

Bombay, served

SEA, SALT & SPICE: A HISTORY OF MUMBAI THROUGH FOOD

By Meher Mirza,
HarperCollins, ₹999

— Bimbasthan, Bombaim, Mumbai — runs like an undercurrent.

The book, the author admits, grew out of oddly specific obsessions: does Mumbai's mango deserve the reputation? Were Parsis truly Prohibition's fiercest objectors? Did the British residents of Bombay call themselves Bombay ducks? More than scholarly queries, these are curiosities of someone who has spent years observing her own city. Mirza looks for not only the economic and cultural encounters that shaped Mumbai's palate — the "watery lattice" of spice routes, the exchanges between the New and the Old Worlds, the arrival of chillies, potatoes, sapota, the city's fascination with Bombaim mangoes and the city's initial abhorrence for South American tomatoes



— but also for Irani cafes, Goan bakeries, taverns, markets, and the "small print of life". In the process, Mirza nimbles through old newspapers, anecdotal accounts, recipes from textual records such as *Manasollasa*, fiction, colonial maps, engravings, paintings, advertisements, *bakhars* and even poetry

from the first-century treatise, *Gaha Sattasai*.

Some of the most engaging passages centre on individual foods. The bit on Bombay duck, for instance, leads to questions on nomenclature, commerce and colonial encounters. The history of *vada pav* runs alongside that of millworkers and the

working class; Chinese *dosa* and Manchurian chicken testify to the culinary improvisations of a city being continually remade by newcomers. The snippets of recipes of Bombay pudding, Mango cream, Herring Pie, and Guava chutney are as endearing.

Beneath these culinary cultures lie the harder boundaries of caste and class. Mirza shows how social hierarchies and entrenched casteism shaped what Mumbaikars ate — and with whom. Religion adds another layer to these negotiations. Mumbai's foodscape thus emerges as a record of collisions and accommodations: Hindus, Muslims, Parsis, Jesuits, Protestants and other communities jostling for space at dinner tables, street corners and the markets.

Mirza also leaves room for the city's less comforting histories — displacement, famine, plague, changing fortunes, the price rise movement and also inequalities, exclusions. *Sea, Salt & Spice* conjures a city that is porous, hungry and endlessly inventive.

Shaoli Pramanik

In *Midnight's Children*, Salman Rushdie summons Bombay through the sights, smells and the spoils of the sea: pomfret, crabmeat, the Kolis' fishing nets, coconuts, and rice. Food bears the history and the memory of a land as well as evidence of possession and dispossession. Meher Mirza approaches Maximum City's rendezvous with culinary cultures with the patience of a historian. The premise of *Sea, Salt & Spice* is simple: tracing the history of the "dog-eared city" through what was "cooked, preserved, traded and eaten". Mirza is candid about her methodology. She has not set out to write an exhaustive account of Mumbai's restaurants, or fishing and trading communities and their kitchens. Instead, she casts a "drifting glance" over different periods, tracing the evolution of trade hotspots such as Sopara, Thane and Vasai under the Satavahanas, Shilaharas and Portuguese rule before moving to the British era and, eventually, into post-Independence Mumbai. The thread of the city's changing name