

Mother India and Paradise Lost:  
Myth, History, and Fiction in the City of Mumbai

Names

The original site of Mumbai was a cluster of islands probably inhabited by fisherfolk. Ptolemy in AD 150 called it Heptanesia, the city of seven islands. Tossed from one kingdom to another, it took the name of Bombay from the Portuguese who called it *Bom Bahia* meaning 'Good Bay'. They also called it Boa-Vida, for the pleasantness of its surroundings and the abundance of food. The main local languages used a range of expressions: from Manbay, Mambai, Mambe, Mumbadevi, Bambay to Mumbai, the latter after the Sultan Kutb-ud-din whose rule over the Hindu population in the fourteenth century was somewhat unpopular and who was believed after his death to have become a demon called Mumba. The British developed the natural harbour into a commercial port and for more than 400 years the city was known to the world as Bombay. In 1997, the coalition in power in the state of Maharashtra officially changed the name of the city. As Suketu Mehta punctually reports: "The government took a look at the awesome urban problems plaguing the city, the infestation of corruption at all levels of the bureaucracy and the government, the abysmal state of Hindu-Muslim relations, and took decisive action. They changed the name of the capital city to Mumbai".<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Suketu Mehta, *Maximum City. Bombay Lost and Found* (London: Review, 2005), 65.

Name-changing has lately been in great vogue all over India. Meant as a process of decolonisation, it has increasingly become a practice of de-Islamisation. The idea is to go back to a purified Hindu past, removing the traces of all other civilizational encounters which, albeit between asymmetrical powers, had nonetheless structured the subcontinent's very rich and syncretic cultural identity. Recently the quest for a unifying heritage selecting Hinduism as the nation's main flagship has undermined the ethos of inclusiveness expressed in post-independence India. And Nehru's idea of the nation, conceived in somewhat romantic terms, as an ancient palimpsest on which layer upon layer of thought and reverie had been inscribed without hiding or erasing what had been written previously seems unfortunately, as Sunil Khilnani laments, "itself in danger of being hidden and erased".<sup>2</sup>

<sup>2</sup> Sunil Khilnani, *The Idea of India* (London: Penguin, 2003), XV.

And yet the effort to purify its image by onomastic strategy has not succeeded in the least. Mumbai, "the bastard child of a Portuguese-English wedding"<sup>3</sup> as Salman Rushdie calls it, is not only the most capitalistic, most dynamic, most crowded of the Indian cities, but, even with its brave-

<sup>3</sup> Salman Rushdie, *The Moor's Last Sigh* (London: Vintage, 1996), 350.

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new-original-indigenous-Hindu name, is also the most complex, ambivalent and protean sign of contemporary Indian identity.

Compared to Chicago in the 1920s and New York post September 11, 2001, it is the capital of modernizing India, the sum of its contradictions, the dream of its potential, the nightmare of its delusions. It is not only a capital of the industry of images but is itself a very source of fiction: an aestheticized metropolitan scene inspiring stories and lifestyles. It is a fundamental hub in the financial world network but at the same time has a massive concentration of abject poverty. It is becoming one of the symbols of the world's shifting axis, but its power, transforming it into the target of terrorist violence, is also increasing its vulnerability. Glamorous and vulgar; secular and sectarian; broad-minded, cosmopolitan and parochial, even racist; dynamic and backward; Mumbai, says Mehta, " ... is a city of multiple aliases, like gangsters and whores"(15). Some are ready to swear that the only true and original etymology derives from the Bombil fish drying on stilts in the sea breeze: Bombay the malodorous town of fishy stench. Others have even re-baptised it as Bumbay: the bay of defecating bottoms, the shitting town, due to the millions actually using every roughly sheltered corner to discharge their bowels in the open air: the women rigorously at night, the men at every hour of the day.

## The Hybrid City

"India's cities house the entire historical compass of human labour, from the crudest stone-breaking to the most sophisticated financial transactions. Success and failure, marble and mud, are intimately and abruptly pressed against one another, and this has made the cities vibrate with agitated experience".<sup>4</sup>

<sup>4</sup> Khilnani, *Idea*, 109.

