LISA BJÖRKMAN and CHITRA VENKATARAMANI

Mediating Mumbai: ethnographic explorations of urban linkage

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Lisa Björkman, Chitra Venkataramani
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Abstract

The disjunctive and incongruous texture and form of Mumbai's urban fabric suggests that explanations for Mumbai's fitful growth and transformation might be found somewhere in the offices of city planners. How do imaginaries and boundary-making practices of city planners relate to the way the ethnographic city is "knit together"? This paper draws on empirical research from two territories that are differently linked up with the city of Mumbai to probe the significance of socio-spatial and temporal proximity (or distance) to the processes of "linkage" (*silsila*) by means of which territories become part of the fabric of the city. The empirical accounts reveal how concepts and categories borne of planning imaginaries and boundary-making practices are themselves constitutive of the sociomaterial contradictions that "linkage" practices mediate - practices which attempts to know/represent the city "as a whole" would seek to resolve. The paper thus makes a case for conceptualizing (and engaging) city planners, surveyors and engineers as not as experts who "intervene" or act upon cities as planning objects, but rather as *mediators in a world of mediators*: socially situated actors working within the social and material complexities and contradictions of always-already mediated urban processes.

Keywords: Ethnography, planning, urban/village, mediation, migration, Mumbai

Author

LISA BJÖRKMAN is Assistant Professor of Urban Affairs at University of Louisville and Visiting Scholar at the Urban Studies Institute at University of Antwerp. Her research studies how global processes of urbanism and urban transformation are redrawing lines of socio-spatial exclusions and inclusions, and animating new arenas and scales of political mobilization, contestation and representation. Her first book, *Pipe Politics, Contested Waters: Embedded Infrastructures of Millennial Mumbai* (Duke University Press, 2015) was awarded the American Institute of Indian Studies' 2014 Joseph Elder Prize in the Indian Social Sciences.

CHITRA VENKATARAMANI is an Assistant Professor at the Department of Sociology at the National University of Singapore. An anthropologist by training, she is broadly interested in science and technology Studies, urbanism, climate change, and visual culture. Her current book project traces the role of cartographic images in shaping contemporary ecological politics in Mumbai.

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Silsila/Linkage

The 2007 Bollywood blockbuster *Traffic Signal* has an intriguing storyline that revolves around the murder of a Mumbai Municipal Corporation transport planning engineer. The story goes like this: there's a traffic signal around which an elaborate (and highly romanticized) informal economy revolves: the hawking of pirated books, cigarettes, flowers, t-shirts, any and all manner of cheap plastic toys. The market around the traffic signal is managed by a poor-but-good-hearted twentysomething named Silsila – whose name means *linkage* or *connection* in Urdu and Hindi – who lives in a slum nearby. The aptly named Silsila is the smallest rung in a long chain along which cash flows: traffic signal vendors make weekly payments *(hafta)* to Silsila, who in turn adjudicates constant turf tussles; Silsila passes cash to the slum's local strongman, Jaffar, who enlists these funds in maintaining friendly relations with local police and authorities; Jaffar then passes cash up the food chain to the local mafia boss who farms out stacks of notes to myriad politicians and public sector workers throughout the city.

In the story, Silsila and Jaffar have worked out a deal with the municipal road maintenance department officer whereby the maintenance department keeps the intersection near the traffic signal constantly under construction, thereby slowing traffic to a halt around the signal and providing a captive market for the traffic-signal vendors. Needless to say, traffic snarls around the signal become increasingly intractable, which compromises returns on up-and-coming real estate projects in the area. The plot thickens when a real estate developer involved with one such-affected nearby project approaches the ill-fated municipal transport planning engineer with a cash-backed request: to revise plans for an under-construction overpass bridge such that the developer's new project – a high end residential development that is currently accessible only via the traffic-clogged signal – can be connected to the arterial road via the new bridge. The engineer flatly refuses, explaining to the builder that the bridge plans are sound and serve the broader needs of the city. Outraged, cash-flush, and not to be deterred, the builder rings up a senior politician whose electoral campaign he had funded, and requests that the politician "manage" the intractable engineer. With his reelection campaign on the horizon, the under-pressure politician then phones up a Dubai-based underworld boss with whom the politician shares business dealings in Mumbai. The boss in Dubai rings the local underworld boss in Mumbai (the very same fellow to whom Jaffar passes cash from Silsila's traffic-signal market) with a request to have the engineer killed. The boss then calls on Jaffar to do the dirty

work, and Silsila is unwittingly enlisted into the plot, which sees the engineer shot dead at the foot of the beloved traffic signal at the film's tragic climax. The story ends with victory for the builder, the removal of traffic signal, and the demolition of the Silsila's home and neighborhood.
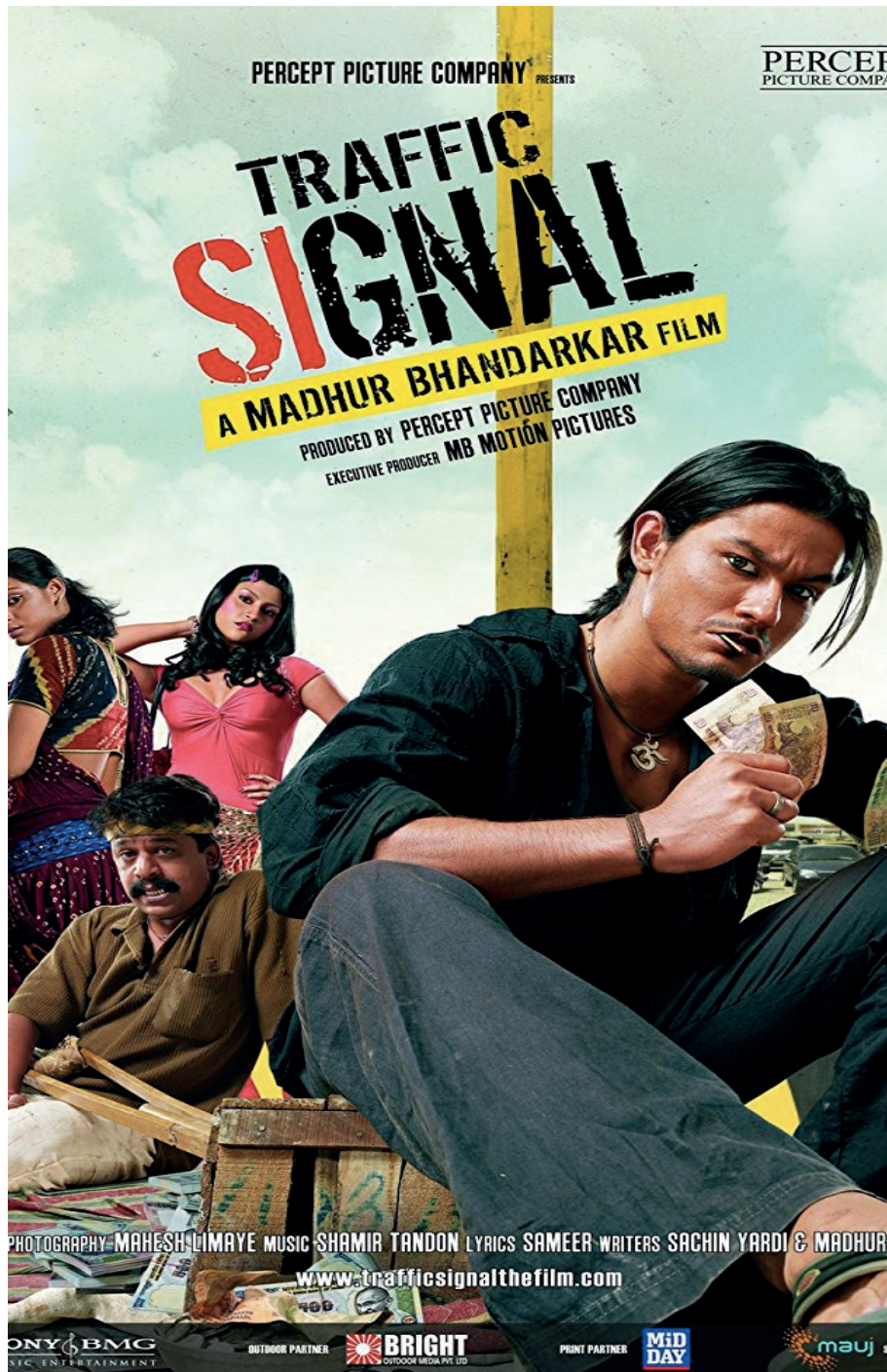

