# "THE TASTE NO CHEF CAN GIVE": Processing Street Food in Mumbai

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Photographers wound through booths draped in white linen, while men in orange shirts lifted crispy spheres out of sizzling oil. On a dry November evening in 2008, an elaborate festival celebrating the *vada pav*—Mumbai's quintessential street food—belied the food's humble constitution of a chickpea-battered, deep-fried, spicy mashed potato patty (the *vada*), tucked into a slightly sweet soft bread roll (the *pav*). The evening festival, called the *vada pav sammelan* (vada pav convention), was sponsored by the Shiv Sena, a regional political movement that promotes the rights of Hindu Marathi-speaking people born in the state of Maharashtra, whose capital is Mumbai. Since its founding in 1966, the Shiv Sena has isolated the *Marathi manoos* (native-born Maharashtrian) as the focus of its politics. The party works through a variety of performative political acts, including violence against "outsiders" ranging from Tamils living in the city to migrants from the northern states of Bihar and Uttar Pradesh. The festival took place in Shivaji Park, a symbolic center of the party's power in the city.

As an influential bloc in Mumbai's municipal government, the Shiv Sena consistently lobbies for "reservations" (reserved job vacancies) for the Marathi manoos. In 2008, the party took the vada pav into its own hands as a potential street-side job creation project in light of disappointing progress toward this end. The Shiv Sena teamed up with Coke and McDonald's and announced the Shiv vada pav. However, the Shiv Sena was not alone in this intensified focus on the

food. A company named Maza had begun to sell branded vada pav in McDonald's-like outlets, claiming that street food was dangerously unhygienic and that mass-produced, uniform versions of it would be cleaner and safer. Both remade versions of the vada pav attempted to isolate the street and to amplify and dampen its desired or decried qualities. Both versions grappled with the transformative relations between the food and Mumbai's streets. Casting these efforts as *food processing*, this article asks: How does food become street food? And accordingly, how do food politics relate to urban politics?

One approach to these questions is to engage food as an element of the city's streets, with *street* as a locative descriptor. This suggests that food is just one of many infrastructures that make up a city, like water or housing, which ethnographers of Mumbai and other urban settings have generatively detailed as constitutive of urban politics (Anand 2011; Anand and Rademacher 2011; Björkman 2014; de Boeck 2011; Prakash 2010; Varma 2004). In a frame of location, the relation between food and urban politics is based on the idea that food is a material located in city streets. However, the street in this framing remains just the scenery—an empty container inside which food is placed for sale and consumption. By contrast, I argue that *food* becomes *street food* not only out of a politics of location but also out of a politics of processing. Studying the processing of the vada pav illuminates how the differences in transforming what comprises food produces differences in how food politics comprises urban politics.

When food is processed into the emblem of a political party, or into a hygienic mass-produced form, what has been changed? What precisely has been processed? *Food processing* calls forth an apparatus of industry focused on changing discernible ingredients and distilling contaminants from a pure product. Processing also can be understood as a mode of value transformation, as raw elements become food through craft and industrial food sciences (Paxson 2012; Paxson and Helmreich 2014; Weiss 2012). I define processing in this light: it is a transformation that imparts value. Differences in possible transformations allow for guesses about how one thing transforms into another. The particular relationship of the vada pav to the street shapes what kind of guesswork is necessary to understand processing's political and social effects. The street marks efforts to transform the vada pav, and, accordingly, ideologies and acts of processing must move beyond a focus on location to accommodate how the street generates possibilities for urban life.

Figure 1. Vada pav. Photo by flickr user Deepatheawesome.

### PROCESSING AN URBAN PATTERN

If the street is both the substance and site of food processing, as I argue here, then it cannot only be understood as a location for food's consumption. Such a framing often occurs in food studies, where location is a backdrop for eating, or a "consuming geography" (Bell and Valentine 1997). This framework is suggestive, but it risks producing stories with predictable arrangements of eating and place. As Brad Weiss (2011, 443) notes, anthropological studies of food must reckon with "the force of the politics of space entailed in appeals to locality." Locality is made, not given. Scaling the local of food to the local of city politics must also be recognized as a process that is speculative and does not always concern eating. Several ethnographies of food offer insights to further this aim. They show complex and lively resonances between food and space (Farquhar 2002, 2009; Janeja 2010; Paxson 2010, 2012; Ries 2009; Sutton 2010; Weiss 2011, 2012). These studies explain what qualities situate food appropriately in place (Douglas 1991), but importantly, also what sensory-spatial qualities define the place of food. Claims to locality also anchor a rich body of research on food and substance in South Asian studies, which deem food exchange central to everyday life in terms of identity and geography (Alter 2000a, 2000b; Appadurai 1981, 1988; Baviskar 2012; Conlon 1995; Khare 1992; Marriott 1968; Mukho-

padhyay 2004; Iversen and Raghavendra 2006; Roy 2010; Srinivas 2007; Nandy 2004; Osella 2008). However, studies of street food tend to cast the street as the bit part, with food as the charismatic lead. This approach leaves the street's transformative potential underexamined. By approaching the street from the vantage point of food processing, I bring urban ethnography into conversation with scholarship concerned with the material-semiotic changeability of food (Alter 2000b; Atkins 2010; DuPuis 2002; Janeja 2010; Meneley 2008; Tracy 2010). This analytical move reveals different combinatorial possibilities between street and food—combinations that involve but also transcend parameters of location.

