

Lisa Björkman (ed), *Bombay Brokers*, Durham: Duke University Press, 2021. ISBN: 978-1-4780-1149-1 (paper); ISBN: 978-1-4780-1053-1 (cloth)

Who are the people that keep a city like Mumbai going? A city that is characterised by immense socio-economic differences, infrastructural shortcomings and improvisations, abject poverty, world-class aspirations, surprising inventiveness and an at times striking mismatches between official protocols and actual practices on the ground. In a new edited volume, Lisa Björkman presents a deceptively simple answer to this question: Brokers. To fill this term with meaning, she has assembled an impressive tableau of 36 engaging ethnographic vignettes written by different authors that take the reader on a tour de force through various distinctive spaces and milieus of a bustling Indian megacity, including law courts, brothels, the film industry, slum neighbourhoods, middle-class housing colonies, municipal corporations, and emerging neighbourhoods on the city's outskirts. The book's scope even extends far beyond Mumbai's geographic boundaries to include various locations and actors that are drawn into the ambit of this fascinating metropolis through long-distance migration routes and flows of capital.

What needs to be stated at the outset is that the book's structure diverts quite drastically from that of an ordinary edited volume. The single contributions are organised into six parts that are tied together by a conceptual framework laid out by Björkman in the book's introduction and revisited in the conclusion by Lisa Mitchell. Each part features its own introductory piece that outlines the theme around which it is organised and explains how its contributions relate. This structure enables the single contributions to focus on detailed description of brokers, and to have a certain open-ended quality to them that might put off some readers at first. Without (necessarily) presenting distinct arguments, each contribution focuses on painting a vivid portrayal of a person who engages in distinct practices of brokerage in the city. The book therefore demands to be read as a whole. The single contributions cannot easily be extracted from the book but primarily serve to inform its overarching argument.

However, rather than constituting a shortcoming, this structure works as a strength of the book because it enables Björkman to present insightful theoretical arguments in the

expansive and well-structured introduction and illustrate the same by drawing on a kaleidoscope of rich ethnographic material contained in the individual contributions. She has done a fabulous job at drawing such a huge and heterogeneous collection of works together to form a cohesive and convincing narrative about the various manifestations of brokerage that take place in an extremely complex and diverse city such as Mumbai.

The book is arranged around four guiding questions. First, it asks what material-practical work hides behind the rather nebulous term “brokerage”, or *dalali* in Hindi. In the introduction, Björkman provides a sort of working definition of the term as *practices of mediating between differently framed objects and materials* (p.16). This definition is broad enough to encompass the vast array of empirical contexts covered by the single contributions, yet precise enough to allow for a set of incisive follow-up questions that guide the individual enquiries. Branching out from the particular to the more abstract, Björkman proceeds to ask what resources, skills and knowledges are required to do brokerage, what moral judgements are applied to particular forms of brokerage, and what role actions of brokerage play in the global present (p.3-4). The reader finds plenty of answers to these questions in the book’s contributions.

The first two thematic parts on “development” and “property” are closely connected and focus on people who provide the city’s residents with access to land, housing, services and resources, mostly related to highly contested processes of restructuring urban space. I found Yaffa Truelove’s piece on the ethical quandaries of self-proclaimed “social worker” Dr. K particularly interesting since it resonated strongly with my own work on housing activists in Mumbai (Holwitt 2020). Dr K’s radical distancing from a vaguely defined terrain of “politics”, his deployment of anti-corruption narratives and the way he connects his work to the campaigns of early Indian freedom fighters sounded very familiar to my ears. In this piece, Truelove effectively demonstrates the contradictions of applying moral judgements to different practices of brokerage, an important argument that runs through various contributions to the book. Other noteworthy contributions in these two sections are provided by Uday Chandra, Lalit Vachani, and Ratoola Kundu. Chandra presents an insightful analysis of Janu who introduces long-distance migrants from the states of Jharkhand and Bihar into their lives as construction workers in Mumbai by including them in fictive kinship structures

based on familiar idioms and behavioural codes. Vachani vividly portrays a middle-class activist who rallies against illegal building constructions and in this process has to navigate the slippery distinctions between licit and illicit claims to urban space. Kundu's piece about Mumbai's red-light district Kamathipura combines dense ethnographic description with an engaged critique of instances of erasure brought about by strives to make Mumbai a "world-class city". Her contribution is also especially well linked to several of the conceptual arguments laid out in the book's introduction.

The book's third part focuses on the theme of "business", and is one of its strongest. It zooms in on the book's theme of value and the contributions effectively illustrate one of the key arguments developed in the book, a critique of popular views that draw premature connections between cash payments and "corruption". In the book's introduction, Björkman argues that the true value of cash payments often exceeds their economic value and involves their capacity to create and maintain social relationships. A number of contributions in this section succeed in underscoring this point with detailed ethnographic accounts of brokerage practices that involve the exchange of money in many different contexts. For example, Daisy Deomampo succinctly illustrates the complex interlinkages between profit and care in the work of a surrogacy agent. Ken Kuroda's reflective piece about his interactions with *dabbawalla* Shankar makes the clash of different moral judgements about the meanings of cash exchanges its central topic, and Björkman's own portrayal of "business energizer" Ramji also sheds light on the manifold meanings of cash. These contributions present fascinating examples of cash's excessive quality and show that its many meanings cannot be properly captured by strictly economist readings.