Figure 1: Traffic Signal

As ethnographers of contemporary Mumbai who have studied the work of municipal engineers and planners, we found *Traffic Signal* both insightful and puzzling. The film's depiction of the planning engineer as a key figure in managing the conflicting claims made on and in the city is intriguing for two reasons. First, the disjunctive and incongruous texture and form of Mumbai's urban fabric seems indeed to suggest that explanations for Mumbai's fitful growth and transformation might well be found somewhere in the offices of city planners: in the imagining and framing of urban problems; in the envisioning of ways to achieve more desirable urban futures; in the designing of practical interventions; in the crafting of policies and tenders in their service; in the work of implementation and follow up. What's more (and secondly), the film's portrayal of the transport planner bears a striking resemblance to idealized notions of planning: upright and broad-visioned, our planner stands above the power-infused entanglements of urban life, seeing and acting only with the broader needs of the city in mind. A textbook technocrat, the planner is incorruptible by particularistic political or economic interests. Yet where planning theory's rational models and theories tend to turn a blind eye to the sociopolitical context within which actual city planning takes place (Fainstein 2005) our doomed *Traffic Signal* planner is instead depicted bang at the heart of Mumbai's rich contextual complexity. The planner's bullet-riddled body attests to the impotence of reason and rationality in the face of power and profit, and the failure of planning to successfully adjudicate Mumbai's intractable urban conflicts.

Traffic Signal's narrative arc thus calls into question the conceptualization of planning as a domain of conflict resolution, in which planners are imagined to act as "mediators" (Fainstein 2005) adjudicating among the city's myriad and conflicting goals and preferences.[1] When our *Traffic Signal* transport planner calmly explains to the anxious politician that the approved plans for the bridge are sound in light of the broader needs of the city, he is performing his dutiful role as one who "speak[s] truth to power" (Fainstein 125) in pursuit of a broader urban vision. Yet insofar as it overlooks the entrenched power imbalances and structural inequalities that determine *actual* distributions of urban resources and benefits, the planner-mediator idea

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1   The mediator idea emerged in response leftists critiques of rational planning models, who questions the presumption in rational planning models that modern science and economics can neutrally be enlisted to achieve urban improvement. Instead, in line with the broader "communicative turn" in the humanities and social sciences since the 1970s, and building on Habermasean notion of discursive rationality of a liberal public sphere (Habermas 1991) planning theory sought to relocate and re-institutionalize rationality in the domain of intersubjective communication.

appears not only ideological (insofar as procedural liberalism's theory of communicative rationality masques historically produced contingencies as universal truths (Foucault 1980)) but adherence to its tenets are portrayed by the film's storyline as dangerously naive.

Traffic Signal's narrative arc thus echoes critiques of the mediator-as-planner paradigm leveled by postcolonial and poststructuralist planning theorists (e.g, Roy 2006; Chatterjee 1997; Hardt and Negri 2004; Hillier 2003) who have challenged the epistemological and normative presumptions of the planner-as-mediator formulation. Calling into question the Habermasean notion that communicative rationality might constrain and critique "the instrumentality of capital and mass media" (Hardt and Negri, cited in Roy 2006: 21), postcolonial urban theorists insist that planners are "already inside, contaminated" (Hardt and Negri, cited in Roy 2006: 21). Planners do not "act on or reflect upon objects" from some external position, Roy writes, but rather "produce them through material and discursive practices" and are thus "implicated in the production of the world" (Roy 2006: 21). The distinctive duplicity and power of planning inheres in the profession's insistence on its own innocence – in the discourses of "distance," the assertions of "stand[ing] apart" and the claims to speak on behalf of universally shared ideals of beauty, interest and morality that are enlisted as justifications for their implicated interventions in a world driven by expansionist capital. How can planning "expose the liberal ruses of empire," Roy asks rhetorically, "if it is beholden to the liberal ideal of ethical communication" (Roy 2006: 21) upon which the very legitimacy of the bourgeois capitalist state and its regimes of urban governance hinges?

It is in light of poststructuralist critiques that *Traffic Signal's* depiction of the bullet-strewn body of the mediator-planner presents a puzzle: in practice Mumbai's planners and engineers are not often (or *ever* as far as we know) murdered by gangsters. Yet at the same time, *Traffic Signal's* implied explanation for this confounding absence of lethal violence against planners – that is, if planners are not being gunned down by gangsters then they must be doing the bidding of gangster-backed builders (and thus of real estate capital more generally) – is equally unsubstantiated. Notwithstanding mass hysteria about "corruption" among city planners and engineers (Björkman 2015; Doshi and Ranganathan 2017) – who are popularly presumed to do the bidding of the highest bidder – the multiple and conflicting ways in which the city of Mumbai is actually changing vitiate against any simplistic notion that con-

temporary dynamics of urban transformation adhere to any builder-driven logic or agenda.[2]

In this context, the empirically interesting questions are threefold: first, if the "knitting together" (Friedmann, forthcoming) of urban fabric into "integrated urban entities" is the stuff of conurbation, then of what material and discursive stuff is this knitting comprised? Secondly, in this context, what (if any) is the role of the "conscious human activity" of urban planning (Fainstein 2005: 121) in bringing the empirical city into being? That is to say, how do the concepts and categories by means of which "the city" is imagined by planners relate to the material and discursive practices by means of which ethnographic city is knit together? And finally – to come full circle – how does this empirical work of knitting relate to the concepts, categories and boundary-making practices by means of which the city is then (re)imagined as an object for planning?

In what follows, we present an empirically grounded thought experiment, drawing on ethnographic material from two territories that are differently linked with the city of Mumbai to probe the significance of socio-spatial and temporal proximity (or distance) to the processes by means of which territories become linked with the city (however defined). In what ways do distance and proximity come to matter – when, how, and to whom? In what ways are spatio-temporal distance and proximity experienced, measured and delimited? What are the stakes of these delimitations? How far is 'too far' to be considered 'part of the city'? How near is 'too near to be considered 'outside'? The ethnographies demonstrate how planning imaginaries and legal-institutional practices of categorization, measurement and boundary-drawing, are instrumental in producing the socio-spatial and material contradictions that everyday practices of "linkage" then seek to mediate – practices that efforts to represent the city as an object of/for planning then in turn seek to resolve. This first point is largely in agreement with the poststructuralist point that planning concepts and categories do not describe but rather help to produce the morphological and legal fabric of the city. Yet this productive work of planning, our ethnographies reveal, is part of

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2 One particularly high-profile example would be the high-profile and stillborn Dharavi Redevelopment Project, a state-directed planning scheme announced in 2004. The DRP has repeatedly (and unsuccessfully) tried to enlist private sector actors and resources in redeveloping the 525-acre plot of prime land in Mumbai. Dharavi is home to anywhere between 300,000 and 1,000,000 people and its commercial and industrial economy has an estimated annual turnover of at least $1 billion. Notwithstanding the enormous potential profits that would accrue, the redevelopment of Dharavi has been repeatedly stalled and derailed, not least because area residents are vigorous and enthusiastic voters.

a more complex and interesting story – one in which planners and their performative utterances, representations and mediations play only one part (albeit an important and empowered part) among many. Set loose in the city, planning concepts work in ways that exceed the designs of their authors in myriad unpredictable ways. In light of these finding, the paper makes a case for conceptualizing and engaging planners, surveyors, engineers as *mediators in a world of mediators*: socially situated actors working within the social and material complexities and contradictions of always-already mediated urban processes.