More than any other Indian city, Mumbai 'vibrate(s) with agitated experience'; it is the quintessential symbol of the new god-and-mammon India, of the uneven and unruly pace of the nation's modernizing advance.

While the wealth of the country flows through its veins injecting business energy, financial turbulence, frenetic overbuilding, billowing corruption and rampant crime, each day new arrivals from the villages, piling hut upon hut and rags upon rags, make excrescences erupt on the



Fig.1: Still from Danny Boyle, *Slumdog Millionaire*, 2008, Celador Entertainment in association with Film 4.

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surface of its body, and new conglomerations mar the schemes of the rational town. The first shock of Bombay is the vision of this juxtaposition: skyscrapers and hovels side by side; shopping malls surrounded by the most elementary belongings of pavement dwellers, giant overpasses crossed by the continuous flow of public and private traffic housing the down and outs who nonetheless are not the most wretched of the town, having at least a cover over their heads.

In his love song to the city, David Gregory Roberts underlines the precarious march of urban development, the tainted nature of its unequal, lurching progress:

Inland from the slum there were a large number of tall apartment buildings, the expensive homes of the middle-rich. From my perch, I looked down at the fabulous gardens of palms and creepers on the tops of some, and the miniature slums that servants of the rich had built for themselves on the tops of others. Mould and mildew scarred every building, even the newest. I'd come to think of it as beautiful, that decline and decay, creeping across the face of the grandest designs: that stain of the end, spreading across every bright beginning in Bombay.<sup>5</sup>

<sup>5</sup> Gregory David Roberts, *Shantaram* (London: Abacus, 2004), 256.

In a more nostalgic tone, Manil Suri makes one of the denizens of the block of flats, which constitutes the narrative universe of his *The Death of Visnu*, lament the loss of the old historical elegance of the town, with its variety of classical, Indo-Saracenic and neo-Gothic styles in favour of the standardized restyling of commercial metropolises:

This was what he liked most about Irani hotels – sitting at a white marble-top table on one of the black cane chairs, staring at the quotes from holy books painted on the mirrored walls, hearing the orders being called out by the busboys, letting the tea-soaked Gluco biscuits dissolve one by one in his mouth. It was a shame so many of them were closing down. Just last month, the one down the street had been converted into a clothes boutique (the fifth boutique on their street), while there was talk of this one being sold to make way for a video store.<sup>6</sup>

<sup>6</sup> Manil Suri, *The Death of Visnu* (London: Bloomsbury, 2001), 23.

But it is Altaf Tirewala who is able, with the series of striking snapshots which map the seething landscape of Mumbai in his *No God in Sight*, to express the sense of utter desolation of the city of the homeless:

You are free. You can go anywhere. Do anything. No one knows your name. Nobody –not even you – can remember when you were born, how old you are, or how you came to be here.

You just are.

You can shit wherever, piss wherever, sleep everywhere and anywhere. You will eat anything. No matter how putrid ... . You can wear anything; sometimes nothing at all. You could be lying naked under the seat of a jam-packed train and no one would even notice.

It is not easy to die when you are a beggar. Life clings to you like a rabid stray with its teeth sunken into your flesh. You manage to survive riots, floods,

blackouts, morchas... and then you multiply. You father innumerable children with innumerable women who lie by the sides of the roads with their mouths and legs wide open.<sup>7</sup>

From body to body, from mouth to mouth, from hand to hand innumerable dealings make overcrowded, overheated Bombay a city of transactions: financial, cultural, political, sexual.

From the Stock Exchange's negotiations to street market bargaining, Mumbai deals in every kind of possible commerce: legitimate and bootleg. The capital of smuggling: gold, currencies, drugs, spirits, girls, boys, Mumbai sells goods for every taste. Often sneaked in by legal professional transients, such as sailors or stewards or even diplomats, commodities from the West but also from Hong Kong or the Emirates flow into town and transform the consumers' attitudes. From the 'freedom of religion and of movement' granted by the East India company, Bombay drew the energy to flourish as a free port, open to trade and continuous human transit. Peoples came from all over India and the world. Jews and Parsees; Mughal, Portuguese and British; then Tamil, Gujarati, Marathi, Sindhi, Punjabi, Bihari, Bangladeshi.