The "force of the politics of space" is a concern shared by studies of the Shiv Sena's comprehensive reach of power in Mumbai across local and regional articulations of Hindu nationalism, gender, and urban consumerism, both before and after India's economic liberalization (Appadurai 2000; Bedi 2007; Hansen 1999, 2002; Katzenstein 1979; Masselos 2007; Mazzarella 2003; Prakash 2010; Rajagopal 2001a, 2001b; Sen 2007). For such scholars, the street constitutes a central ground for claims to space (Anjaria 2006; McFarlane 2011). The decline of Mumbai's textile mills has proven integral to the party's power dynamics, and mill owners, union leaders, and workers have had tangled relations with the Shiv Sena (Finkelstein forthcoming). Malls and movie theaters have replaced many of the mills, providing ample sites to examine the dynamics of investment capital and consumer desire for India's new middle classes (Fernandes 2006; Lukose 2009; Rajagopal 2001a; Sundaram 2010).[1] These dynamics implicate the street's more and less viable arrangements with persons and things. For instance, street-hawking regulations and local policing converge with middle-class efforts to rid the streets of entities deemed foreign and a nuisance (Anjaria 2009, 2011; Benjamin 2008; Phadke, Khan, and Ranade 2011; Shah 2014). Collectively, these studies narrate the Shiv Sena's physical and ideological claiming of streets through neighborhood-level events and agitations. They show the efforts of the Shiv Sena to isolate specific qualities of the street in order to stabilize it enough to launch schemes like the Shiv vada pav. I add to this work an analysis of processing, which necessarily bridges materiality with events and experience. From this perspective, the symmetries between "the food in Mumbai" and "the Mumbai in food" are not given. Rather, their differences materialize through efforts to transform the boundary potentials of food and street. These efforts at processing can inform analyses of how materials and locations rearrange each other, and focus attention on differences between rearrangements.

My thinking about processing draws on the work of Gregory Bateson (2000, 413), who considers a process to be a pattern, something that is "an aggregate of events or objects which will permit in some degree such guesses when the entire aggregate is not available for inspection." Bateson wrote at length about evolution and enculturation, and he often used banal examples such as trees or packs of cigarettes. He considered these objects as a *process* rather than an *effect* of culture. Processes are always changing and generate the unexpected ("stochastic," in his terms). "We have been trained to think of patterns," Bateson (1979, 13) writes, "with the exception of those of music, as fixed affairs. It is easier and lazier that way but, of course, all nonsense. In truth, the right way to begin to think about the pattern which connects is to think of it as *primarily* (whatever that means) a dance of interacting parts."[2] Isolating one element from this dance is difficult if not impossible; the conceit that one could do so runs contrary to the premise of an interactive pattern.

At the junction of politics and food, then, it makes more sense to speak of ingredients as interactive patterns: an aggregate of events and objects. Patterns generate the unexpected via their combinatory potential. In my analysis of the vada pav, I examine investments in changing that potential, and do so in terms of processing. If for Bateson process entails pattern, my analysis of processing explores the ideas, actions, and consequences of tinkering with patterns, because the Shiv Sena and Maza focus intently on isolating, exaggerating, and even deleting certain parts of the vada pav's pattern. What is a recipe, after all, if not a pattern?

This article is based on eighteen months of ethnographic field research in Mumbai broadly concerned with relations between food, the body, and the city. The article's sections each reflect a site of research on the vada pav.[3] The first section describes the genealogies of the vada pav and its entanglements with city streets. The second returns to the sammelan to explore the development of the Shiv vada pav. The third section describes how vendors situate the vada pav as a means of livelihood amid violence and competition. The fourth part discusses how Maza marketed "the taste of risk" to give the vada pav the aura of chaotic, microbe-laden street life, with city politics and health risks both neutralized by a shell of global fast-food aesthetics. Each section illustrates the possibilities and limits of processing, and the porous milieu of food and street entailed therein.

THE SCENT OF THE SOIL

Although the Shiv vada pav convention made the food seem like a natural member of the Shiv Sena family, both published and oral histories of the food point to a more complex ancestry. Vikram Doctor, one of India's most influential food writers, traces the origins of the pav (the bun) to either the Portuguese who first settled the islands of Bombay, or perhaps later to Goan and Irani immigrants who opened Bombay's first bakeries. Doctor explains that the vada (the potato ball) most likely comes from Maharashtra, and notes that potatoes themselves are of British origin dating back to the nineteenth century. Over time, potatoes spread to the city, and "sliced thin or mashed they were dipped in chickpea batter and deep fried as a snack" and then served in a bun (Doctor 2008, n.d.). Doctor also echoed a popular story: "the real inspiration" of joining potato and bread came from a street vendor named Ashok Vaidya, who lived in central Mumbai in the 1960s. Shiv Sena officials took note of Vaidya's popular snack, and encouraged party members to set up vada pav stalls around local party outposts (*shakhas*).

A city-beat journalist, Dhruv, anchored the origin point of the vada pav in earlier events that linked potatoes to Partition. During Partition, he explained, large numbers of Hindus from Sindh Province in Pakistan were relocated to a temporary settlement a few hours from Bombay. The settlement became Ulhasnagar, now also known as Sindhunagar, because so many Sindhis remained in the ensuing years. Sindhi rail commuters bound for the city often carried spiced potatoes and bread, staples back in Sindh. Vada pav was born out of the contradictory needs of these commuting refugees: the need for a mobile snack composed of a comforting, if crumbly, staple. Crumbling spiced potato balls would often fall from the bread. A clever vendor began to batter and fry the balls. With improved structural integrity, commuters could enjoy a mobile potato snack without worrying about a stained kurta. "You can still get a vada pav without the batter in Ulhasnagar, even today," Dhruv told me. Once this battered potato ball sandwich took up residence in Mumbai, the city's diverse residents changed it over and over again with different chutneys, spices, and chilies, especially with the Maharashtrian staples of garlic, peanut, and chili. "That food has the scent of the soil in it" [*Khane mein mitti ki khushbu hai*], he said. "A taste of the people it comes from." In narrating the food's history, Dhruv distilled the soil of Maharashtra from the pattern of the food.

