

Maximum City

Bombay, Lost and Found

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Bombay is a city of fourteen million people and growing. A powerful magnet to its vast hinterland of villages. Villages that recreate themselves in the city as slums. Bombay is posh, the southern part that is, the Bombay of Malabar Hills and Marine Drive, with real estate fetching prices rivalling those of New York and Paris, sometimes even outdoing them. Further north the slums take over, although for innocent Westerns even the rich southern part has its share of marginal people. Why do people congregate in slums when they can live, at least in our views, idyllic lives in the country? One such family eking it out in the slums of Jogeshwari, squeezed inside a shack, do take a vacation for a few weeks every year, returning to their village. Why do they not stay there? Maybe the question is naive.

The writer himself grew up in a comfortable upper middle-class section in Bombay, emigrated with his family to the U.S. at the age of fourteen, returned after twenty-one years to hack it out in the city which he always has thought of as the one he came from. He informs the reader about his tribulations trying to make things work in this land of NO. When every service is a matter of connection and favour, when corruption is rampant, and things simply do not work. But soon he turns into the real subject of his book. Sex and Violence, both being united by that phenomenon of which Bombay is known all around the world - the Bombay Film industry, a.k.a. as Bollywood. It is all about dreams, dreams that keep people surviving in the teeth of deprivation and misery. The film industry is fascinated by gangsters and beauties, just as the gangsters and beauties are fascinated by the film industry. The directors and script-writers seek out the underworld to see how it really operates, while the denizens of the underworld turn to the cinema as into a mirror in order to find out how they should act. Show-business is a risky business, staid banks and other financial institutions are leary of touching it, so much of it is underwritten by the gangsters, having a surplus of cash to throw around, and a more than sentimental attachment to boot.

There are riots. Hindus murdering their Muslim neighbours, and Muslim taking revenge, leading to a potentially unending cycle. There is much hatred and suspicion between the groups, on the other hand they are perfectly capable of living amicably with each other. One day he is your business-partner, the other day you kill him with no qualms, and on the third day you would be happy to resume your dealings with him, would he have been resurrected in the meantime. The whole thing is completely schizophrenic, thoroughly compartmentalized. Hindus are obsessed by Muslims, or at least those who profess to hate them, knowing their religion and rituals better than the Muslims themselves. The same, by symmetry, goes for the Hindu-mongering Muselman. It is said that in traditional villages, with their rigid caste systems and social demarcations, there is no communal vi-

olence, no one needs to prove their faith, their ethnic identity, by doing violence to the other. Everything is already defined for them. But in the city people became rootless, prey to the rhetorics of politicians. The Congress party, however corrupted, based on at least the vision of equality and a casteless, secular society, has in recent years lost ground and BJP, the Hindu revival party has caught the fancy of the growing middle-class. Even more disturbing is the rise, since stemmed, of the Sena party under the leadership of Bal Thackeray, publicly implicated in the riots of 1993. His assumption of the civic power in Bombay, heavily guarded, has led to the ridiculous renaming of the city to Mumbai¹.

In a city of fourteen millions, crowded into every crevice, with no functioning judicial system, there is a niche for private initiatives. This means exhortations and killings to give to the former that sharp edge that allows it to make its cuts. Gang-wars arise, partly fought by the police, partly fought with the police. Is there such a thing as a good, incorruptible cop? Mehta, the author, thinks he has found one - Ayud is his name. He did more or less single-handedly compose the official report on the blasts following the massacres of the Muslims. The Muslim blasts, dishing out responsibilities and laying bare the facts. Admirable work, yet politically correct, unlike the corresponding report on Hindu atrocities, a report which was never allowed to be written. But Ayud needs to get information, and there is only one way of getting it, and this is by breaking wills, i.e. applying torture. The author is made witness to a few of the sessions. Naturally they sicken him, although he is only allowed to watch the foreplay. Still, in spite of himself he is filled with admiration. Ayud may be a rough guy, no better than a thug. But he is our thug and hence our verdict is that he is simply unsentimental. Mehta tells himself that Ayud only applies torture for a definite purpose, so that we can sleep well at night, not out of a sadistic need. He is fighting evil, maybe with evil, and becoming evil in the process. But in this way he takes on our sins, and leave us good and innocent. But how come he can live such a lavish life out of such a pittance of a salary? Maybe he is not as clean as we would like to believe. Ayud himself scoffs at the suggestion and shakes it off. It is a question of wise investments and help from appreciative friends. And the author himself has become a kind of friend, and you do not rat on your friends. And at least Ayud does not kill people in so called encounters, or 'counters' in the local slang. Staged executions conducted by the police, and overlooked by the judiciary system, in spite of many a sarcastic comment by the latter.

