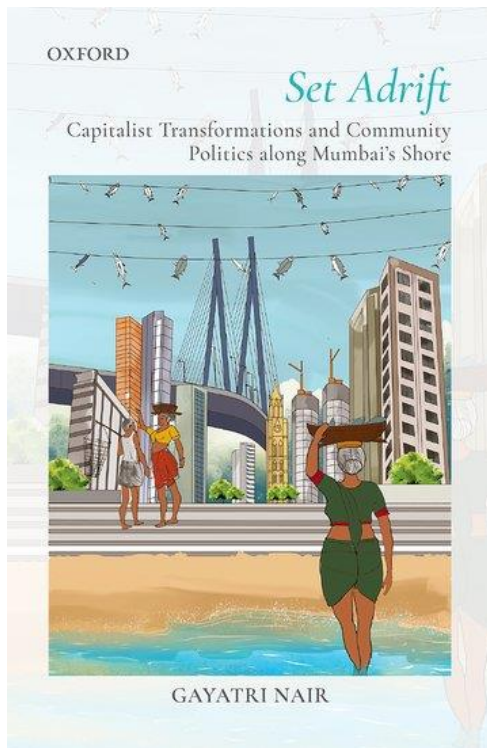


BOOK REVIEW

Tangled Web: Indigenous Rights and Spatial Politics in Mumbai

Chitra V*

Gayatri Nair. 2021. *Set Adrift: Capitalist Transformation and Community Politics along Mumbai's Shore*. New Delhi: Oxford University Press.



Set Adrift provides a detailed and comprehensive account of the interplay between caste, rights, and spatial politics in urban India. The book focuses on the political struggles of the Koli community, particularly those engaged in artisanal fishing, fish processing, and sales in Mumbai. It weaves a detailed account of their everyday struggles, from the pressures of changing fish markets and its impacts on Koli women and domestic economies to the charged politics of development projects and the changing demographics and practices that characterize the fishing industry. Tying these narratives together, the book addresses larger questions surrounding

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dispossession and access to the commons, urban transformation, and changing narratives of rights and belonging. Nair binds these macro and micro perspectives together through her nuanced understanding of community organizations, fisher cooperatives, and the political institutions central to the fisheries industry at the national and state levels. The central issue that runs through this book is the tension between the Koli community and the migrant workers who seek employment in the industry. Nair illustrates how the shift to capital-intensive fishing practices, ecological degradation, and land pressure necessitates the Koli community to fall back on nativist politics, pitting one marginalized group against the other.

Nair begins the book with a description of the Koli community and their role in Mumbai's history. As recorded in the 1901 Census, the Kolis are counted among the earliest inhabitants of the archipelago that later became the colonial port city of Bombay, and later still, the metropole of Mumbai. The Kolis comprise several different sub-castes; those in Mumbai are officially classified as “backward classes”. The Koli communities in the city largely reside in informal settlements and have long managed to stave off the threat of displacement by invoking this historical claim upon the city (Chhabria 2018). However, as Nair points out, this land pressure has only increased in recent years with the rapid development of suburbs and the lucrative real estate market. The effects of this capitalist accumulation, Nair writes, are also evident in the fisheries industry: the less-intense forms of fishing practised by artisanal fishers are fast becoming unviable. This stands in stark contrast to the general upward trend in the fisheries industry and the booming exports market, which are supported by investments from both the state and the private sector in intensive fishing practices such as trawler fishing and the use of purse-seine nets. The shifting landscape of the fisheries industry is further bolstered by the influx of cheap migrant labour, who engage in informal arrangements and predominantly perform taxing work for low wages. These shifts are key drivers in the Koli community's struggle to claim authority over the coast and the fish markets, a claim that hinges on their identity as original inhabitants of the city. This claim, Nair writes, is supported by regional political parties such as the Shiva Sena, an important political party in Maharashtra, which champion the cause of Maharashtrians over migrants from other states. The net result is that Kolis and the political organizations they belong to fall back on nativist politics. Rather than seeing migrant workers as allies in the struggle against extractive economies, Kolis cultivate hostilities against those they perceive as “outsiders”. The book charts the emergence and circulation of this problem within the complex set of relationships that connect the changing city, the politics of community and belonging, and the changing economic and ecological conditions of the coast.

The first half of the book explores the political economy of urban change and how it is shaped by historical, environmental, and spatial elements. Nair sets up one of the core concerns of the book as the need to understand the changing nature, uses of, and claims over the city's commons—in this case, the sea. Nair displays how, in Mumbai, the state has long promoted schemes that discharge surplus capital through redevelopment programmes targeting informal settlements. For instance, the Bombay Improvement Trust, which was set up after the plague outbreak in the early 20th century, allowed the colonial government to capture land and redistribute infrastructure. Redevelopment programmes continue this legacy, putting the residents of informal settlements at constant risk of eviction. As many of the city's Kolis live in informal settlements, they get caught in these cycles of accumulation and dispossession.