The ethnic composition has always been rich in variety and complex in its arrangements. With trade and religion, as well as with caste and census, it draws the lines of a metropolitan cartography the traveller ignores but the temporary resident begins to recognize:

The section from Nana Chowk to Tardeo was known as a Parsee area. It had surprised me, that a city so polymorphous as Bombay, with its unceasing variety of peoples, languages, and pursuits, tended to such narrow concentrations. The jewellers had their own bazaar, as did the mechanics, plumbers, carpenters, and other trades. The Muslims had their own quarter, as did the Christians, Buddhists, Sikhs, Parsees, and Jains. If you wanted to buy or sell gold, you visited the Zhaveri bazaar, where hundreds of goldsmiths competed for your custom. If you wanted to visit a mosque, you found several of them within walking distance of one another.<sup>8</sup>

But as the protagonist of *Shantaram* had also to learn, the complicated map of divisions and separations in the polyglot, multicultural city was not as rigid as it appeared and traffic across the borders went on almost regularly. Crime and showbiz, business and politics, always weakly fenced against commingling and corruption, tend to trade with one another, and



Fig. 2: "Zaveri Bazaar and Jeweller's Showcases", 1991, photograph, Mumbai, Maharashtra, <[www.raghubirsingh.com](http://www.raghubirsingh.com)>, © Succession Raghubir Singh.

<sup>7</sup> Altaf Tirewala, *No God in Sight* (San Francisco: MacAdam Cage, 2007), 185.

<sup>8</sup> Roberts, *Shantaram*, 203.

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even the lines between religions, the critical field of tense relations, were often 'stepped across' in Bombay more easily than elsewhere.

Saturdays were a day of atonement for Mr. Asrani. He would 'make the rounds' as he put it, to ask forgiveness for all his sins over the week. Primarily, he supposed, for all the time he spent at the drinkwalla. He would first take the 81 to Mahim, and pay his respects at the big Ram Mandir temple there. Next, he would stop at the Prabhadevi temple, and the Mahalakshmi temple, and sometimes at the small shrine to Hanuman along the way as well. After finishing with the Hindu temples, he would take the bus all the way to the masjid near Metro, and offer his prayers there, covering his scalp with his handkerchief like the Muslim mosque-goers. On the way back, if nobody he knew was watching, he would make one final dash into the Catholic church across the street. Mr. Asrani believed in not taking any chances where appeasement of the heavenly powers was concerned.<sup>9</sup>

<sup>9</sup> Suri, *Visnu*, 27.

Indeed, syncretism and partaking in different cultures have been Bombay's hallmark from the very beginning. Its geographical position, and the contingencies and rationalities of colonial history put it at the entrance to the rest of the world, supplanting even Calcutta as the main gate of Empire when the opening of the Suez Canal halved travel time to England. As the threshold connecting the Subcontinent to the Globe, Bombay was where 'all India met what-was-not-India'. Bombay's vocation, as depicted by Rushdie in *The Moor's Last Sigh*, was to be a 'middle' town, in all the possible senses implied by the term. "Everything north of Bombay was North India, everything south of it was the South. To the east lay India's East and to the west, the world's West. Bombay was central; all rivers flowed into its human sea".<sup>10</sup>

<sup>10</sup> Rushdie, *The Moor's Last Sigh*, 350.

In 1927, the basalt domed arch known as the *Gateway of India* was built in Bombay to commemorate a previous visit of the English king, George V. Twenty years later the same monument saw the last British troops marching out of the Empire. The town had been the gateway of colonialists seeing them in and then off. But also for Indians, Bombay has often been a passage town: a sort of outpost of the West. Rushdie remembers how his parents, before the partition massacres, left Delhi and moved South "correctly calculating that there would be less trouble in secular, cosmopolitan Bombay".<sup>11</sup> Suketu Mehta with his family paused and rested for a decade 'under the Arch' on their journey from Kolkata to New York. Remembering his early life in Bombay, Arjun Appadurai recalls experiencing modernity, seeing and smelling it through cinema, *Life* and American college catalogues, before theorizing modernity itself in the States.<sup>12</sup> For them all, as for the hundreds of thousands of poor migrants, Mumbai represents a kind of 'acclimatisation station' in their travel towards the World. And yet it is also considered as "the most Indian of Indian cities".<sup>13</sup>

<sup>11</sup> Salman Rushdie, "A Dream of Glorious Return", in *Step Across This Line* (London: Vintage, 2003), 195.