Although different at the outset, Dhruv's and Doctor's histories converged at a moment of intensified power of the Shiv Sena. When the city's textile mills closed in the 1980s and people needed income, they sold vada pav outside the

mills. According to Dhruv, because the remaining mill workers would pass their former colleagues on the streets selling vada pav, to buy it from them meant, "Here is my brother, laid off, and I will support him"—an effort of unity in times of aloneness. The Shiv Sena stepped in and offered unlicensed hawkers protection from city officials and police, for a price. It began as a few rupees each day, but over time would indebt street vendors to the Shiv Sena in amounts of hundreds or even thousands of rupees a week. Protection (*sanrakshan*) could bring a street cart or a business under the watchful eye of the local shakha. The shakha would monitor any potential vandalism and forestall official fines during raids by the local police, further solidifying everyday patterns of how persons in India get by in between the virtues and vices of policing (Jauregui 2014). It was this milieu that gave birth to the Shiv Sena's own origin story of the vada pav: the authentic snack that sustained workers in times of labor trouble.

On several occasions, food has exemplified the iconographies essential to the Shiv Sena's public performances (Bedi 2007, 1535). A friend explained to me that in the 1960s, some Shiv Sena protest signs read "Idli dosa bagao" [Stop *idli* and *dosa*], referencing the two iconic snack foods of Tamil Nadu, as Senaiks attacked South Indian Udipi restaurants because the party founder, Bal Thackeray, accused South Indians of taking jobs that "rightly" belonged to the Marathi manoos. Later, in the 1990s, the Shiv Sena created an employment scheme based around *zhunka bhakar*, a rural Maharashtrian porridge-and-bread dish. That effort has largely been understood as a failure in terms of popularizing the food, with many zhunka bhakar outlets in the city now serving Chinese food instead (as an employment scheme, however, it was moderately successful). These complex histories of the vada pav and its culinary forebears illustrate how neither the vada pav nor its political valences were simple matters of food and street.[4] As the next section details, with the advent of the Shiv vada pav, the party would protect its own not only through claims to historical originality but also through the purity of the processed street itself.

### SPELLING OUT THE INGREDIENTS

At the Shiv vada pav sammelan, both potatoes and carts took center stage. The son of the Shiv Sena's leader, Uddhav Thackeray, invited twenty-seven of the city's vendors to the sammelan at Shivaji Park to fry up thousands of free vada pav, advertised the event widely, and garnered extensive media coverage.[5] The winning recipe would become the official one of the Shiv vada pav. The Shiv vada pav would be the bellwether of taste and hygiene, prepared in gleaming,

sanitized stainless steel food stalls by hundreds of Shiv Sena–employed vendors. The publicity team hyped this party-line brand using the narrative of the vada pav as the food that had nourished party members during violent protests in the 1960s and energized Shiv Sena constituents during harsh economic times. But they also recruited the pinnacles of food processing to attest to the food's purity. The team invited marketers from McDonald's and Coca-Cola to lend slick consumer appeal to their logo and food-cart design, an interesting development since the Shiv Sena had famously protested McDonald's in 2001 over allegations that the company was using beef extract in its French fries (*The Hindu* 2001).



**Figure 2. Shiv vada pav publicity. Photo by Harris Solomon.**

Inside the sammelan's billowing cloth walls, vendors struggled to balance the forces of standardization and conformity with their own diverse recipes and preparations. Booths lined the perimeter of the grounds, each representing a different vada pav vendor. I started from the corner booth, and moved down the line eating three vada pav in quick succession: one tasted stale, another fresh and crunchy, and a third, my favorite and the eventual winner, exuded a citrusy sweetness. Each booth was uniquely decorated; one especially creative vendor spelled out "Shiv vada pav" in Devanagari script using green chilies, and "Chav

Maharashtracha!" (Taste Maharashtra!—a key Shiv Sena slogan) using garlic cloves. The ingredients spelled out the patterned political commitments at hand.
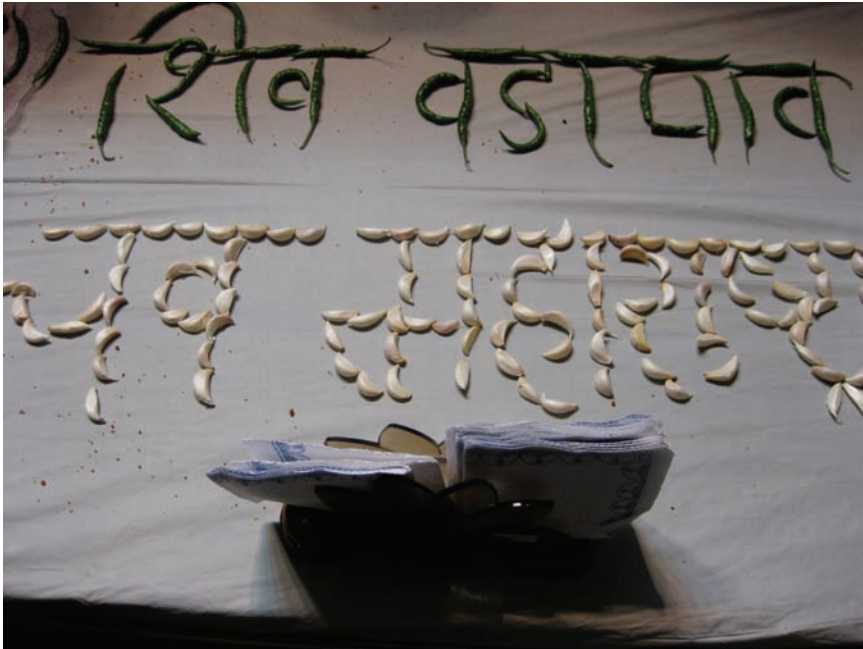


