I have abandoned over-determined assumptions of the shape and nature of religion as an object or sphere, somehow demarcated from an equally overloaded notion of economy as rational growth and inevitable development. These assumptions are indebted to a Weberian history and analysis of religion and modernity that both analyze a historical development and predict and prescribe a teleology. Where much of the history of the 20<sup>th</sup> century has indeed conformed to these globalizing predictions, the process has been one of violent imposition rather than automatic or systematic progression (Césaire 2001). The affinity between religious and capitalist practice is not at all surprising, since religions and religious actors are always in the world, engaged in practices of translation and commensuration.

To point to the affinity between religion and market practice as if two separate spheres of life, is in fact to reinforce the erroneous secularist assumption that religion is somehow backward, strange, or static. As Anna Tsing has argued, to predict a world captured by market reason is a ‘crippling assumption’ that reinforces the capitalist ideology of a teleology of progress (Lowenhaupt Tsing 2015:5). She favors ‘close-attention to the world’ as crucial for bringing to view complex modes of being and doing that may unsettle taken-for-granted assumptions about personhood, subjectivity, and economy (Lowenhaupt Tsing 2015:5). My point here is simply that attending to religion and economy as materialized and embodied in the world as inseparable phenomena, is necessary to appreciate the embodied and material ethics and politics of these formations as a meaningful archive for imagining an ethical future. Consideration for clientele and questions of food quality are thus not things ‘out there’ that ‘others’ do, but are instead a force for critical reflection on the shape, form, and ethics of contemporary food consumption and trade relations in Mumbai and elsewhere.

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