<sup>12</sup> See Arjun Appadurai, *Modernity at Large. Cultural Dimensions of Globalization* (Minneapolis and London: University of Minnesota Press, 1996), 1.

<sup>13</sup> Rushdie, *Moor*, 350.



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The selfsame hybrid, mixed quality that makes it belong “to nobody, and to all”(350-1), is indeed the quintessential mark of its Indianness, reflecting the multiplicity of the nation’s complex patchwork identity. It has been described by many as the epitome and the emblematic representation of the contrasts and ambivalences of the country, both in fiction and in essays. In many novels, Bombay is identified with the idea of India as Mother, *Bharat-Mata*, a traditional rooted vision of the country as female: powerful and inexorable when depicted as a deity or divine feminine energy, Shakti, but also frail and victimized when conceived as the prey of foreign attack and colonial exploitation. In Rushdie’s magic-realist stories, the peculiarly metaphorical renditions of his writing capture and create at the same time a Bombay that is even richer and denser, adding to its spectrum of possible meanings a much deeper symbolical resonance. Bombay stands for an alternative vision of India-as-mother, not the sentimental mother of the India of the villages but a mother of cities: “as heartless and lovable, brilliant and dark, multiple and lonely, mesmeric and repugnant, pregnant and empty, truthful and deceitful as the beautiful, cruel, irresistible metropolis itself”(204).

In *The Moor’s Last Sigh*, the novel which he particularly devoted to his birthplace, the trope of motherhood encapsulates one within the other, Matryoshka-style, the actual figure of the protagonist’s mother, the image of the mother-town, and also the idea of the nation as mother. And when Aurora, the mother of the Moor, from a Catholic Portuguese family marries a Jew from a Spanish and Moorish background, the image of Bombay as *Palimpsestine* takes shape under the strokes of her paintbrush in terms of a hybrid palimpsestic city of mixed creatures belonging to two overlapping worlds where it is impossible to establish which is which.

The water’s edge, the dividing line between two worlds, became in many of these pictures the main focus of her concern. She filled the sea with fish, drowned ships, mermaids, treasure, kings; and on the land, a cavalcade of local riff-raff – pickpockets, pimps, fat whores hitching their saris up against the waves – and other figures from history or fantasy or current affairs or nowhere, crowded towards the water like the real-life Bombayites on the beach, taking their evening strolls. At the water’s edge strange composite creatures slithered to and fro across the frontier of the elements. Often she painted the water-line in such a way as to suggest that you were looking at an unfinished painting which had been abandoned, half covering another. But was it a waterworld being painted over the world of air, or vice versa? Impossible to be sure.(226)

## Slums

India is not an overpopulated country but it shares the Asian phenomenon of megalopolises. Mumbai is a megacity; greater Mumbai numbers 19



Fig. 3: Hema Upadhyay, *Wish*, 2007, courtesy of Roger Fournier.

million people, the average density is 17,000 per square kilometre, but as the congestion is unequally distributed, the island city reaches a density of 45,000 per square kilometre. Being this densely crammed, the city appears as a congested organism which sneezes and coughs from oppressed lungs. Pollution and traffic jams are the normal conditions and humidity only adds to the almost unbreathable quality of the air. (One of the recurrent topics of novels set in the town consists in rhetorically exuberant descriptions of terrible rush-hours).

Overcrowding makes it impossible for the well-off to distance the underdog; new arrivals every day feed the jaws of maybe the biggest and most widespread monstrous conglomerations of shanties in the world. But, as the really poor occupy flyovers and sewage pipes, the inhabitants of the city-villages are usually workers belonging to a sort of lower middle class. In *Sacred Games* by Vikram Chandra for example a police constable is the Virgil whose residential experiences serve to describe life in a *basti*.