Figure 3. Chilies and garlic. Photo by Harris Solomon.

A sudden boom of fireworks reverberated through the space. Hindustani musicians began a concert on the stage at the front of the festival grounds. Amid chants of "Jai vada pav!" speeches commenced and guests of honor took the stage: senior executives from McDonald's, Coca-Cola, and Uddhav Thackeray himself. The program's emcee asked the McDonald's and Coke execs to stand, and un-veiled the official Shiv vada pav cart in gleaming stainless steel. Behind the cart, McDonald's and Coke logos interspersed larger-than-life photos of Uddhav and his father, the party founder Bal Thackeray. Two speeches wrapped up the event. Mumbai's mayor, Dr. Shubha Raul, extolled the vada pav as the city's cultural treasure whose added benefit came in the form of its nutritious mix of vitamins and carbohydrates. Next, Uddhav Thackeray explained that India's regions are best characterized by their food, and that the Shiv vada pav would do that work for Mumbai and for the people of Maharashtra. Fireworks exploded, and above the stage a giant sign made of sparklers reading "vada pav!" in Marathi burst into flames, officially concluding the event. The spectacle illustrated the Shiv Sena's

tactics of corporatism, taking the party beyond mere communal politics and ru-dimentary violence (Eckert 2004). The stainless steel cart mattered here as the site of craft and technology that would ensure predictable profits. It removed the street's microbes and enforced hygiene, connected transnational agribusinesses to the Shiv Sena's employment scheme, and mixed biomedical health, transnational capital, and urban purity into one tasty mouthful.



Figure 4. Shiv Vada Pav cart unveiled. Photo by Harris Solomon.

The aftermath of the sammelan proved rocky. During the following year, the Shiv Sena fought battles with the municipal government, which decreed that vada pav carts would violate street hawking regulations (Desai 2009a, 2009b). City news columns mocked the scheme as just another Shiv Sena publicity tactic. The opposition Congress Party announced plans for the "Congress *poha*," a tra-ditional spicy snack made from beaten rice flakes (Desai 2009c). Others followed suit: the leader of the Republican Party of India (Athavale), Ramdas Athavale, said that if the Shiv Sena would have Shiv vada pav, his party would have Bhim vada pav to honor the Dalit intellectual and political leader Dr. Bhimrao Ambed-kar (UNI 2009). A son of a state minister began his own Chhatrapati vada pav outlets to compete with the Shiv Sena's Shiv vada pav (Anandan 2011).

I asked a Shiv Sena official, Sanjay, about the alliance with fast-food companies.[6] He dismissed my question with a wave of the hand and a laugh: "The vada pav is not fast food! It's got *mirchi* [green chili], *haldi* [turmeric], and *kothimbir* [coriander]—it's healthy food!" My intention in asking the question was to learn more about corporatization, but like the vendors in the booths at the sammelan, Sanjay spelled out the ingredients for me. That which sustained the Marathi manoos, even when processed, could hardly be unhealthy. And indeed, the Shiv Sena *did* link up with fast-food companies—a linkage between Hindu nationalism and corporate consumerism that scholars have pointed out as characteristic of the party's work (Appadurai 2000; Rajagopal 2001b). Yet these links still had to reckon with the street in the vada pav's recipe. As Sanjay suggested, its potential for health may have emerged from processing raw ingredients in hot oil in the name of urban hygiene (Chakrabarty 1991; Kaviraj 1997; McFarlane 2008). But the Shiv vada pav scheme would eventually place its winner back onto Mumbai's streets. Even poststerilization, the street would again be amplified in the food. The stainless steel cart might attest to global iconicity even as it announced the vernacular (Ghosh 2011), but no matter how hygienic and how global, the cart would be nothing without the streets of the Marathi manoos.

### "THE TIGER STILL ROARS"

I wondered how stall owners themselves expressed a relationship between their own vada pav and the demand to transform the food. If the Shiv Sena aimed to protect the Marathi manoos through the Shiv vada pav, how—if at all—did the sellers themselves engage these aims? The Shiv vada pav promised them a spot of entrepreneurial ascendance on the Mumbai streetscape by participating in a project of processing; all they needed to do was follow the party's calculation. What happened when stability and speculation converged? For one seller I met, the problems of isolation and processing materialized as he sold his own family's classic recipe.

A friend had mentioned to me that an elementary school classmate, Mahesh, had taken over his father's long-standing vada pav cart. We linked up over the phone; Mahesh told me that he would be happy to tell the family's story. His father, Alok, had some health problems that might make communication difficult, he said, but I would see for myself that these challenges did not stop his father from assuming his post behind the vada pav cart, as he had done for forty years. On the first of my visits, Mahesh picked me up on his motorbike at the Shiv Sena headquarters and angled through alleyways to his home, a low building in the

heart of the neighborhood of Dadar. His father sat on the couch in the living room, but stood up to shake my hand before leaving the room, passing three enormous trays of potato *vadas* that circled the television. As Alok walked outside to check on the cart, Mahesh rummaged through a cabinet and brought out laminated newspaper articles about Alok and the vada pav cart to help narrate their linked history.