Who else is his friends. Hitmen? Not really, yet he seeks them out, get their stories, ostensibly at the peril of his life. He cannot hide his fascination. How does it really feel to kill a man? He puts the question over and over again. The point is that the hitman does not feel much. He does it for money, and often for just a pittance. What makes him get away with it? Anonymity, the ability to blend with the crowd. And so he does, usually small of stature, so ordinary, so faceless. He may not be that well-paid, on the other hand he is part of a larger organizations, that take care of his needs, and feeds his family when in trouble. Sometimes he has to be evacuated, then usually to Dubai, where he is invariably bored and isolated, sometimes to Pakistan. In fact Pakistan is seen in the book as being the source of many of the criminal gangs, often run by Muslims, but not exclusively. A

¹ Bombay was never founded by Indians, it is a foreign city in a way, in particular its etymology stemming from the Portuguese, expressing their appreciation of a protected bay. The name is garbled in many ways, each tongue adjusting itself appropriately, Mumbai only being one of many such adjustments

Muslim gang can aspire to a higher calling, they are in it not just for the money, but for the glorification of the Muslim nation. The wider picture is one of international terrorism, ties to Afghanistan and Pakistan (even the name of Bin Laden is dropped), funded by Arab petrol money as well as gambling, drugs, prostitution and plain exhortions.

But gang-violence is just one small part of the reality of the city, and as far as misery and death, a minor part, albeit a most glorious and fascinating part. If you are an average Bombay citizen, the risks of being killed by a gun are negligible, far more likely that you will be a victim of chaotic traffic, or fall off your over-crowded commuter-train. Several thousand people die each year from train accidents. Individual such, not collective, although those claim their fair shares as well. Falling off while extended out of a door or window, being hit by poles or electrical wires too close to the tracks of speeding trains. Of that not much is written, and although mentioned by the author, he fails, intentionally or unintentionally, to point out the ironies².

And there is sex. Of course blatant sex as in the red-light districts of Bombay. But this is too obvious, too blatant in fact, and does not appeal to the journalistic instincts of the author. The real tantalizing action is taking place in the dance-bars. Young girls, fully clothed, dancing in front of male customers. The bottom line is of course carnal satisfaction, but the longer that is withheld, the greater the pain and the subsequent pleasure and mutual reward. Thus the game is to entice and make the customers fall in love. The dancing is provocative, and the immediate rewards is being showered with money. The rupee notes being thrown at you with frenzied abandon. The idea is of course to hook somebody, to make him pay for you, to keep you. There are plenty to go around of young rich horny men in this steaming megapolis, all with excess cash to throw away.

The author befriends a strikingly tall and beautiful dancer. She is but twenty, raised in the slums. She has already tried to slit her wrists several times, in despair over unhappy love-affairs. The author gains her confidence, and while he reveals little about his own life, not even that of his wife and children, she literally tells him everything. He tries to raise her in the world, introduce her to photographers and movie-people, taking her to fancy parties, where she is treated politely with curiosity. But to no avail. Sex and allure has its place, most commonly in the lowly bar; when it comes to selling soap, other qualities are required. In short, after a brief success in the limelight she is doomed. There are so many like her, and then those who are even more beautiful, more extreme, more charismatic. How can she compete?

The movies is the ultimate, at least in Bombay. The stars are known all over the Indian world, hysterically celebrated, not to say worshipped like gods. The Indian movie is something out of this world, at least that of the Western world. There is little plot, little development, almost no dialogue, the audiences would not hear it anyway in the din during a screening, and even if they could hear, they may more likely than not have no chance of understanding due to the great proliferation of languages in the sub-continent. What is important is the celebration of values, and it has to be politically correct as well in a literal sense, as there are all-powerful censorship boards. And the Indian movie is above all song. Eight big songs at least has to be present as to fill up a DVD. Often the songs

² Cynically one may ask what is the big deal of a bomb-blast in a Bombay commuter station, it will hardly be noticeable in the accumulated statistics of annaula casualties anyway

are released before the movie. The songs are remembered and sung, the movie itself has a short run to generate its profit, most of which is raised in its first week of showing. Also there are so many movies made, the competition is so fierce, so most movies flop. The typical movie is made on a shoestring budget. No elaborate studios, no big salaries for the hopeful actors. But if a movie makes it, its stars get amply rewarded. Competition does not always guarantee quality, in fact all too often it merely streamlines and polishes. The Indian movie is inane, yet of course taken on its own terms it could be exquisite. This is what competition is all about after all. Polishing a niche to narrow perfection. And it should not be forgotten that in Bollywood, Muslim and Hindu are mixed. A Hindu role can as well be played by a Muslim. And the movies appeal equally to both communal groups regardless of ethnicity.