Mediating Mumbai

The question of how to delimit a city – for planning and administrative purposes as well as for social science research – has been the subject of much scholarly debate in recent years. In their influential statement on "planetary urbanization," Brenner and Schmitt write:

> During the last thirty years […], the form of urbanisation has been radically reconfigured, a process that has seriously called into question the inherited cartographies that have long underpinned urban theory and research […] This situation of planetary urbanisation means, paradoxically, that even spaces that lie well beyond the traditional city cores and suburban peripheries—from transoceanic shipping lanes, transcontinental highway and railway networks, and worldwide communications infrastructures to alpine and coastal tourist enclaves, "nature" parks, offshore financial centres, agro-industrial catchment zones and erstwhile "natural" spaces such as the world's oceans, deserts, jungles, mountain ranges, tundra, and atmosphere—have become integral parts of the worldwide urban fabric. While the process of agglomeration remains essential to the production of this new worldwide topography, political-economic spaces can no longer be treated as if they were composed of discrete, distinct, and universal "types" of settlement.

Brenner and Schmitt argue that while urban scholarship increasingly describes cities as interconnected, this language of connectivity and flow often fails to capture the physical and spatial dimensions of the emerging "planetary" condition. Thus they suggest that the challenge posed by contemporary processes of urbanism is not simply a *practical* one concerning how to plan for these new scales, dimensions and spatio-temporalities of linkage, but rather a *conceptual* one, concerning the need to devise new ways of thinking about the sociomaterial practices of linkage by means

of which territories become "integral parts of the worldwide urban fabric." This is a question that concerns the very ontology of the city.

Brenner and Schmitt's formulation has opened up new sites of inquiry for urban researchers but has detractors as well. In a much-discussed article, Scott and Storper (2015) have argued for the continued relevance of the "local scale", given what they argue as the "agglomeration dynamics common to all cities" (Scott and Storper 2015: 6). That is, while they concede Brenner and Schmitt's point that "cities are strongly and increasingly intertwined with one another in relational networks" and that "there can be no rigid and absolute boundary between any given city and the rest of geographic space," Scott and Storper nonetheless insist that:

> Once these points have been made […] we still need to assert the status of the city as a concrete, localized, scalar articulation within the space economy as a whole, identifiable by reason of its polarization, its specialized land uses, its relatively dense networks of interaction (including its daily and weekly rhythms of life), and the ways in which it shapes not just economic processes (such as the formation of land, housing and labor prices) but also socialization dynamics, mentalities and cultures.

The question that these debates ask, in other words, has to do with the whether and how space and time matter for the broader economic processes and agglomeration dynamics that Scott and Storper insist are (as per the title of their article) the "nature of cities."

A second line of debate about the relationship between urban parts and wholes has been taken up (largely in the pages of the journal *City*) between proponents of a Deleuze-inspired "assemblage urbanism" (e.g., McFarlane 2011, Farias and Bender 2011, Farias 2011) on the one hand, and their (neo-Lefebvrian) critical urban theory detractors on the other (e.g. Brenner, Neil, David J. Madden, and David Wachsmuth 2011). In the introduction to their book *Urban Assemblages,* for instance, assemblage theorists Farias and Bender (2011) argue that appearance of the city as a coherent space and scale must not be taken at face value:

> [Conceptualising] space and scale as a product that somehow becomes independent from the set of practices that produce it would involve falling into the trap of fetishism, in the Marxian sense of taking for real and ontologically autonomous what is rather an attribute of particular actor-networks and urban sites. Space, scale and time are rather multiply enacted and assembled at concrete local sites where concrete actors shape time-space dynamics in various ways producing thereby different geographies of associations (Farias and Bender 2011: 6).

The city, Farias and Bender thus suggest, is not an object whose form and function are given by the broader political economic system of which it is a constituent part, but rather ought to be studied as a distinct site of "urban practice" and of "processes of becoming" in which myriad (human and nonhuman) component parts come together (are "assembled") to the effect that the city *appears* as a single entity. Thus, as McFarlane (2011) writes in his own critique of critical urban theory, "[…] o*bjects remain both within the whole, and in isolation in terms of their specificity and differences even while they alter through interactions*. There is little space here for politics and movements that exist in relation to but which nonetheless move outside of capitalist development" (McFarlane 2011: 211 *emphasis added*). Critical urbanism thus understands the city as defined and given (following Deleuze) by "relations of interiority" in which the relations among the bits and parts of the city are *internal* to structures of capitalist accumulation and thus interact functionally in its service. By contrast, assemblage urbanists like McFarlane and Bender and Farias posit that the interactions among the bits and fragments that comprise the city are defined by *relations of exteriority*, and thus seek to "shift attention from parts within wholes to the transformative potential of multiplicity and experimentation emerging through often irresolvable differences." That is, rather than understanding cities as sites where the "conflict and contradiction" of the capitalism's universalization plays out (as neo-Lefebvrian critical urban theorists would have), assemblage urbanism is concerned with how cities might be sites where new kinds of possibilities might "emerge through and exceed capitalism." Critical urbanists, for their part, respond by accusing assemblage theorists (Brenner, Madden and Wachsmuth focus their critique on McFarlane in particular) of "naïve objectivism" (Brenner, Madden and Wachsmuth 2011: 223), writing that "while the assemblage ontology focuses on the material themselves, it is essential to consider the political-economic structures and institutions in which they are embedded" (234). Assemblage, they conclude, offers no account of "why some possibilities for reassembly are actualized over and against others that are suppressed or excluded" (235).

As ethnographers, we found these debates over the ontology of the city of only passing interest when they first appeared in *City*. After all, whatever we might like to believe about 'the nature of cities' – about how bits and parts of cities (ideas, objects, bodies) might come together or fall apart – to decide on such things in advance (or independently) of ethnographic inquiry would be not only practically unhelpful but methodologically suspect. As questions of *ontology* these debates about how to conceptualize the relationship between parts and wholes and about how to represent

the internal and external boundaries of 'the city' appeared somewhat removed from practical research.

Yet the question of how the city is imagined and represented resurfaces in rather urgent ways in contemporary planning and policymaking practices – especially in the field of urban modeling and simulation where practices of urban representation increasingly animate urban policy formation, planning decisions and patterns of financial and material investment. While is true that, as Friedmann (this issue) writes, that "modelers don't deal with policies, laws, and regulations" it is equally true that policymakers, planners, and lawmakers *do* deal (and increasingly so) with models and simulations – as well as with modelers and simulators, and with the tools and technologies and gadgets with which they work. While Friedmann suggests that technological innovation be considered an "exogenous variable," we know as well that research and development of technology is related to perceptions of markets for their products – and insofar as these markets are often very large cities, then the way that cities and their problems are imagined and conceptualized to tech companies who are designing things to sell seems to matter very much. The emerging "smart city" agenda is a good example: as Levenda's research on Austin, Texas' 'smart grid experiment,' suggests, notwithstanding stated goals of 'smart city' projects (sustainability, efficiency, social justice…), urban experiments are at least as interested in 'market-testing' as in overtly-stated goals (in Austin's case, of reducing carbon emissions) (Levanda, 2016: 5). To the extent that technological innovation responds to the framings of urban problems implied by models and simulations (which are an increasingly important component of urban knowledge production and forecasting), then technological change must be described as endogenous. How the relationship between the 'whole' city and its 'constituent parts' is conceptualized, modeled, simulated and "imagined" thus matters tremendously insofar as these objectifications/representations have powerful material effects.

