



DISAPPEARING PROFESSIONS
OF URBAN INDIA

PHOTOGRAPHS BY CLARE ARNI | TEXT BY ORIOLE HENRY

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INTRODUCTION

In each place we researched the professions traditionally associated with the city or state. We wanted to explore the historical patterns of professions, whether they were vanishing and how they are trying to adapt to survive. We also looked at the broader traditional trades that are being marginalised and are disappearing across the urban landscape. These changes, which happened in the West over hundreds of years, are occurring in India within a couple of decades. Many of the skilled artisans documented were struggling to adapt, most said their children were not going to follow them into the profession and some have since ceased to be employed.

In documenting these professions we looked at the impact of new technologies and changing markets as the country's role rapidly grows within the global economy. We also looked at those trades that are, for example, being forced out of the city by high rents; the small, specialist shops that are being marginalised by larger one-stop chain stores but also how a disappearing profession can profoundly impact the geography of a city. We wanted to look at the wider context of what will be lost along with them; their knowledge base, the variety of merchandise and the scope for pluralism in the employment market of the future.

MUMBAI

The city of Mumbai has gone through many avatars in its lifetime. From fishing communities on seven small islands, it went on to become a large trading post and a manufacturing centre (particularly for cotton) by the 19th century. Today Mumbai is the most populated city in India and has once again changed to become the financial and entertainment capital. In looking at Mumbai we wanted to see what trades had survived from these older avatars but we also looked at how disappearing professions can impact, not just individuals, but also the geography of a city.

Mumbai was initially not as successful as the other ports such as Chennai and Kolkata. It was isolated by 'unfriendly' neighbours and therefore had no overland route for goods from the interior. To try and combat this the British governor in the 17th century, Gerald Aungier, encouraged migration from other parts of India, promising them the freedom to trade, no religious persecution and that they could build their houses within the fort walls.

Encouraged by these policies, communities from across India and also from other countries settled in Bombay. One of these were the Zoroastrian community from Iran who began arriving in the 19th century, perhaps attracted by the success and religious freedom of the Parsi Zoroastrians who emigrated to India in the 10th century. Many of these Iranians opened cafes and by 1950 there were 350 across the city. Now there are only 15 left, "and many of these," one owner told me through gritted teeth, "have been converted to beer bars." The reasons for their decline vary from the younger generation wanting more lucrative jobs to many of the buildings that house these cafes being torn down to make way for skyscrapers.

Mumbai as an island has always struggled for space and though it expanded during the 18th century, the restrictions on trade meant that it wasn't till the 19th century that it began to really prosper. The wealth and boom that paid for this expansion, and the joining of the islands, was largely based on the cotton trade. This 'Cottonopolis', of at one time over 130 mills built across the city, is now at best crumbling or being torn down for redevelopment. The industry declined because of many factors, including a failure to update technology, the emergence of the ready-made garment market and competition from power looms. The death knell was the strike of 1982, which went on for 18 months and by the end most of the mills across Mumbai had closed.

The original inhabitants of the islands, the Koli fishing community, have been buffeted by each of these avatars - pushed to the edges of the growing town and employed and then unemployed by the cotton mills. Some have also continued in the fishing trade in pockets across the city in villages surreally surrounded by skyscrapers. The fishermen and women who sell the catch are now struggling. Increasing pollution in the sea, too many trawlers fishing the same area and the destruction of mangroves where the fish breed has hugely affected the fish population. The fishermen have to go further and further out to sea but this costs more in diesel for the boats, for what often turns out to be only a meagre catch.

The National Association of Fishermen said in a recent article that they have land adjacent to their homes and intend to develop this for commercial buildings, which they will then rent out. Using this income they plan to 'renovate' the seven main Koliwadadas and the other 40 smaller fishing areas. What is interesting is that despite the opportunities they have to develop in a myriad of ways, and despite struggling in their fishing trade, they still want to preserve their jobs and their way of life. This is perhaps not surprising when only one in five graduates from the Koliwadadas manages to go on to find other work. Still, living in the city for generations and buffeted by all its avatars, it is strange they want to continue as they are. Perhaps they have learnt something that the burgeoning and hungry city has not. That in the end these avatars may come and go, and with them their jobs, but what is important is to preserve a way of life.



Bombil Fish Drying on Bamboo at Madh Island

Many of the Kolis use small boats, only capable of going out to sea for a day. This is because the cost of diesel and the wages of the larger crew for trawlers are increasingly not compensated by dwindling catches. There are, however, over double the legal limit of trawlers operating, which further affects the amount of fish.