Our author befriends a movie director. He has had a few successful movies, but his latest flopped. That could happen to anyone. The difference between success and failure is a big mystery. It is all a gamble. He is now engaged in a new project, and he cannot afford to lose this time. Mehta is engaged as a script-writer, be it one of many, with the director calling the shots. Out of chaos, and there is controlled chaos in any filming of a movie even in the organized West, something eventually appears, and after having run the gauntlet through censors and being targeted for exhortion, the film eventually takes off and becomes a great commercial success. What more can you ask for?

Jains form an extreme Hindu sect, abhorring the killing of everything alive. This does not mean that many Jains cannot pursue successful business careers, in fact the diamond business, out of which Mehta is sprung, is mostly run by Jains, some of them becoming excessively rich. But how does a rich man save his soul? The answer is well-known - by simply renouncing all his earthly possessions. The Jains go a few bit further. They do not only renounce riches and bodily comfort, but also the love of those closest to them. One such family has decided to take *diksha* in order to achieve *moksha* if not in this life, at least in a future incarnation. *Moksha* is happiness, the happiness of total renunciation of desire and will to live. The act of renouncing itself is made into a lavish ritual, the head of the family squanders all his possession and riches. Literally throwing money away to the mobs that line the joyous procession³, feeding entire villages, bequeathing to relatives and friends. Then they separate, males walking one way, the females the other, fated never to be reunited again, save by accident. The author is fascinated by this extreme form of behaviour, just as he before was fascinated by hitmen and dancers. But in this case his fascination goes even deeper, as what he is just witnessing clearly goes beyond what he can imagine for himself. It is only at the end he learns that this rich family did save some part of their vast fortune, a part big enough for them to return to *samsara* (the world of comfort) would they find their chosen way intolerable. All their miseries and hardships are but voluntary, liable to be reversed and abandoned would they tire. All they need to do is simply to admit defeat.

Admitting defeat is what most of the people in Bombay could do. But doing so would in no way lift them out of their miseries, and turn defeat into something so much sweeter it can only be termed victory. With so many people how can you stand out? All that talent

³ a gesture in its abandonment reminiscent of that which customers at dance-bars throw at their objects of carnal desire

that is doomed to be forever hidden and buried. Not everyone can be a glorious star, a rich diamond merchant, a succesful writer, a famous scientist. For most of people that is nothing but a dream. But it is that dream, abetted by the movie industry, that sustains them in the end.

But still deeper than the impossible dream is the crowdedness. What we Westerners would find intolerable. No matter how crowded, be it in the shack, the pavement, the train or in the car, there is always room for one more soul. When you are running to catch your overfull train, hands are invariably stretched out to catch you and lift you up. No one is asking whether you are Muslim or Hindu, all they see is a human being in need of catching up, not missing an appointment. The very notion of crowdedness, all those souls, leads to a frightening epiphany of the author. He imagines that he has lost his individuality, he is but a cell in that vast organism which is the population of Bombay. He has no will of his own, he is haplessly pushed back and forth according to the whims of the crowds. Maybe this is a common sensation for the slum-dweller, who fears nothing as much as isolation and loneliness, and which also may explain the furor of a mob, each individual being subsumed in something greater of which he has no control. The real comfort of the Indian is the mass in which he is but a part. And in this respect the well-off Indian is as much of a stranger in his own country as is the Western tourist.

It is a thick book, almost 600 pages, and unfortunately it is not a very well-written one. Clearly the author is a journalist, his instincts are to get stories, not to savour the writing of them. The book has a lot of action, but little in the manner of evocations. Things are reported and documented, but never conjured. Also, there is irritating not to find a map of Bombay in the book, meant as it is not only for the locals. Sections of Bombay are repeatedly refered to, but what is there relations to each other⁴. Shorter sections of it would fit very well in travel magazines, Newsweek and even in the New York Review of Books, but waddling through the whole thing, the reader feels a bit bloated yet empty.

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⁴ Luckily I have a very detailed map of Bombay myself, which enables me to confirm that the temple he is visiting at the end, is in fact the very one, into which I stumbled myself. Without my own memories from Bombay to draw upon, the rewards of the book would have been even scantier