

Making of a Cosmopolitan: A Study of Changing Socio-Cultural Pattern of Bombay (c.1800-1947)

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Abstract

The aim of this study was to trace the historical background of the heterogeneous society in present-day Mumbai (the then Bombay) with reference to the period between c. 1800 to 1947 as many changes in the socio-cultural composition of Bombay occurred around this time. Bombay underwent a huge transformation from a group of seven scattered islands with a negligible population as a result of the advent of different groups of people who came and settled in Bombay mostly in search of better prospects of life. The study focuses on the wide range of cultural elements that were brought in by these people who mainly belonged to communities like Parsi, Bania, Bhatia, Marwari, Bohra, Jain, Bene Israel, Jewish, etc. The diverse elements of the culture of these communities were accommodated to create the multicultural, multilingual, and multiracial society of the emerging Bombay city and were reflected in the language, architecture, art, food, festivals, etc. which has also been highlighted in the study.

Keywords: Bombay, Socio-cultural change, Cosmopolitan, Culture and Diversity

Introduction

Bombay, the city that houses millions of people from different regions was once upon a time a group of seven scattered islands, lost in oblivion for a long period of time. Different people from different regions and communities came and settled down in these seven islands at various points in time and if we look at the history of Bombay, these people who have migrated from different areas have contributed a lot to the making of modern-day Mumbai, the then Bombay as the city of dreams. One of the turning points in the history of Bombay was the settlement of Europeans, especially the British. They consolidated their power and took up several developmental projects including uniting the seven islands into one through land reclamation. Once the islands were consolidated into one territorial unit, people from

other regions were encouraged to come and settle in Bombay as there was a need for useful settlers.

Several economic and religious concessions were given by the British government to attract gardeners, silk and cotton weavers, carpenters for building ships and houses, etc. to come and settle in Bombay. This period was characterized by a huge inflow of people looking for better prospects from declining urban centers especially the port city of Surat. The arrival of diverse communities like Parsis, Baniyas, Bohras, Bhatias, etc. in the seven islands had a great influence on the socio-cultural structure of Bombay city which hardly came into the limelight until the 18th century. Thus, the seven islands slowly began gaining some recognition.

Social Composition

The advent of the settlers resulted in Bombay acquiring a very cosmopolitan nature. The majority of the people belonged to regions other than Bombay who came in search of better prospects of life. Bombay became home to a wide range of races and religions. The crowds that thronged the streets of Bombay appeared to be full of wonderful diversities of race, nationality, and religion demonstrated in a greater degree here than in any other place in the world.

The existing juxtaposition of diverse communities was one factor that impressed visitors even in the late nineteenth century. These communities are often seen as blending with each other without any differences but this mixture was only apparent and not real as these communities had their own social sphere, occupational demarcation, and residential division. These differences were reflected in the lifestyles of the people. Moreover, riots were also sporadic between these communities in the different nooks and corners of the city. Riots between Parsis and Muslims in 1851 and 1857 were one of the most serious cases of riots. Apart from religious diversity, society in Bombay was also marked by linguistic diversities. Since a large number of people came from the Gujarat region, Gujarati became one of the dominant languages of Bombay. By 1941, Marathi was spoken only by about half the population and others spoke several other languages like Gujarati, Hindustani, Telugu, Konkani, English, etc.

Another characteristic of Bombay society was the hierarchical structure formed by the initial divisions of labour that organized the communities in a manner that the Europeans occupied the top position, followed by the Indian trading communities like the Parsis, Baniyas, Bohras, Khojas, etc. The Parsis were the most dominant of them all as merchants, builders, contractors, entrepreneurs, landlords, etc. At the bottom of the hierarchy were the

Maharashtrian people who mostly came and settled in Bombay city from the hinterlands. They were mostly engaged in clerical jobs, agriculture, and labourers in the new industries and mills that were coming up around this time. With the spread of western education, the newly educated group of people began challenging this hierarchical structure and the superiority of Europeans and commercial classes towards the end of the 19th century.

Religion, Culture, Education and Lifestyle

These communities who came and settled down in Bombay despite existing closely, continued to practice their distinct customs and traditions and this was evident in the different religious worship places and community associations that were established during this period like the Churches, Cathedrals, Parsi Fire temples, Jewish Synagogues, Parsi Panchayat, Jewish Association, etc. These places provided them a space to get together and carry out different activities and discussions relating to their communities. For example, young Baghdadi Jews used to meet either in a Synagogue or a Jewish compound for Hebrew classes, learn Israeli songs and folk dances which resulted in the emergence of clubs like the Judean Club and movements like the Habonin League Youth Movement that were aimed at preserving their own unique identity and culture.

This indicates that these communities tried to maintain their own identity but there were others like the Bene Israelis, who had already adopted some Maharashtrian customs and traditions. As they were initially settled in Konkan before moving to Bombay they spoke in Marathi, wore sarees, and ate Indian food and some of them continue to practice even after moving to Israel in the post-independence era. But nonetheless, they still maintained certain distinct practices of their religion i.e. Judaism for e.g. observing the Sabbath on Saturdays, celebrating major festivals, and circumcising their sons.