Mahesh started helping his father sell vada pav when he was eight years old. Being the son of a street vendor meant taunts and mockery in the schoolyard, but Mahesh had persevered and, after completing his bachelor's degree, eventually followed his father into the family business. He discussed his plans to open his own Shiv vada pav stall. His move toward selling Shiv vada pav was a relatively recent one, even though his family had been longtime supporters of the Shiv Sena. A few men from the Shiv Sena's higher ranks contacted him and asked if he wanted to help lead the effort to popularize Shiv vada pav. He agreed to serve as a vice president of the initiative and helped organize the sammelan by sorting through thousands of applications from vendors hoping to make it to the final cut of twenty-seven who would compete.

Yet Mahesh harbored doubts about the party's scheme. He was not opposed to changes. If he opened his own stall, the Shiv vada pav was certainly the likely product. Mahesh was thus not wedded to his father's precise recipe, the same one that fed his family's livelihood. Nonetheless, Mahesh had his own idea about what differences made a difference. He thought it made more sense to sell the masala, or spice mix, instead of commodifying the Shiv vada pav itself. "That way," he said, "housewives could make it at home, and because the masala stays fresh for a long time, it will turn a fast profit." He led me back into the kitchen and opened a stone urn underneath the stove. It was filled with a green-yellow masala paste, the centerpiece of the family's vada pav recipe. The organizers had nixed the idea of selling a spice paste. These ingredients were indeed crucial, but they were not the ingredients of success. Mahesh explained that the Shiv Sena wanted to train people to make the food and sell it on the street. This came with risks: "The minute that person leaves the job, someone else has to be trained. If they had chosen to market the masala packet, it could have netted more profit." For the Shiv Sena, vada pav carts furthered their claims over the street, but for Mahesh, the movement of workers in and out of that street undercut the plan. Mahesh saw the masala packet—the raw ingredients of the vada pav, ready to go—as the best way to make the food. Upholding the street as central was shaky business. By contrast, he felt he had the solution to the problem of guessing the

correct kind of processing. But his masala packet was a venture that intended to bypass the street, and thus proved untenable for the Shiv Sena.

Mahesh deftly navigated the conflicting positions that resulted: son of a longtime party supporter; chosen VP of the new Shiv vada pav initiative; detractor from the details of that initiative and from the wishes of party leaders; and engineer of a potential vada pav of his own design. Amid these differing investments, his daily routine still included helping with his father's vending practice. In the early afternoon, we went outside to help Alok push the cart down the street toward the main road. We paused at a collection of small hutments across from the nearest Shiv Sena shakha, where, in a rented, closet-sized room crowded with a fuel tank and black cauldron, Alok's longtime assistant fried the vadas. We continued to push the cart to the main road until we reached the corner. Mahesh hung signs on either side of it: bright orange, with the Shiv Sena name and its official logo of a snarling tiger. It was Alok's original cart from 1968, with a few tune-ups. "The tiger still roars," Mahesh said cheekily, anchoring the vada pav as the transmitter of occupations delineated through kin.



**Figure 5. Alok's cart. Photo by Harris Solomon.**

Alok readied the cart with shaky hands. He unlocked the moneybox, made of weathered wood and covered in gold and red swastikas. He straightened his orange hat that had the Shivaji bow and arrow embossed on it. The cart's preparation surface was carefully organized: a pile of newspaper squares for to-go orders; a small *katora* (bowl) for string to wrap the newspaper packets; larger bowls for the wet green chutney and the dry red chili chutney; and a tray for the pav, which Alok pulled from a burlap bag and stacked neatly. He silently motioned for me to touch them, grabbing my hand by the knuckles to nudge it into a pav: still warm. The cart officially opened at 3 p.m., marked by the arrival of Alok's assistant who walked the half-block length with the first batch of vadas. There was already a short line of people waiting. Alok prepared the vada pav, gave it to the first man in line, and blessed the money he received in a ritual that consecrated the day's first business.

I stayed with Alok as Mahesh ran back and forth between the cart and the house to ensure a smooth flow of supplies for the onslaught of customers. School-girls begged Alok to rush their order in the seconds before their bus arrived (they need not have worried, because on its arrival, the driver himself bounded out of the bus, cut the line, and called out, "*Jaldi jaldi ek dena!*" (Give me one quickly!). Several people were on their way either to or from the nearby Hindu Siddhivi-nayak Temple. Men and women, across classes, faiths, and age groups clustered around the cart. "You feed everyone," Mahesh said, and this seemed to be the case, as some pavement-dwellers also approached the cart with coins in hand. Mahesh pointed out the corner's geography of street food: "There's a guy selling *sev puri* there, across the street. Down the block, there are sandwich guys . . . they're *bhaiyyas* [north Indians], and to some extent it's affected my business, but I let it go." If people wanted a sandwich or sev puri, and the money went to the *bhaiyyas*, so be it—"it's their money," Mahesh said. On this busy street, even in the face of competition, there would always be someone lining up for vada pav.