An important policy that affects the Kolis is the Coastal Regulatory Zone (CRZ) policy, which, in recent years, has opened up coastal land for real estate development. As Nair notes, despite the CRZ's goal to ensure ecological conservation, it largely fails in this regard as it does not consider the complex lineages of ownership and tenancies across the coast. Instead, it ends up introducing new pressures and further entrenching community divides. A consequence of the CRZ policy is the emergence of conflict between the Kolis and the migrants, which draws parallels in the fisheries industry. Nair highlights that the fisheries sector has undergone rapid expansion, driven by investments in extractive practices and technologies. Until recent times, fishing was largely a caste-based occupation, but the rapid rise of the export market has changed the makeup of the industry. These parallel tensions shed light on the Koli community's political articulations and the linkages between organizations such as the National Fishworkers Forum (NFF), the Maharashtra Macchimar Kruti Samiti (MMKS), the Shiva Sena, and the Maharashtra Navnirman Sena (MNS). The Shiva Sena has long been hostile towards working-class migrants. The Koli community adopts this hostility; and while they employ migrants as informal labour, they often block them from entering their organizations. Belonging, Nair notes, becomes the basis for demanding exclusive rights over fishing and fish markets.

In the second chapter, Nair expands on the impact of policy and urban change on the coastal commons. Drawing on scholars such as Ajantha Subramanian (2009) and Kalpana Ram (1991), Nair displays how India's fishery policies have systematically neglected building cooperatives in favour of high revenue streams such as shrimp exports and trawler fishing. This development attracted private capital to the sector, creating a large economic gap between trawlers and artisanal fishers. Trawler fishing offers certainty of yield, which makes it an attractive proposition for private investors, an

advantage the Kolis are unable to compete with. Nair argues that the demand for exclusive rights over coastal waters is an outcome of these policy directives.

The book's second half explores Nair's fieldwork, household surveys, and interviews, building a detailed picture of the changing community and its political networks. Nair shows how organizations such as cooperatives regulate fishing activity and support the community, but they also end up gatekeeping by denying membership to non-Kolis. An important shift in the fisheries business is the decline of the "owner-worker" category, though this still forms an important aspect of the Koli man's identity. Previously, most fishers owned and worked on their own boats. However, this has transitioned to a system wherein owners employ other individuals to work on their vessels, especially in cases where technologies like trawling and purse-seine netting are employed. Despite their adverse impacts on coastal ecologies and catch, there remains enduring support for these practices.

In the fourth and fifth chapters, the book explores the consequences of these changes for Koli women, examining their inclusion in workers' collectives as well as their own politics and political organizations. Within the Koli community, women are largely restricted to fish processing and selling. This sex-based division of labour, coupled with a lack of state aid and a dearth of opportunities for economic mobility, has had a negative impact on fisherwomen. Nair illustrates how this, in turn, precipitates xenophobia and hostility towards migrant workers who enter the fish market. Traditionally, fish markets provided Koli women with greater mobility and access to the city, fostering relationships with the market across generations. As the quantum of catch and its export increased over time, the scale of the fishing industry changed and opened up to global markets. It also significantly changed the way local fish markets functioned and the income generated from auctions and sales. Women who lacked the capital to trade in the wholesale market found themselves losing out to wholesale dealers who could move large quantities of catch. Fish processing has also become attractive to migrant women who toil under demanding conditions for low wages. Nair's extensive surveys on education levels show that, despite these negative impacts, Koli women often find themselves unable to move out of the fishing industry due to their lack of education. As Nair demonstrates through her analysis of education levels over different cohorts, this is set to change. Younger women are increasingly pursuing higher education and staying in school, indicating a potential shift in the pattern. However, this change will take time, and the current lack of mobility is the primary reason why Koli women fight for community-based rights to the market.

The book concludes with Nair's observation that so long as access to coastal resources, development potential, and livelihoods are tied up with identity, it will continue to drive a wedge between communities. The task at hand then is to build solidarities between marginalized communities through a nuanced understanding of the complex webs that bind them together.

Set Adrift will be a good addition to undergraduate and graduate syllabi on gender and the city, class struggles and urban labour, as well as urban transformation, policy, and theory. In classes on urbanism, it will be particularly useful to combine one of the theoretical chapters from the first half of the book with a more empirical chapter from the second half of the book. I also think this will be a good book for classes on research methods, particularly to demonstrate how to deploy surveys and combine survey data with interviews.

Conflict of Interest Statement: No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author.