Most of these buildings of public importance and usage were constructed by the affluent families belonging to these communities and hence their tastes influenced the physical character of the city to a great extent. With the arrival of Europeans, new types of buildings of Gothic style began emerging as a result of which traditional styles began disappearing. The lack of interest of the European rulers to promote local styles was not surprising but the wealthy Indian magnates were also not interested in encouraging local craft traditions. Instead, they often lent their patronage to buildings of European styles, and therefore most of the buildings like the University Senate Hall donated by the Parsi entrepreneur Sir Cowasjee Jehangir, Rajabai Tower endowed by Premchand Roychand, etc. exhibited British styles instead of local styles. This is one of the main reasons that most buildings of that time looked very European in style and design. In the later part of the 19th

century, there was a growing concern among the artistic community regarding the decline of the traditional style which resulted in the growth of a new style called the Indo- Saracenic. It combined European designs with regional Indian decorative elements and one of the finest examples is that of the Taj Mahal Hotel, built-in 1904 by a Parsi businessman J.N. Tata.

The influence of 16th century Gujarat architecture was also visible in The Gateway of India which heavily funded by Jacob Elias Sassoon, son of David Sassoon. With all these structures coming up Bombay also became a centre of attraction for aspiring artists and people seeking architectural jobs. An important contribution to it was the establishment of the J.J. School of Art by the Parsi entrepreneur Jamsetjee Jeejeebhoy which was the first architectural training institute in India. Thus, Bombay became a hub of art and architectural skill development.

The spread of education and literacy among people brought about a significant change in the social and cultural life of Bombay. In this matter, certain names of people from these communities need to be taken for their efforts like David Sassoon, Dadabhai Naoroji, Sir Dinshaw Petit, etc. who founded several libraries and reading halls for people. As a result of the increase in the number of educated people, new associations, clubs, theatres, restaurants, etc. came up where these people socialized and shared ideas. Initially, only the Europeans had their clubs and societies in which Indians were not allowed. Later on, even Indian communities like Parsis, Pathare Prabhus, Goan Christians, East Indian Christians began to establish their own educational clubs and societies to promote education. There were also musical clubs which were run mostly by Muslims where people played shatranj(chess), recited poetries and enjoyed music and dance performances by girls. These clubs and societies became places of informal cultural activities which added to the social and intellectual life of Bombay. Several sports clubs also emerged as Indians began taking interest in sports. Influenced by British military officers of the Marine Battalion, the Parsis also began playing the game and established the first Indian Cricket Club called the oriental club which was later renamed as Zoroastrian Cricket Club. Soon Cricket made its way into the hearts of other Indians and it led to the establishment of four gymkhanas.

Another important element added to the social life of Bombay was the café culture and hotel industry which provided a wider space of interaction between different people. The first modest Indian hotel in Bombay was also owned by a Parsi called Old Pallonji. As the population grew in Bombay with the expansion of mills and factories, Brahmin khanavals, Muslim Bhatarkhanas, Parsi Dharamshala, Gujarati wadis also increased which provided food and accommodation to people. Gradually other communities also began opening

eateries serving their own food like Goans, Malvanis, Konkans, Banias, etc. A negative impact of the growth of such eating houses was that caste-based taboos were strengthened to a great extent but its positive impact was that it provided a solution for the workers who lived in tiny rooms of chawls (multi-storied buildings with single rooms) which had no space for cooking. This period was also marked by the growth of little Irani cafes which served a wide variety of food ranging from bun-maskacha to biryani and pulao where people socialised over food.

As cafes and hotels grew, new forms of entertainment also came up as now musical shows, live band performances, etc. were also organized. Apart from these places theatres became a platform for interaction between people and to discuss social issues. Theatres and drama used to be played in different languages which again reflected the linguistic diversity of the city. Different theatre companies were established like the Niti Darshak for Gujarati Drama, Hindustani by Parsis, and the first one with high production called Parsi Natak Mandali was established by Dadabhai Ratanji Thudi. It soon became a centre of cultural activities and entertainment and artists from different places began flocking to the city. In the field of cinema also, Jewish women like Sulochana (Ruby Meyers) and others were ahead of other Indians because they were more progressive and liberal than Hindus and Muslims.

Conclusion

Bombay city, by the first half of the 20th century, was almost a full-fledged cosmopolitan society with a wide diversity of population from different parts of the country and as well as the world. Its every street and locality represent a mixed population and mixed culture even today. The wide variety of cuisine, worship places, language spoken on the streets, architectural style, etc. gives evidence of diverse cultures that have had roots somewhere else but now made Bombay their base of existence. Every place has some specialty and Bombay's specialty lies in the fact that despite such differences, the city has been a centre for their coexistence and this would not have been the case if these communities didn't come and settle in the seven islands that were once lost in oblivion. Thus, these settlers played a significant role in the making of a cosmopolitan Bombay.

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