A few hours later, Mahesh led me across the street to visit the pav bakery. Around the corner from one of the city's better-known sugarcane juice stalls, a wooden half door led to the small main office of the bakery and, past it, to a structure with two glowing rectangular ovens cut into the back wall. It was a warm day outside, but inside the room, crowded with fifteen young men, the heat seemed positively searing. We helped a few of the men pack the fresh pav in sacks, and then carried the bags back down the alley, across traffic, and down the block to Alok's cart. Mahesh remained silent as we walked, but then he began talking about the 1992 Bombay riots that pitted Hindus and Muslims against each

other: "I saw horrible things. A man lit on fire in front of the train station, at 10 a.m. in broad daylight. Street kids that took knives and were stabbing people. Horrible, horrible things. It was a dark spot on the city. But Dad was out there with the cart, after the curfew ended. No one had food, and so people lined up for vada pav." Surely the tiger roared on the cart, but it struck me during exchanges like this that the roar also permeated the street and isolated it as a critical technique of survival. Mumbai's cosmopolitanism might seem self-evident on any given day at Alok's stall, surrounded as it was by vendors from different areas of India selling other regional specialty foods. Yet time had not erased memories of the brutal violence on his street corner or the close connections of family to street food. In times of violence, which meant singling out that which did not belong, "no one" had food, according to Mahesh—no one except those like his father who could feed the street to others. Processing worked even in exceptional times, and in these moments the vada pav offered stability when life's basics were up in the air.

Two years after this conversation, I returned to the corner where Alok kept his cart. Mahesh was there, doling out vada pav during the afternoon rush hour. He never started his own Shiv vada pav cart after all. He had gotten married, and was starting a catering business. Alok had fallen quite ill, and Mahesh needed extra money to pay the hospital bills. "Business is stable, but everyone's struggling," he said. "Thankfully, Dad built up the business for so long, so everyone knows him and comes here." His father had fed the city during one of its darkest hours, and everyone knew that. For Mahesh, making and selling his father's vada pav offered a combinatory technique ready at hand. Tinkering with its pattern would be a risky move. Alok's time-tested version turned the street into life and money, an arranged process that unfolded one sale at a time.

### THE TASTE NO CHEF CAN GIVE

When Mahesh had described his own soon-to-open (but ultimately never-opened) Shiv vada pav stall, I asked if he worried about the number of small corporations that had branded their own versions of the food. He scoffed: "They have an expiry date! I want fresh food, not food with preservatives." "Those" vada pav were anonymously sourced, pre-frozen, and laden with preservatives. Another Shiv vada pav seller I had interviewed, Nitin, who like Mahesh came from a family of vada pav vendors stretching back decades, had expressed the same sentiment. "That's not the way," Nitin had said of corporatized versions. "Freezing them, having expiration dates . . . it needs to be fresh, and homemade. The taste

changes when you keep it on the shelf." No corporation could fabricate a pattern in which the street was at the crux of change.

Corporate brands of vada pav have become an increasingly regular sight in Mumbai's train stations, malls, and on the streets in the past five years. By appealing to fears about poor hygiene historically and presently attributed to the city's streets, the companies that produced them did include streets in their recipe, but in a version sanitized via a standardized taste. Like the Shiv vada pav, these products extolled standardization; but unlike the Shiv vada pav or the regular versions of the food, they were offered in stalls off the street, not in carts. Fans of vada pav could enjoy eating the city while avoiding the health threats that lurked in its corners. Corporate versions of vada pav needed the street. Its isolation was crucial for processing the final product. The endgame, however, aimed to remove the street entirely after its isolation—a tactic that ran up against unanticipated friction.

One day in my neighborhood I noticed that my locksmith had an outside wall of his store painted with an advertisement for a new vada pav brand called Maza, with the tagline "Vada pav No. 1." I began asking friends and neighbors about their thoughts on the matter, and, thanks to a neighbor's connections, a few weeks later I walked into Maza's head office through a bright red door at the back of a sprawling suburban industrial complex. Parth, the marketing director, ushered me into a conference room. In mass-producing street food, he explained, Maza sold "the essence of Mumbai," which the vada pav exemplified. "The first thing visitors to Bombay want to do is see the Gateway [of India] and to eat vada pav," he explained. Food and the city made for an immersive itinerary. The head of operations, Mr. Anand, soon joined us in the room with an "original" Maza vada pav for me to try. It was unusually sweet, thanks to chutney rich with dates and *gur* (jaggery). Mr. Anand laundry-listed some common ingredients—chilies, garlic—but many were unique to the "company special recipe" that took six months of testing to develop. Mr. Anand narrated the Maza story as I chewed, introducing it by proclaiming that "the vada pav has graduated from the street corner, and has grown up." The marketing team wanted to embrace how Indians were "experimenting" with unusual flavors, like "Szechwan," that would lift the vada pav out of Mumbai's streets.

The drive to isolate the street dated back to Maza's founding and continued to structure the company's operational rationale. Mr. Anand's involvement in the company came from his desire "to do something for the middle class" and "to make people into entrepreneurs." People were to be processed along with the

food. Maza's emphasis on employment and training meant that vada pav sellers could contribute to social cohesion. "It's just like McDonald's," he said. "You give food to the masses. You generate employment. And if you don't employ people, they'll get led to crime, to terror—they'll go and plant a bomb somewhere." In 2004, he and his business partner had wondered about doing something with street food, after feeling "disgusted" by the lack of cleanliness they saw daily. To answer the central question of their business plan—"Can we make it like McDonald's?"—they turned to food processing. This was Maza's unique contribution to a broader project of cleaning the streets, Mr. Anand claimed. "There are no food laws in India," he complained. "*Filthy* is the vision for foreigners who come here." Maza's innovation was to isolate and remove the street's contagion by linking up with OSI, a multinational food-processing company, to bring in the machinery and expertise of global industry.