The lane was narrow, narrow enough in some sections that Katekar could have touched the walls on both sides of it with outstretched hands. Most of the doors of the homes were open, for the air. ... Katekar came around a corner, past a tiny shop selling cigarettes, packets of shampoo, paan, batteries, and then he stood aside to let a row of young women go by, and the girls stepped tidily over the curve of the gutter, powdered and properly salwar-kameezed for shops and offices. ... He had one foot propped up on a two-inch pipe that ran along the bottom of the wall. The mohalla committee had collected money for the laying of this secondary water pipe last year, but it worked only when the pressure in the main municipal pipe down near the main road was good. Now they were collecting money for a pump.<sup>14</sup>

<sup>14</sup> Vikram Chandra, *Sacred Games* (London: Faber & Faber, 2007), 72.

Out of unsuitable surroundings and premises, in slums people tend to build a network of relations which most often evolve in a community with a history, a cultural character and even a model of rough social organization. Spatial proximity and the sharing of problems help develop mutual help and solidarity. Despite causing outbreaks of violence in the name of private justice and retaliation, such conditions tend to make a form of identity and social conscience emerge from common difficulties.

In *Shantaram*, a great feast is organized when, after many attempts and actually coming to blows, a sort of temporary school is granted to the

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800 school-age children who were not admitted to the already-full official schools in the surroundings.

The people got their own teachers organised, and found a good spot for a school, but the authorities still put up a hell of a fight.'  
'Because it's a slum...'  
'Yeah. They're afraid that a school would give the place a kind of legitimacy. In theory, the slum doesn't exist, because it's not legal and not recognised.'  
'We are the not-people... And these are the not-houses, where we are not-living.'  
'And now we have a not-school to go with it'.(250)

But the school is to be torn down as the construction site closes, which allowed, in the first place, the first nucleus of huts to be erected in order to eliminate travelling time for the thousands of workers who were employed regularly, or on a daily basis, in construction. In fact, many illegal slums in Mumbai derive from temporary areas set aside and marked off in hovel-sized plots to keep the entire work-force, hired for huge building programmes, living in a single community. Drawn by the regular income of the workers, their needs and their vices, squatters usually arrive in abundance to spread outside the fence-line, rapidly blurring the division between legal and illegal sites and leading to a ten-fold rise in the original number of occupants.

Whole districts of shacks were erected from the beginning through illicit means by criminal speculators, giving a roof to thousands of illegal denizens. Telling the story of the rise of Ganesh Gaitonde, Vikram Chandra explains how entire cities within the city emerged from the show-off building projects of gangsters in the areas over which they had won their criminal supremacy.

Gopalmath filled up fast, there were citizens queuing up for the kholis even before we finished them .... Up and down the road the basti spread, and it went climbing up the hill, it seemed to grow every day. Right from the beginning, we had Dalits and OBCs, Marathas and Tamils, Brahmins and Muslims. The communities tended to cluster together, lane by lane. People like to stay with those they know, like seeks like, and even the thick crores of the city, in this jungle where a man can lose his name and become something else, the lowest of the low will seek his own kind, and live with them in proud public squalor.<sup>15</sup>

<sup>15</sup> Chandra, *Games*, 111-2.

Incredible as it might appear, in Bombay even the slums are ranked by hierarchy and crossed by confessional differences: not only in the move from pavement to shack, or from shack to suburban one-room flat, but also within the hovel-dwelling there is a possible progression or a finer selection of affinities.

"Imagine ... imagine you and me in the heart of Mumbai on the seventeenth floor. What a view! Oh, the breeze! Ah, the silence! ... I saw it today! A slum on



<sup>16</sup> Tirewala, *No God*, 61-2.

the top of a building. It has nine shacks and two toilets with running water". Suleiman and my embroiderer uncle rented two adjacent hovels; over a few days they shifted our things from Barauli before bringing us women to this Muslim slum on the terrace of a Muslim skyscraper in a Muslim area.<sup>16</sup>

The phenomenon of small slums on top floors is well known in Mumbai, and again their origin lies in working conditions. As the people who worked on the upper floors of skyscrapers were not allowed to use the elevators, which were reserved for building materials, they tended to stay up there and gradually developed resident communities, a sort of base camp with kitchens, beds and even farm animals.