In what follows, we bring ethnographic insights to bear on these issues, focusing on the practices by means of which conceptual and material dimensions of urbanism co-constitute one another. Building on insights from anthropology, we conceptualize "linkage" as a process of mediation – not in the conflict-resolution sense predominant in planning theory, but as practices that "transform, translate, distort, and modify the meaning or the elements they are supposed to carry" (Latour 2005: 39). Building on the Latourian distinction between *intermediary* and *mediator* (where the former is a passive conduit that does not act on or alter the resource it conveys, while the latter is enlisted in the production and transformation that resource), we demonstrate

that practices of linkage do not "bridge" gaps between already existing entities – the rural and urban; the legal and the illegal. Instead we show how everyday practices of linkage work through and against these sorts of institutionally empowered "cognitively available"[3] (Keane 2016: 167-198) planning concepts and categories, enlisting the possibilities and constraints that these concepts afford in the everyday work of urban life. Urban linkage, in other words, comprises the range of material and discursive practices by means of which urban connection and disconnection comes to be "embodied" (Keane 2003) or "materialised" (Appadurai 2015), as well as the sociospatial work that brings territories proximity or distance – spatially, conceptually or temporally. The ethnographies attend to how Mumbai's sociomaterial and spatial interconnections and disjunctures are imagined, instantiated, and contested through practices of linkage, as well as to the stakes of these multiscalar mediations.

Nagaur: too far to count?

Proximity of course is a function of time as much as space, such that a direct train that links, say, Mumbai's Central Business District (CBD) to Pune's CBD (approximately 90km) might lead us to think of these two cities as part of the same conurbation, whereas the local (slower) train (or no train) connecting Mumbai's CBD to the working class neighborhoods where the CBD's service staff reside might be geographically much closer but temporally more distant – with commutes half the distance taking as twice as long. The space of the city exists, as Rao (2009) writes, "as a function of movement rather than existing a priori as a normative abstraction" (Rao 2007: 233-234). But if space can thus be said to be a function of time and infrastructure, then it is also the case that the increasing importance of transport infrastructures signal that territorial proximity continues to matter; people and goods might now be able to move from one place to another faster and faster and from further and further away, but that they do so at all suggests the continued relevance of proximity to urban processes (however understood).

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3   As linguistic anthropologist Vellerman argues, "which actions we can make depends on which descriptions or concepts are available for us to enact" (Velleman 2013: 27, cited in Keane 2016: 158).

Figure 2: Nagori Dairy

Given the infrastructurally mediated nature of urban space, how short (in time or distance) must distance be – and how often must travel between two territories take place – before the two can be conceptualized as part of a single 'city?' Take, for instance, the smallish city of Nagaur in western Rajasthan, situated about 1100 km from Mumbai. While the censused population of Nagaur is around 100,000, the size of the Nagori community is estimated (by Mumbai-based Nagoris) at around 20,000. That is to say, a large percentage of Nagori households have one or more of their members working in Mumbai. Many Nagori Mumbaikars are married men who spend a few months at a stretch in Mumbai, where they live in modest accommodations and send much of their earnings back to their families (parents, wives, children) in Nagaur where families invest in land, education, and ever-larger houses. By overnight train from Mumbai's railway terminus, Nagori men (and sometimes women) move back and forth from Nagaur in around 17 hours. Most Nagori men I know make the journey every six weeks or so, to visit with mothers and wives and children. Some women join their husbands in Mumbai – an arrangement that is generally worked out among the brothers of an (extended family) household: one wife

will stay in Nagaur to manage the home and cook and care for aging parents and school-going children, while the other wife will take up residence in Mumbai to manage the household. On completion of grade 10 or 12, sons will often hop the train from Nagaur and join fathers in Mumbai, learning the business and apprenticing for a few years, eventually taking over and allowing the father to spend less and less time in Mumbai, and to eventually retire in Nagaur.

The Nagori in Mumbai are largely in the milk trading business, and a large number of Mumbai's innumerable tea houses, sweet shops, and dairies are Nagori-owned (see images).[4] I spoke to a proprietor of one such tea house located in the central Mumbai neighborhood of Madanpura – a man who looked to be in his 60s to whom others present referred simply as Chacha (uncle). Chacha recalled that he came to Bombay in 1972 to sell milk, explaining that "milk is our community's historical business." In Rajasthan, Nagori Muslims have long been in the business of managing buffalo stables (tabelas) and milk from Nagori traders is known in Mumbai for its purity and for its high fat content. "All our milk is pure buffalo milk," a dairy owner named Rasheed explained:

> Other companies, they dilute the milk. Or they skim the fat and sell it separately as *ghee*. But our milk is fresh, whole milk. That's why [Nagori] tea houses and dairies use milk only from Nagori suppliers.

Rasheed tells me that he tests the fat on his milk every day eagerly demonstrates for me the process: filling a jar with milk, chacha adds a few drops of alcohol to the small sample, then shakes the jar so that the fat will separate. He measures the fat and flashes a broad smile: "see, our fat is always 7%."

I asked Chacha about the Nagori networks through which his milk is supplied: how is it organized? Do they have a trade association? Chacha shakes his head: "there's no association. We're all related, so we just get the milk through our family networks." Chacha explains that the person who delivers his milk every morning is a cousin's son. Chacha's daughter is married and lives with her children in Nagaur, but her husband is a milk trader who divides his time between Nagaur and Bombay. Chacha himself has four grown sons, all of whom live and work with him in Bombay. The stability and success of Nagori business in Mumbai, in other words, is inextricably bound up with social and economic relations rooted in Nagaur. Not only does the reliability and purity of Nagori milk products hinge upon Nagaur-based kinship

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4   This section draws on research with Nagori traders conducted between 2008 and 2017.

networks, but all of the Mumbai-based Nagori traders I know participate in Nagori credit association: chit funds, savings and loan groups. Nagori traders frequently rely on kinship-backed credit associations to fund both new business ventures and to pay for marriage expenses (the two are inextricably linked) as well to move money back and forth between Nagaur and Mumbai. The savings groups, needless to say, are comprised exclusively of Nagoris. It was explained to me that this is the case because the imperative of maintaining the family's reputation in Nagaur ensures that loans and dues will be paid in full and on time – even if it means that a participant has to take an interest-bearing loan from a third (non-Nagori) party to pay his chit fund dues. To default on a payment to a Nagori savings group or chit fund would be devastating to a family's reputation in the village, damaging to the future marriage prospects of children, and therefore detrimental to the viability of the family's Mumbai-based businesses.

While flows of Nagori milk and money articulate networks of kinship and credit rooted and territorialized in Nagaur, the viability of Nagori businesses hinge equally upon the forging, maintenance of sociomaterial and political relations in Mumbai. The territorialization of Nagori Mumbai has both production and consumption dimensions: the former relates to the spatial geographies of milk production and flow and the latter to the legal-institutional and policy frameworks governing the urban territories where Nagori retail outlets cluster. And each of these dimensions relates differentially to the categories and concepts through which 'Mumbai' has been constituted as an object of planning.