Edward Theatre

Built in the 18th century to stage plays Edward Theatre still has remnants of the sets, orchestra pit and box seats around the movie screen where they now show re-runs of old Hindi films. As a reminder of its former avatar the different ticket prices are 'the orchestra' Rs.28, the 'dress circle' Rs.24 and 'first class' Rs.18. Many of these independent cinemas are under threat though in Mumbai they may have more of a chance of survival, as it was the first city to create a Heritage Committee and then in 1995 pass regulations grading buildings.

Britannia & Co

On the sign outside the restaurant are the words THERE IS NO LOVE GREATER THAN THE LOVE OF EATING and next to it is a picture of a chicken. I asked Mr Boman Kohinoor why there was a chicken? He laughed and said, "Very good question. See my wife was an animal lover. People came to know around here that she likes animals. So one fine morning, a lady came with a small chick and told my wife, this chick has lost its mother. The mother had died so my wife took it and reared it. It would always perch and sit right on the counter. Absolutely motionless and you would come and ask is it a stuffed bird and I would touch it and it would push off and the foreigners especially would say 'oh my god this is a live bird' When my children were small, 7 or 8, they used to play with it. My elder son used to go and hide somewhere upstairs and tap the floor, this one [the chicken they called Robin] used to run helter skelter, where is he hiding, where is he hiding, and go and catch him. So this logo is because of Robin." I asked what happened to Robin and he said, "He lived about five years. In India we get people cremated, so we got it cremated. I went personally for the cremation."



GOA

In Goa we looked at the urban centres across a state rather than just concentrating on the capital Panaji. We did this because essentially the state's historically poor economic conditions meant that traditional urban trades were few and far between and so we had to look across the urban centres to find which professions had existed and which were still surviving.

Goa was a successful centre of trade with Arabia and the Far East before the Portuguese invaded in 1510. The Portuguese were then initially, ruthlessly, successful in their aim to rest control of the sea trade routes from the Sultan of Bijapur. However, unlike the other port cities of Kolkata and Mumbai, trade was virtually strangled in the 1700s by the Dutch and later the British. The Portuguese, however, continued to rule Goa until 1961 and over these two and a half centuries the state struggled economically with no major industries (until iron ore mining started in the 1950s). In this isolated position Goa remained largely an agrarian economy, with fishing and salt production along the coast.

During the heyday of the Portuguese trading success, many Goan villagers were attracted and encouraged to move into the towns. Documents of the time list the professions given licences to practise as barbers, goldsmiths, gem cutters, blacksmiths and tile manufacturers among others. The problem was that as the Portuguese fortunes declined, so did the need for these professions and so the Goans had two choices; either to return to their village, where these professions were often a side-line from agriculture, or to go abroad. They did both and so few of these professions were left in the urban centres.

This lack of local trades and skills was evident to us because in the myriad of shops, makeshift stalls and markets for tourists along the coast little is made in Goa. We did manage to find a few - the potter, Lea Rodriguez, traditional jewellers and the redoubtable Mrs Jaimala Bartake (though not a Goan herself) who was still producing shell craft at the age of 87. These examples were though scarce and in the shops along the beachside roads their products were rarely on sale. Many of these trades also have to survive only on local income and so the temptation for them, and the children of these struggling professions, is to move into the seemingly more lucrative tourist industry.

Even some of the fishermen and women we met, one of the few long standing employments in Goa, said their children did not want to follow them into the profession. This is understandable as they were struggling, as they are the world over, with the decline in catches and the competition from deep-sea trawlers. The problem for the future is that if their children rely solely on the tourist industry, and consequently these professions disappear, what will replace them is only a narrow market. Tourism only provides income for, optimistically, six months of the year but worryingly figures for visitors have been in steady decline even before the global downturn. It seems, unless more permanent alternatives are found, Goans will continue to be forced, as they have been for centuries, to go abroad for work.



The Potter, Duza Siguiera

Several members of the family work together in a small red laterite workshop producing hand pinched pots as well as thrown pots on what looked like a modified bullock-cart wheel. Duza Siguiera was producing pots to sell to those celebrating St Mary's feast. As he worked his niece, Lea Rodriguez, told me, "the market has become less as everyone is using plastic and stainless steel." She doesn't understand this as, "it is good for the health [to use terracotta to cook]," and then cupping her hands into an imaginary bowl and raising it to her lips she said, "and it is delicious to eat from them. No?"

Elmech, Sewing Machine Repair Shop

Mr Shivdasa Madhavihari sells and repairs sewing machines in his small shop in Mapusa market. He has been working there for forty-five years and says he is the last sewing machine repair place anywhere around here. He used to have two men working for him, but now the work has slowed down so much he had to let them go and it is just him. He has no children. This profession is under threat as garments are increasingly bought readymade.