<sup>17</sup> Roberts, *Shantaram*, 253.

An area around one of the pillars was fenced off with wicker and bamboo for use as an animal pen. Straw and hessian was strewn about to serve as bedding for the goats, chickens, cats, and dogs that foraged amid discarded food scraps and rubbish in the pen. Rolled blankets and mattresses, for the people who slept there, were heaped around another pillar. Yet another pillar had been designated as a play area for children, with a few games and toys and small mats scattered for their use.<sup>17</sup>

What is particularly contradictory and reversed in this re-visitation of village life in town is the notion of what is superfluous and even lavish. While in the average slum every hut usually has a TV set and many have satellite aerials, the people living there have very few basic home facilities. The real luxuries are running water, private toilets, sewerage and drains. Life can be dangerous at nights along the pathways by the shacks where dogs and rats roam freely and regularly attack children and drunks. Space and privacy are the real treats, and even the concept of intimacy is substantially revisited. However, for many people, living in a crammed hovel, a large and empty bedroom in a modern block of flats can prove dispiriting and even desolate, causing insomnia if not agoraphobia... as recorded, for example, by Mehta when interviewing his underworld men

in their rapid ascent up the ladder of wealth and status.

However, with their endless expanse of tin roofs and small mud-brown walls, slums are not only dormitories and ghettos for the poor but also busy engines that pump life into the city: producing, recycling and trading all kinds of



Fig. 4: Still from Danny Boyle, *Slumdog Millionaire*, 2008, Celador Entertainment in association with Film 4.

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goods, from shoes to clothing, and plastic to paper, even medicine.<sup>18</sup> Slums provide the workforce for every modernizing infrastructure or housing estate project of the official town, every commerce and deal, the whole system of private transport and, with their pressing energy and melodrama, with their frantic, toiling fervency, they contribute massively to the ever-flowing kinesis of the never-sleeping city. Ceaselessly adjusting its flanks to host the multitudes of new refugees and adventurers from all over India desperately wishing to fulfil their 'Bombay dream', the gigantic monstrous creature, made of a million shacks perennially on the move between making and dismantling, is one with the town of hopes and its *filmi* logic of happiness at hand.

### A City for Fiction

One of the principal by-products of the new global cultural order oriented by the media is the role played by the imagination in social life. As highlighted by Appadurai in *Modernity at Large*, people are increasingly inclined to see their fate through the spectrum of all the possible lives offered by cinema, television or the net. Fantasy has entered into the fabrication of social models as never before and "even the meanest and most hopeless of lives, the most brutal and dehumanising of circumstances, the harshest of lived inequalities are now open to the play of the imagination"(54).

Being rooted in the hearts of people as the city of dreams come true, Mumbai has become the destination of massive immigration from the poorest areas of the nation. At least since independence and increasingly after, Bombay has figured in the minds of Indians as the land of wondrous opportunities and terrible temptations, of wealth and corruption, of happiness and disillusionment, of success and downfall.

With its emancipatory anonymity in a land of compelling traditions and rigid social constraints, Bombay represented in post-independence India a more fluid receptacle of democratic aspirations. Its gigantic urban cauldron was brimming over with opportunities; its attractions had the giddy effects of feeding hopes about self-made destinies. What lodged this fascination in the popular fantasy was Hindi cinema.<sup>19</sup> The city, with its traps and its enchantments, was long familiar from celluloid. Everybody in India already knew and was then able to recognize the dazzling skyline of Malabar Hill and the imposing crescent of the Necklace (Marine Drive), Chowpatty Beach and Nariman Point, the gothic cavernous cathedral of Victoria Terminus, the meeting point at Flora Fountain and the busy shops of Colaba, the seductions of the Taj Mahal Hotel and the opening to the sea-breeze of the Gateway of India. Today, with the ever-increasing audience of Bollywood, and the worldwide success and the Oscar awards acclamation of *Slumdog Millionaire* (another

<sup>18</sup> On this topic, both Roberts in *Shantaram* and Vikram Seth in *A Suitable Boy* (London: Phoenix, 1994), give long and detailed descriptions.