As far as production is concerned, Chacha explained that milk for his dairy and teahouse is sourced not from Nagaur, but rather from Nagori-owned tabelas in and around Mumbai suburban districts. Transport and refrigeration of fresh milk is exceedingly costly, he explained, and Nagori traders differentiate their relatively more-expensive products from those of non-Nagori milk retailers who traffic in less-expensive, reconstituted milk purchased from non-local tabelas. While it is therefore extremely important that Nagori traders maintain their reputation for dealing only in fresh whole milk, Chacha explains, this is becoming increasingly difficult because Mumbai's development planning and policy frameworks – which incentivize the conversion of land employed in 'non-urban uses' (like tabelas) into commercial and residential urban real estate products – are pushing tabelas out of the city. Until recently, Chacha explains, he sourced his milk from a Nagori-owned tabela located in the Mumbai neighborhood of Jogeshwari. But the landowner recently terminated the tabela owner's lease, taking advantage of Mumbai's sky-high property values to

construct a high-rise residential tower. The institutionalized incentives to convert tabela-occupied lands into high end residential real estate has resulted in a growing scarcity of tabelas in Mumbai and rumors have begun to circulate that some Nagori dairies have begun surreptitiously using reconstituted milk in their products. Chacha however is determined to preserve the integrity of the Nagori reputation for fresh whole milk: after his previous milk supplier lost his business to a high-rise tower, he began sourcing his milk through another relative – a nephew who had recently opened a tabela just north of the city. This land was less likely to be converted into a tower Chacha explained, not only because of the distance from the Central Business District, but because it was situated on land that had been surveyed by development planners as "village-owned."

On the consumption side, Nagori Mumbai is materialized and territorialized in the city's countless retail centers and tea houses**.** Nagoris are not an especially wealthy business community and their storefronts tend to be spatially concentrated in the city's Muslim-dominated neighborhoods of central Mumbai – areas that have long been at the heart of Bombay's socioeconomic life (Green 2013) but which have had an ambivalent place within Mumbai's exclusionary (and historically violent) ethno-linguistic and sociopolitical climate in recent decades (Hansen 2001). In this context, Nagori traders run brisk and stable businesses by maintaining elaborate sociopolitical networks and relations with non-Nagori (and non-Muslim) customers as well as with myriad suppliers with whom they do business: propane suppliers and bakeries for instance, as well as with city police and municipal officials. The strength and endurance of these extra-community linkages are crucial to the viability of Nagori businesses in Mumbai and thus to material transformations of built space in Nagaur.

This work of producing and maintaining relations recalls our earlier discussion of *Traffic Signal's* Silsila, who keeps the wheels of the Mumbai's plan-subverting pathologies lubricated with cash. Yet unlike the filmic portrayal of linkage as the work of *subverting* plans (seen in the payments made to keep the road under construction for instance) and *circumventing* laws (in the depiction of Silsila's neighborhood as an illegal occupation), Nagori practices of linkage by contrast have a more complex relation to planning and policy concepts and categories. As in Mumbai more generally, certain aspects of Nagori businesses have ambiguous and sometimes conflictual relations with policy categories and rules. For instance, many of the non-elite neighborhoods where Nagori dairies are situated are areas that, beginning in the 1990s, came to be treated for policy and governance purposes as 'slums' – notwithstanding the planning histories and diverse tenure arrangements of the city's highly

differentiated built fabric (Björkman 2015). The planning and policy frameworks governing neighborhoods treated as 'slums' make it exceedingly complicated to produce documentation necessary to apply for commercial licenses and permits. The complex and sometimes-contradictory documentation requirements for commercial licensure vitiate against any clear procedure whereby regular supply of, say, municipal water or cooking gas can be arranged to many Nagori teahouses.

Take for example a teahouse proprietor named Rasheed: The small structure in which Rasheed's teahouse is housed is at the edge of a low-income "slum" neighborhood where Rasheed lives with his brother's family. The structure itself is situated on public land (owned by the state government) and is adjacent to a gas station. The original structure housing Rasheed's teahouse was constructed in 1991 Rasheed tells me, by a now-elderly Nagori trader (whom Rasheed calls Chacha) who set up shop on the plot shortly after the petrol pump was opened, in order to prepare tea and snacks for truck drivers stopping at the petrol pump. Chacha has documentary proof of his tenure on the plot since 1991 in the form of a ration card bearing his name and address – a crucial piece of documentation given a policy framework pertaining to areas treated as 'slums' that ties eligibility for compensation in the event of eviction to current residents' ability to provide evidentiary proof that their tenure in a given structure predates a (constantly changing) "cutoff date."[5] Chacha ran a brisk business for 20 years, but in 2011 began thinking about plans to retire to Nagaur. Retirement presented a dilemma however: Chacha had no children to whom to pass his shop, and selling the business was not an option because according to Mumbai's slum policy framework (at that time) whoever purchased the business would not inherit Chacha's cutoff-date proof – meaning the new owner would not have the requisite documentation necessary to obtain things like municipal water connections and to militate against eviction.[6] It was in this context that Rasheed approached Chacha with an idea: Rasheed proposed to lease the structure from Chacha, to whom he would pay a one-time deposit, as well as a monthly rent payment. Rasheed and Chacha drew up a contract stipulating that when Chacha dies, the ownership of the structure will be transferred to a religious trust in Nagaur to which Rasheed would then make the monthly rent payments, with Rasheed and his sons retaining indefinite tenancy rights. And as a bonus, the trust in Nagaur – which is connected to a mosque

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5   Until very recently, proof that a structure meets the "cutoff date" was also an eligibility requirement for a municipal water connection.

6   A government circular in 2012 addressed this problem by allowing transfer of ownership of slum structures.

– would offer Chacha (who owns no property in Nagaur) accommodation, food and care for the duration of his retirement.

When Rasheed's chit fund turn came around, he used the cash to renovate and expand the storefront, renovating the storage area behind the structure (which abutted a drainage ditch) into a seating area for customers. To accommodate the additional clientele, however, Rasheed needed to double his weekly propane allocation. This presented another problem however, because there was no clear procedure by means of which Rasheed's establishment could procure a commercial license that would allow him to legally obtain more propane; Rasheed's repeated efforts to obtain a commercial license for his shop had been unsuccessful. Chacha had long managed without a license by keeping the scale of his operations small and making small weekly payments (hafta) to police constables who frequented for tea while on patrol. But the expanded space and increased propane deliveries to Rasheed's shop drew the attention of city officials and increasing hafta payments began to threaten the viability of his business. In response to this situation, one of Rasheed's police friends/patrons came up with a solution: the officer filed a case against Rasheed him for operating without a license. Rasheed then presented to the court all the documentary evidence of his repeated efforts to obtain a commercial license; he explained that given constitutional 'right to life' provisions, a sympathetic judge can order that a commercial license be awarded. Rasheed smiled as he recalled how he had told the judge: "Sir I'm doing this work to fill my stomach and to feed my family; I've applied for a license but it was denied. Please give me a license to do my business legally because that's what I want to do." The judge ultimately agreed, directing Rasheed to first pay a modest fine for operating without a license, and then ordering the municipality to award him a commercial license. Rajesh explained that, "see, there's no way to *apply* for a license," Rasheed shrugged, "but the court can *order* one!"[7]

For Nagori traders like Rasheed, in other words, doing business hinges upon the forging and maintenance of stable and enduring relations with an wide range of city actors: transport companies, police constables, municipal staff, city politicians and corporate suppliers (especially for cooking gas). The stability of Nagori businesses in the city indexes the community's deep and well-institutionalized linkages in Mumbai. Mumbai's Nagori traders, in other words, are not a 'migrant group' who share ethno-linguistic *origins* in Nagaur, but rather a kinship-linked community of trading families whose financial viability, ethnolinguistic identity, socioeconomic aspira-

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7   At the time of writing Rasheed's case is still pending.

tions are both rooted in and routed through the territory of Nagaur, but which are equally bound up, invested in and materialized in the territories – both tabelas and storefronts – where they conduct their trade. Indeed it is because of institutionalized and enduring character of Nagori linkages that tea shop owners are not-infrequently sought out as advice-givers and campaign workers during election season (notwithstanding the fact that Nagori traders tend to vote in Nagaur rather than in Mumbai).