A standard logic of industrial processing, however, did not predict the difficulty of removing the street from the vada pav. This was a risky venture, Mr. Anand explained. It required an inventive approach to processing. One cannot simply process the street into a product of pure sterility because the microbes that cause food-borne illness also give the vada pav flavor. In the home, he said, microbes multiply in food, but not enough to make you sick. By contrast, the street posed a more serious problem, "because bacteria multiply more there." Indians were well aware of this, he claimed, and could taste it: "With street food, even if it's vegetarian, those bacteria give the food a taste of non-veg, a taste that no chef can give." The challenge, then, was to corral the disorder of the infectious streets without sacrificing taste.[7] He felt that Maza was unique among all other vada pav enterprises in accomplishing this feat: "That non-veg taste in the food, that's the taste of risk. We market that. We give the street taste, without the danger." Maza wanted to remove the street from the vada pav, but still faced a twofold challenge. First, it had to isolate the right quantity of the street for taste without risk. Second, and relatedly, it had to navigate the gendered dimensions of vegetarianism. The essence of "non-veg," a quality of food often attributed to masculinity and to Islam (Alter 2000a; Donner 2008; Ghassem-Fachandi 2009; Roy 2010), had to be isolated as much as the microorganisms that would be removed. This work required processing the vada pav into something that all bodies of the city could enjoy because they could anticipate authentic taste without the harm of contagion. Yet a bit of the street had to stay in the food for it to taste right. As Mr. Anand pointed out, no chef could do this without Maza's approach to processing.

"Even some political parties have become interested in vada pav," Mr. Anand said, to emphasize the craze around the food. As he changed the subject to discuss the machinery they used to process potatoes, I cautiously explained that I had attended the sammelan in Shivaji Park. He sighed. "It's been a challenge, a controversy," he said. "We are avoiding certain parts of the city. Basically, we're staying away [from the Shiv Sena]." Maza did not have the name recognition and media magnetism of McDonald's, but it also did not seek to amplify the street, making it as untenable a strategic link for the Shiv Sena as was Mahesh's masala packet idea. To grow business, Maza focused on "new markets" in Maharashtra's interior untouched by Shiv vada pav—away from the city streets. Maza signaled its appeal through nationalism instead: the brand logo included colors indicative of the Indian flag and the company's guiding philosophy: orange for *garam* (hot/ freshly fried); green for *mirchi* (spicy); and white for clean.

Parth took me into an office cubicle to show me a DVD recording of Maza's processing workflow. In a dark warehouse, men and women in green rubber suits and galoshes hosed down open crates of potatoes. They tumbled the crates of potatoes into a mechanical peeler, which carried the peeled potatoes to another machine that steamed, boiled, and cubed the potatoes. The cubes rattled along a conveyor belt under the watchful eye of men standing on either side of the belt who pick out "the bad bits" for quality control. The quality cubes fell into industrial-sized mixers, and a woman poured in a cauldron of spice paste. After the mixture cohered, she transferred it to a die-cutting machine that punched the mash into uniform disks, six at a time. The disks moved onto another conveyor belt, received a wash of *besan* (chickpea flour) batter squirted out of hoses, and the excess dripped through a grate. The coated vadas then entered a vat of hot oil for a par-fry process. After another quality check, they moved into a box to be cold-blasted (an element of the individual quick-freeze food preservation process). More workers parceled out the quick-frozen vadas into plastic bags, counted the bags into cartons, and then moved the cartons into a cold room. The cartons would be shipped to Maza stores for the final step in processing, whereby employees would reheat the vadas and dress the pav with chutneys.

Maza made hygenic perfection its rationale for processing, but like the Shiv Sena, the company had to grapple with food and street in a complex and unexpected pattern. When I recounted these experiences to Mahesh and Nitin, they remained unimpressed—Maza's attempts at isolation and deletion were foundationally anathema to real vada pav. Dhruv, the journalist, felt similar about Maza's corporate version: "It's not *real* vada pav," he said. "The chaos of the street, the

individualized taste of each vendor, *that's* vada pav. That's street food. You can't make it uniform everywhere." Processing was risky in matters of taste and in its possibilities to consolidate the city's critical differences.

As infighting beleaguered the longevity of the Shiv vada pav, a portal of opportunity opened for Maza. When I spoke with Parth in July 2012, he noted that Maza had expanded to 150 outlets throughout the country. I asked about the rise and fall of the Shiv vada pav. He politely noted that Maza "was not in the business of competing—we're in the business of meeting demand." Maza, he said, wanted to bring the taste of Mumbai to the rest of India, and was now expanding its stores to Chennai, Hyderabad, and Bangalore. Its success hinged on processing a vada pav that could transcend vernacular squabbles as it wound its way from factories to the streets of other cities.

### CONCLUSION: The Slash of the Street

On Saturday, November 17, 2012, Bal Thackeray died from cardiac arrest, according to the doctors tending to him at his home. The following day, Thackeray's body was wrapped in the Indian tricolor flag and brought to Shivaji Park, the site of the Shiv vada pav sammelan and so many of Thackeray's speeches over the years concerned with isolating the Marathi manoos and its others. Here, in Shivaji Park, Uddhav Thackeray lit his father's funeral pyre. "What was the magic or the charisma that attracted people towards him?" asked the journalist Kumar Ketkar (2012) of the scion of the Shiv Sena. One possible answer might come from the vada pav, whose instantiations illustrate what Thomas Blom Hansen and Oskar Verkaaik (2009) call "urban charisma"—the affective myths and corresponding political relations emanating from the city's iconic sites, materials, and characters. The vada pav proves urban charisma to be a pattern, and further, a pattern difficult to disaggregate. Streets and foods pattern into livelihoods, community injuries, dreams of urban renewal and belonging, and transnational enterprise. These arrangements complicate easy identifications of eater and eaten, of location and dislocation, and of desire and risk. I have focused attention on attempts to parse these distinctions across both tenuous successes and outright failures to transform the vada pav.