Part 4 highlights the theme of "difference" and presents a reading of brokerage as mediation between multiple fragmented identities based on caste, ethnicity, religion, gender and language that inform notions of belonging in the city. This section reads as the most conventionally "anthropological" one of the book as it delves into the capacity of actors to create, navigate, mobilise and manage cultural differences. R. Swaminathan's contribution presents a highly original argument about *hijras*' ways of making themselves valuable to Mumbai's modernity by "dealing in shame". This well-written piece provides a lively illustration of the wide range of skills that practices of brokerage can involve and how they

allow people to carve out niches for themselves in an environment that is characterised by highly complicated and dynamic power relations. Furthermore, Maura Finkelstein's contribution deserves praise for ingeniously using brokerage practices around the preparation of street food to illustrate the intricate interplay of nativist ideologies and everyday cosmopolitanism, as well as puzzling combinations of localistic pride and global branding.

The book continues with a part on "publics". Here, cinema and electoral politics are the two major empirical contexts that are explored, and a convincing, though not entirely new argument is made about the many connections that run between these two realms in the city of Bollywood. Taking up the argument about the complexities of cash transactions presented earlier, a similar point about the shortcomings of popular complaints about "vote-bank politics" runs through the contributions in this part. Unfortunately, this part of the book is a bit repetitive and especially the contributions by Sarthak Bagchi and Simon Chauchard – though well-developed individually – are quite similar in content and arguments. Considering Björkman's own longstanding interest in the city's electoral politics (Björkman 2014), it makes sense to see this topic receive much attention in the book, but I would argue that this section would have benefited from some tighter editing.

Luckily, the final section on "truth" picks up the pace once more and presents a collection of fascinating and diverse case studies about the contentious relation between practices of uncovering and practices of hiding different truths. Featuring engaging contributions that explore the contradictions of moral policing (Srimati Basu), the impact of social media on communal politics in the city (Sahana Udupa), and the fault lines of knowledge production in the context of urban development (Prasad Shetty and Rupali Gupte; Amita Bhide), this part most explicitly engages with the book's questions regarding the relevance of brokerage practices in the global present. The contributions aptly capture Björkman's argument about the particular forms in which a "global interregnum" – a state in which a sovereign "retains coercive power but in the absence of any legitimizing authority" (p. 11) – manifests in a city like Mumbai. The brokers portrayed in this part produce different truths that often challenge or subvert established truths as they cannot be easily reined in once they are introduced to the world. This makes for a compelling analysis of the instability and

malleability of truths that not only applies to the case of Mumbai but deeply resonates with a more general contemporary global condition.

The editorial framework chosen by Björkman and its consequences are thought-provoking: What could have been other framing devices for a collection of texts of this sort, and what other perspectives and forms of knowledge would this have enabled? In a way, Björkman herself presents an answer to this question by making human actors the central framing device of her book, yet drawing on the work of Michel Callon that has argued for the decentring of humans as social actors. Some contributions would particularly lend themselves to a focus on “non-human brokers”: Truelove’s description of the work done by the stamps and business cards of Dr. K (p.122, 126) points in such a direction. Udupa writes about the capacity of smartphones and social media to cause riots in the city (p.381). Anjali Arondekar makes a similar point in her introduction to Part 4, where she states that the true protagonists of the contributions to this part (on “difference”) are non-human entities like the snack, *vada pav* (p.236), and the *Bambaiya* dialect (p. 239). One could think of several other non-human brokers in a city like Mumbai – for example, electric grids, mangrove forests, and water pipes – that bridge “material, institutional, legal, or informational gaps” (p.7). Considering these various hints that are already present in the book, an extension of the notion of the broker to non-humans does not even seem like a huge conceptual leap to take but more like a useful next step that would connect the arguments developed in the book to a growing body of works on “more-than-human cities” (Franklin 2017).

Björkman does well to situate her concept of brokerage within the broad scholarly literature on this topic (p.6). However, I found the lack of reference to the work of anthropologist Ian M. Cook surprising. In a 2015 article, Cook developed an argument very similar to the one presented by Björkman when he described practices of land brokers in Mangaluru as “link work” (Cook 2015). Like Björkman, he stresses the ability of brokers to act as mediators who capitalise on their ability to bridge gaps between different parties and thereby create value. With its focus on brokerage practices in the field of housing, the article also addresses a topic that is extensively covered in the book’s first two parts on “development” and “property”. Considering these striking similarities in concept and content,

as well as the authors' shared geographical focus on India, Cook's article reads almost like a spiritual precursor to Björkman's book, and therefore would have deserved a mention.

But this small complaint should not overshadow the fact that the book is a highly engaging read, as well as a rich and very valuable contribution to the literatures about Mumbai and the concept of brokerage. By highlighting the similarities of brokerage practices across the social spectrum, it formulates an eloquent critique of popular accusations of "corruption" and "vote buying" that more often than not obscure power relations and reproduce social inequalities. Moreover, it develops the figure of the broker into a useful conceptual tool to explain why theories derived from the study of Western cities and societies often do not match lived realities in postcolonial metropolises. In this sense, the book provides food for thought for debates about the specificity of Southern urbanisms (Robinson and Parnell 2011) and enriches our conceptual vocabulary for thinking about cities.

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