Mumbai's *Gaothans*: proximate and distanced

If the Nagaur thought experiment stretched the notion of spatial distance to ask about the boundaries of the city, a second thought experiment pulls in the opposite direction, asking what we are to make of bits and parts of the city that while within the official 'urban boundaries' are yet treated as 'non-urban,' putting in question the rights of those who reside in these spaces. These are areas of Mumbai whose residents might consider themselves "Mumbaikars" and are spatially proximate, but which, from an agglomeration perspective might appear entirely disconnected. Indeed, as the case of Mumbai's Mobaikar community shows, rights to land, housing, and infrastructure might even rest on a community's capacity to claim their identity as distinctly non-urban. Thinking Mumbai from the perspective of its *gaothans* (villages) invites us to consider how and in what ways spatial proximity matters – or is confounded – in the contemporary era of technologically-mediated space-time compression.

There are several "villages" or *gaothans* within the jurisdictional boundaries of the Mumbai Metropolitan Region, which have existed since before the Portuguese began trading along the coast more than 500 years ago. However we want to define "Mumbai," *gaothans* clearly predate the city, which has grown around these villages. As Mumbai's periphery crept upwards along the coast, it bumped up against a growing number of settlements like the *gaothans* and until recently, these older unplanned settlements in the city were largely ignored by the urban planning authorities or dealt with in a piecemeal fashion. However, as the city and its suburbs continue to grow, developers are increasingly turning towards informal settlements, such as *gaothans,* in order to find pockets of buildable land. Much of this development has been through the framework of the Slum Rehabilitation Authority (SRA), which is a violent, much criticized process that displaces residents of informal settlements into mass housing

blocks. One of the key strategies of those residing in *gaothans* has been to carve their identity as "East Indians," as one of the founding communities of the city, distinct from "slum dwellers." The Mobaikar community was, in a sense, re-born from these struggles and pressures of land and housing.

The Mobaikar Movement aims to bring together the city's East Indian community of Roman Catholic converts, many of whom reside in *gaothans* and are engaged in small-scale near-shore fishing. This movement is not an isolated one – it is deeply connected to other communities (such as the Koli fisher community) who are simultaneously petitioning the state to give them greater rights over the development of their settlements and better access to infrastructure and services. Several of these villages are situated in the northern fringe of the city, which has developed rapidly in the last two decades. For example, Malad, a suburb in the northwest of Mumbai, was the fastest growing area according to the 2011 census. Between 2001 and 2011, Malad's population grew by nearly 20% to 900,000, or 8% of the city's total population (GoI 2011). This population growth fuelled a steep rise in construction work and real estate development in the area, which in turn placed a great deal of pressure on the villages in and near these suburbs. As noted previously, what adds to this pressure is the slum rehabilitation policy framework – residents from unplanned, informal settlements that are classified as "slums" are redeveloped as mass housing blocks where families, regardless of the size of their original dwellings, are allotted small studio apartments with little to no access to services. Thus, communities such as the fishers and the East Indians who live in *gaothans* are caught in a double-bind: not only do they need to distinguish themselves from residents of "slums," their only way to ensure safety against displacement into slum rehabilitation schemes is to prove the identity of their settlements as a "village," that is, as distinctly "non-urban."

In 2012, the Mumbai Metropolitan Regional Development Authority (MMRDA) published a proposal for developing Manori, Gorai, and Uttan, a cluster of villages in the northwest suburbs, as a "Recreational and Tourism Development Zone" (MMRDA 2016).[8] These villages are not just located at the boundary of the city, but they are also physically partially disconnected from the city by the Manori creek. Thus, the only way to get to this cluster is either by a ferry from the south or taking

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8 In early 2017, the government of Maharashtra decided that the villages of Manori, Gorai, and Uttan would no longer fall under the jurisdiction of the MMRDA and thus the "Gorai-Manori-Uttan Recreation and Tourism Development Zone (RTDZ)" as it is called would be administered by the Mira Bhayander Corporation. Thus while the overseeing institution has changed, the plan is still in place.

a connecting road located further up north, which adds a considerable amount of time to the journey. The plan proposed introducing a huge amount of infrastructure such as water-supply and sewage treatment plants, but one of its main goals was also to develop particular villages and village-areas as "heritage" districts – culturally relevant zones which would be conserved in order to attract local tourists. In order to facilitate this plan, the MMRDA proposed the construction of a bridge that would replace the ferry lines in the south and reduce commute time, while introducing a more concrete physical link between this village cluster and Malad suburbs.

For communities that identify themselves to be the "original" inhabitants of the city, this plan served as a catalyst for political organization in order to contest the state's vision for heritage conservation, while ensuring they retained the right over their land, for development, and to infrastructure. In the wake of the proposal's publication, the MMRDA received close to 16,000 letters of objections from different East Indian and fisher communities in the city. Much of the agitation against the plan was directed at the proposal to build a bridge that would provide allow a much faster route into Malad, potentially bringing in more commerce and infrastructure. Indeed, when the MMRDA re-proposed the bridge in 2015, the Mobaikar community responded by stating that such a bridge would completely destroy the community's identity, allowing the "villages" to be overtaken by the "city" (Dutta, 2014). While such a protest might seem strange given that the bridge would help bring revenue and infrastructure to the community, it has to be seen in the context of Mumbai's rapid suburban development and land politics.

Many g*aothans* have transformed considerably over the decades: as residents are moving out of traditional occupations such as fishing, many have resorted to developing their plots in a piecemeal fashion, building two or three story housing over their dwellings. These units are leased out and this rent forms a very important part of their domestic income. Over the years, this unregulated construction has transformed many *gaothans* into high-density settlements where people from many different communities, including migrant workers looking for cheap housing in the city, reside. As East Indians and fisher communities become increasingly intertwined with the economies and social networks outside of the community, the distinctiveness of the "village" morphology vis-à-vis the city's myriad other neighbourhoods appears more and more arbitrary. This is further complicated as their claim over their lands and housing is intrinsically tied up with their ability to prove their identity as "original inhabitants" of the city, and that of their settlement as a "village."

The city's heritage laws also add a further layer of complexity as they restrict building and construction in areas and over structures deemed as having historical importance. This was a central problem for the villages identified in the MMRDA proposal: if the proposal were to go through, it would mean that the city's heritage laws would come into effect in these settlements, severely curbing their development potential. Thus, in the eyes of the community, it was also important to not be listed as a "heritage" site as that would bring severe restrictions on their right to develop their individual properties. Simultaneously, in rejecting this "heritage" tag, they also had to take care that they were not opening the door for private developers to come in and take over their lands under the slum rehabilitation laws (if these villages were to be classified as "slums"). Thus, after the MMRDA released the proposal to develop Manori, Gorai, and Uttan as a heritage and tourism site, what unfolded was a complex political rights claiming process where the community had to reject the state's heritage vision while ensuring that they were not subsequently categorized as a "slum," which would open the possibility of displacement.

The MMRDA proposal and the Mobaikar community's response shows the ways in which distance and linkages are often a slippery slope and must be carefully negotiated and worked with great skill. If the Mobaikar community in these particular villages were to appear too close – both historically and in terms of physical proximity – then they run the risk of being emblematized as markers of the city's architectural heritage and stand to lose the chance to develop their plots of land. However, if they were to be seen as too "distant" as somehow unimportant to the city's history, then they risk losing their land and homes as well, and the possibility of displacement. In such a case, linkages have to be forged in the right manner and at the right *distance*.