To return to Bateson's thinking about process as a pattern of guesses, it strikes me that the register of the guess is important in light of the successful and not-so-successful attempts to isolate the street from the vada pav. Bateson writes of a "slash mark": the limit line of an object (human or nonhuman) at which an observer can guess about what lies on the other side. Slashes concern predicta-

bility. At the base of a tree, an observer can guess that the pattern of the tree above ground means that the roots lie below. Or, "From how the boss acted yesterday," Bateson (2000, 131) notes, "it may be possible to guess how he will act today." Slashes "may be spatial or temporal (or both) and the guessing may be either predictive or retrospective." For the vada pav, the slash of the street calls forth past and future guesses aimed at isolating and transforming parts of a greater complex. Studying these guesses yields insights into patterned interfaces between food and politics. More generally, it opens conversations about predictions based on a small glimpse of a material's transformative potential—predictions that ethnographers and those they study with make constantly.

Through different efforts to materialize the vada pav, I have argued that the street must be understood as a street food's semio-material slash-marker. This argument raises questions about how food relates to the breaking and reshaping of urban patterns through isolation, amplification, and deletion. It attunes ethnography to the materials and techniques sought after to gauge and stabilize patterns suffused with differences. As Heather Paxson and Stefan Helmreich (2014, 173) note in their work on microbes, "Microbes embody potential not because of their brute materiality, but because they can be enrolled in modeling, and thereby shaping, new food science and politics." The stories of the vada pav interrupt a smooth scan over the field of street food that may mistakenly identify efforts to transform food as easily predictable and thus easily translatable into politics. The differences in these stories clarify what kinds of arrangements between foods and politics are bearable amid efforts to conserve or strain patterns. Circumstances that define when predictions for food's politics carry through and when they fail are matters of what can and cannot be processed. They are circumstances of what must be absorbed or unleashed at slash marks to make politics cohere. And most important, they challenge ethnographers to pursue the patterns of material difference that people can and cannot live with. No one chef—whether political party scion, street vendor, or aspirational businessman—could undertake speculative ventures into the patterns of the vada pav without working on the slash of the street. But their attempts to do so illustrate the guesswork at play in a politics of processing.

### ABSTRACT

*This article examines a Mumbai street food called the vada pav. I describe how a local political party branded its own version of the food, elaborate how streetside vendors make and sell the food, and then show how corporate franchises inspired by*

*McDonald's rendered the vada pav "safe" and "clean" through mechanized processing. In contrast to treating the street as an empty container inside which food is placed, this article elaborates how the street is critical for changing a food from one version to another. I argue that the street lies at the heart of what I will describe as attempts at food processing. Food processing isolates raw ingredients; it singles them out to transform a food into something else. My aim is to expand what processing might entail across sites of vernacular politics and intensified corporatization. Differences in possible transformations allow for guesses about how one thing transforms into another. The particular relationship of the vada pav to the street shapes what kind of guesswork is necessary to understand processing's political and social effects. The street marks efforts to transform the vada pav, and, accordingly, ideologies and acts of processing must move beyond a focus on location to accommodate how the street generates possibilities for urban life.* [food politics; urban life; India]

### NOTES

1.  In the case of Mumbai, which long had a Maharashtrian middle class (centered around Shivaji Park and in the neighborhoods of Lalbaug and Parel for the more working classes), such distinctions matter.
2.  See Marcus (1985) on Bateson's reception and resonance.
3.  The limited appearance of women in this article has much to do with the forms of ethnographic access I found open or closed. As Phadke, Khan, and Ranade (2011, 136) note, the act of going to and eating at street-side vending stalls in Mumbai is already masculinized because of the gendered politics of respectability governing access to public spaces. Such politics conditioned the very possibilities of my routes of access during fieldwork. In the broader project that encompasses this article, I address these contingencies directly. See Bedi (2007), Shah (2014), and Sen (2007) for studies of the complex ways that gender and sexuality inflect Mumbai's streets and civic politics.
4.  Certainly, Mumbai has many street foods that might be known as the favorite. This is the case for many of the city's forms of *chaat*, or snacks: *bhel puri*, a puffed rice and chutney snack, and *sev puri*, a snack of fried vermicelli atop chunked potatoes and fried dough disks, mixed with chutney. The *vada pav* is claimed by some as a Maharashtrian food, and *bhel puri* has a lineage connected to groups ranging from Gujaratis to others as far away as West Bengal. To call the *vada pav* Mumbai's favorite food is in some senses to claim Maharashtra as the natural root of Mumbai's street food, although the influences from other regions are readily apparent.
5.  See, for example, Allen 2008; Koppikar 2009; *Mumbai Mirror* 2008; PTI 2009; and Srivastava 2008.
6.  See Lawrence Cohen (2010) on the politics of recognition and relation at stake in publicizing injury in India, and Hansen (2001, 16) and Sen (2007) on reflexive field methodology in researching the Shiv Sena.

7.    See Paxson (2012) on the concept of "microbiopolitics" in this light.

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