In such a scenario, communities such as the Mobaikars and the fishers have to forge linkages that not only confirm the solidity of their deep-rooted ties with the city, they have to perform the tricky feat of forging the right length of a link that puts them at a perfect distance in order to make these claims. Such political claims are often about reinforcing the identity of a community by strengthening internal connections and ties; they also involves distancing themselves from other communities, despite the fact that such communities may live together in the same neighbourhood or may be connected through intricate ties of formal and informal economy (Venkataramani, 2017). In the case of the Mobaikar community, this complex creation of a link was most evident in the newsletters and articles circulated in the *gaothans.* In an article that featured an illustration depicting a "traditional" village surrounded by palm trees, chickens, pigs, and ominous looking sky-scrapers in the distance, the *gaothan*

residents were urged to bring back the village "look" to their homes by redecorating their houses with traditional building materials, keeping livestock, and most importantly, by not selling out to private developers (Image 3, illustration from the "Gaothan Voice," November 2011). This need to reproduce the identity of the settlements is not one that is manufactured by the communities alone, it is also reinforced by the state's policies, many of which tie up identity politics with housing rights, thus compelling communities to reproduce these categories.
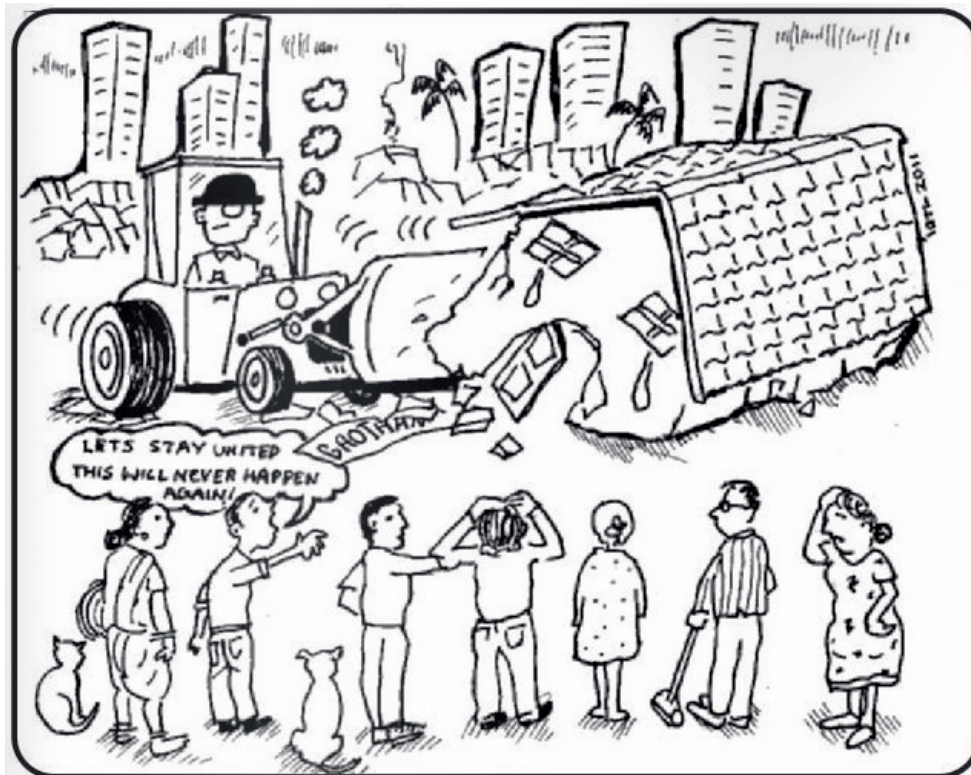

Figure 3: "this will never happen again"

Conclusion: "when some problem is reframed then some solution becomes possible"

In February 2015, the Municipal Corporation of Greater Mumbai published its long-awaited (and much overdue) 2014-2034 Draft Development Plan (DP), uploading the 500-page tome onto the corporation's website, and inviting comments and objections over a following 60-day period. On publication of the plan, a firestorm broke out in the media, with activists, environmentalists, politicians and community

organizations objecting to various aspects of the proposed plan. The week following the release of the Draft DP, a Stakeholder Meeting was convened by the internationally backed NGO Mumbai Transformation Support Unit, during which DP's chief planner V.K. Phatak, was invited to address to concerns raised by the city's heterogeneous and very lively civil society organizations. Among the most vocal of the meeting's participants were city housing activists, who took Phatak to task for two things: first, for what elected councilors and housing activists described as egregious errors in the existing land use plan (ELP), foremost among which was the failure to detail plot-wise land use in areas marked on the ELP as "slums." As one elected councilor later recalled, "I looked [at the ELP] and saw that there were at least 25-30 *masjids* [mosques] in my area that were marked incorrectly – as residential. I approached [the Municipal Commissioner] and asked him for an explanation. And do you know what he said? He told me 'we did it on purpose because so many of those masjids are illegal.' And I said to him 'what about all the illegal [high end residential] buildings? Are you going to mark those as masjids?'"

The second point of contention was the DP's failure to outline a comprehensive vision for addressing the perennial dearth of affordable housing in Mumbai, where an estimated 60% of city residents live in areas surveyed by in the DP's Existing Land-Use Plan (ELP) as "slums." In this context, one activist wanted to know, why have city planners not proposed a comprehensive planning solution to the city's housing problem? Phatak's four-decade-long career as a public sector planner in Mumbai has afforded him an encyclopedic knowledge of laws and policy frameworks governing the city's built space, as well as the practical, legal, and political complexities of planning in and for Mumbai. Phatak responded to the housing activist's accusation-laden question: "People have come up with their own housing solutions; the problem is that the state government hasn't provided the infrastructure." Another activist chimed in: "but are these 'housing solutions' *legal*?" Phatak shrugged and stated simply: "Well we all know that land tenure in Mumbai can be complex; there are so many ways in which housing can become legal." It was precisely because so much of the legal and institutional fabric governing Mumbai's myriad tenure regimes falls outside the purview of city planners, Phatak explained, that his draft plan had outlined flexible provisions for "Local Area Plans." As Phatak put it: "When some problem is reframed then some solution becomes possible."

This exchange is remarkable: housing activists point out that the sociomaterial and legal-institutional fabric of the city is highly problematic: the vagaries of tenure mean that city residents (particularly non-elites) face constant threats of eviction

and are forced to contend with infrastructural insufficiencies and pathologies. These pathologies, moreover, are (at least in part) the effect of the material instantiation of a modernist planning imaginary that has envisioned the city through an ideological set of conceptual binaries: planned/unplanned; urban/rural; developed/slum. The institutionalization and legal empowerment of these epistemologically privileged categories over the past few decades have ignored the myriad regimes of tenure "legitimacy" (Bhan 2016) by means of which urban land claims have been instantiated in the city, criminalizing the lives and livelihoods of many non-elite Mumbaikars.

We have seen how Nagori milk traders like Rasheed are blocked from obtaining commercial licenses by a conceptualization of 'slum' that imagines only removal and redevelopment. In this reconfigured conceptual context, Mobaikar fishers seek to articulate a spatialized community identity whose content renders their villages and communities somehow distinct from the criminalized categories of 'slum' and 'encroacher.' These risks of delegitimization and criminalization are managed and mitigated through the sociomaterial and semiotic practices of linkage that we have described. Given the powerful effects of discursive categories like 'slum' and 'illegal' in Mumbai, it is unsurprising that these are the very terms in which housing activists formulate their arguments with Phatak: "but are these housing solutions *legal*?" To which Phatak responds: "there are so many ways in which housing can become legal; when some problem is reframed then some solution becomes possible."

This ethnographic encounter between a Mumbai planner and a housing activist – each boasting decades of personal experience with the sociomaterial effects that planning categories have had on Mumbai's infrastructural and material fabric – is instructive. In sharp contrast to assumptions about the relationship between law and mediation (as communicative rationality) that saw our *Traffic Signal* planner meet his sad demise, we have seen in the ethnographic accounts of Mobaikar and Nagori Mumbaikars how planning categories like *slum, village, planned* or *legal* not only mediate the very urban forms that they profess to represent, but animate sociomaterial and political projects and aspirations that far exceed the designs of their authors. As Nagori-owned tabelas are displaced by 'urban' planning imaginaries that privilege buildings over buffalos, tabela owners are relocating outside the official boundaries of the city to 'village' lands which thereby become ever-more-densely linked up with economies and processes of Mumbai's commercial center. Meanwhile, the vagaries of documentation and licensure and for Nagori businesses operating in non-elite neighborhoods treated for planning and policy purposes as 'slums' produce relations and linkages with city officials, politicians, and police. These linkages – and their

relation to the conceptual categories with which they're bound up – infuse Mumbai's public cultures (Appadurai and Breckenridge 1988) and cinematic imaginaries (Cinar and Bender) in complex ways – as we saw in the film *Traffic Signal,* discussed at the outset of this essay. So perhaps the reason Mumbai's flesh-and-blood planners don't get killed off like celluloid ones is that while the filmic planner presides over a plan that has a singular relation to planning concepts and regulatory frameworks (a neighborhood is either planned or it is illegal; a bridge is either efficient and necessary or it is not) our real-live Mumbai planner lives in a city where words and worlds mingle promiscuously: "when some problem is reframed," as Phatak puts is, "then some solution becomes possible."

The public outcry over the draft DP (only part of which was directed at the slum and housing issue) ultimately inspired the Chief Minister to direct the Municipality to re-draft the plan in its entirety. Speaking with me[9] in his home some months later, Phatak explained that, "see, no one understood the local area plans. We were trying to let all the city councilors and NGOs do what they had all been proposing all along – so many people already had local area plans! So we said 'Great, go ahead.' But the activists expected that the state should do it." Phatak explained that the state government had long ago abandoned the idea of directly providing of affordable housing stock: "We're only planners. How can we make housing policy?" But civil society actors nonetheless read the absence of a comprehensive vision for as evidence that the plan was driven by the builder lobby: "Everyone was so fixated on the builder lobby," Phatak said with a sigh; "but now the *revised* draft plan is completely pro-builder." He recalled wryly how a prominent housing activist had phoned him up after the release of the revised draft DP to say that he had come to realize that – Phatak put it – "my plan was actually very good."

The words and insights of this seasoned Mumbai planner echo some general conclusions suggested by the empirical accounts presented in this essay. Our first conclusion echoes critiques of planning outlined by poststructuralist theorists who point out that planners' efforts to delineate and represent the city as a singular and coherent planning object, and to present these objectifications as value-neutral and disinterested representations are acts of self-deception. Rather, planning as mediation asks: how are various bits and parts of the city connected to other bits and parts of the city? Of what sociomaterial, spatial-infrastructural, and legal-institutional 'stuff' are these linkages comprised? Indeed the insight towards which the Nagaur

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and Mobaikar thought experiments gesture is that these linkages might be conceptualized not in terms of part-to-whole connections, but instead as a field of practice by means by which territories are drawn into proximity or pulled apart.

Indeed, thinking with Nagori and Mobaikar Mumbai unsettles some of the presumptions about space and proximity inherent in agglomeration-based understandings of the urban that are at the heart of debates about how the city is and ought to be imagined and represented as a planning object. If the spatial dimensions of a city are a function of time – and if time in turn is function of the infrastructures and technologies that enable regular movements and flows (of people, goods, capital, and ideas) across space – then it is unclear why, say, Pune ought to be included within the ambit of Mumbai's regional planning imaginary but not Nagaur, from and to which Mumbai sees a constant flow of people, capital, goods and ideas. The accounts of Nagori Mumbai suggest instead that rather than deciding what (if anything) comprises a 'whole' city of which various bits can be considered – for planning purposes – as parts, the more interesting question concerns the processes and practices by means of which bits and parts of the city come to linked with other bits and parts of the city – how, by whom, and to what end.

The example of Mumbai's villages (*gaothans*) similarly probes the exigencies and paradoxes of proximity and proximal linkages. While urban development seeks to appropriate village lands, we have seen that political mobilizations animated by these dynamics cut both ways: the rising salience of *gaothans* as an identity category shores up land claims, but is built on dividing and distancing the 'village' from the 'urban,' and in forging a very carefully constructed link between the two that leaves room for development and for claiming specific identities and rights. State officials, planners, engineers, and corporations are not external to the construction of linkages. If anything, the negotiations between the MMRDA and the residents of the villages affected by its plans shows the ways in which these linkages are mediated from both ends. Simultaneously, the case of the Mobaikar community shows the ways in which linkages are not simply abstract connections, but a great deal depends on the ways in which they materially manifest, or are made to appear in the landscape. In this case, the Mobaikar community had to simultaneously show their historical interconnectedness with the city, while simultaneously distancing the community from the "urban" in order to be able to claim belonging to a 'traditional village' rather than an 'informal slum.'

All of which is to say that proximity, as a characteristic of an urban linkage, is neither self-evident nor a guarantor of rights nor are linkages characterized by ter-

ritorial proximity necessarily stronger than 'distant' ones. Cultivating proximity and distance, in other words, involves the careful forging and maintenance of linkages necessary to remain relevant and make effective claims within the larger network of links that comprise conurbation. This is a high-stakes business and is thus (unsurprisingly) the site of much contention and contestation.

It is from *within* this linked-up, highly dynamic and fraught urban fabric that the work of city planning is practiced. The work of planning, in other words, is also the work of sociomaterial and legal-institutional practice of mediation and linkage. Planners, in other words, are mediators among mediators… but not all forms of mediation are equal. We have demonstrated that everyday practices of linkage do not bridge ontologically prior 'gaps' (between the rural and urban; legal and illegal; proximate and distant); rather we have shown how institutionally empowered categories borne of planning imaginaries play starring roles in the everyday work of linkage that comprises urban life. The violences and dispossessions enacted over the years in the name of planning have understandably resulted in widespread and pervasive mistrust of city planners, and cynicism regarding the idea of planning more generally. But the concepts, categories, and representations of urban parts and whole forged in the offices of city planners have the potential to be transformative as well. Indeed as Gautam Bhan (2016) asks rhetorically: 'Can planners not practice occupancy urbanism, focusing on politics, materialities and open-ended complexities?' (Bhan 2016: 85). Bhan thus takes progressive scholars to task for abandoning 'planning' a key site of pro-poor political engagement, rightly cautioning that 'this is dangerous ground to cede.' Indeed Bhan's words echo those of Ananya Roy, who directs her words of incitement at progressive planners themselves: in a context where 'the practices of the profession and the practices of empire are closely aligned,' Roy writes, '[w]ould not the retreat of planners cede this territory to those less benevolent, less trained, less caring?' (Roy 2009: 12-13). We agree. So to this chorus of cautionary notes we will conclude with our own: as scholars of the global urban present, it is of utmost importance that we not take privileged sociological or political categories as points of analytical departure; for to do so is to overlook dynamic conceptual terrain of through which the actually existing city is produced. When a housing activist rings up a retired planner to say that, perhaps, on second thought, his prosed plan and its new conceptual framings may have actually been rather 'good' – that it defined problems in new ways, that it offered fresh categories that might yet be put to good use – then perhaps we might say that trust might yet be cultivated and that new linkages are already being forged.

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