<sup>19</sup> As Mehta tells us, Hindi film directors loathe the term Bollywood which implies a derivative origin from its American Californian counterpart. The film industry in Bombay is in fact older than that of Hollywood as the Lumière brothers brought their invention to Bombay only a few months after their extraordinary Paris debut. As early as 1897 a Maharashtrian called Bhatvadekar was making short films on wrestling matches and circus monkeys in Bombay (383).



Fig. 5-11: Photographs by the author.

fable of social and love dreams fulfilled, set by the English director in contemporary Mumbai),<sup>20</sup> these places are familiar to a globalized public and Mumbai begins to rival more traditional urban cinema sets.

Having in the meantime become the world capital of commercial cinema, Mumbai has transformed the ethos of the somehow radical cinema of the 1950s, enlivened by a nationalist vision of an inclusive, secular India, into the mirror-house of capitalist, glossy, sophisticated success. Cinemas are now seen as ‘temples of desires’: “They are designed to seduce: monumental spaces gleam with light and color, vestibules are plastered with posters of gods and goddesses, red carpets exude desire and wantonness”.<sup>21</sup> They hold that Bollywood’s average product has on Indian imagination, not only in the subcontinent but also overseas, not only on the traditional middle-class audience but also on the hungrily desirous, self-projecting proletariat, is usually that of an affluent, smooth and glossy world of pleasure and self-complacency. If for a ‘mediascape’ one intends, again with Appadurai, a large and complex repertoire of images and narratives which feed throughout the world a sense of belonging disconnected from territorialization, Mumbai has become for all Indians, in and out of the subcontinent, the quintessential centre of an imaginary Indian landscape or ‘mediascape’, created by the intermingled agencies of diasporic memory, desire and the media. The most virtual and aestheticized and fantasised of all the ‘imaginary homelands’. Anyway, both in the comedy version, confected above all for the homesick public abroad, where conflicts are reduced to a minimum, and in the more melodramatic or violent domestic pictures, the invasive soundtrack portrays a colourful, energetic life reduced to, or at least diluted and mitigated by, a long series of dance numbers. Indeed, the musical sequences of Hindi cinema are becoming the soundtrack of Indian public and private life as they are used in every family festivity, at every wedding, as well as in the night life of Mumbai when, in the so-called bar line, demurely clad girls flirtatiously make eyes at their spectators as they sing and dance to Hindi film music, dreaming to interpret in reality the fictionalised lives of the movies and thus to elide the distinction between “the life of fiction and the fictionalisation of lives”.<sup>22</sup>

Bombay is indeed a difficult city in which nonetheless life flirts with pleasure in an incredible number of ways and where it is almost impossible to forget that one is alive, drawing injections of nervous energy from the

<sup>20</sup> The movie directed by Danny Boyle was drawn from Vikas Swarup’s novel *Q. & A.*

<sup>21</sup> Vijay Mishra, *Bollywood Cinema. Temples of Desire* (New York and London: Routledge, 2002), 1.

<sup>22</sup> Appadurai, *Modernity*, 55.

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frantic urban chaos of daily fervency and above all from the spectacular, extravagant and somewhat hysterical rhythms of the night when, as Mehta puts it: "The city unfurls itself, luxuriously ... in the receptions, premieres, parties and dinners of the night; in the beer bars, hotels, dance clubs, warehouses and alleyways." (289)

Transgression is the subtext of many activities, and crime, in the social imagination, proves a powerhouse of models and myths at least as exciting as those of cinema itself: glamorous, flamboyant lifestyles being the prerogative of gangsters as well as of film stars. Night-life occupies the shared stage in this folly.

Bollywood's entanglements with the criminal underworld of Bombay have been repeatedly emphasised in fictional and journalistic mappings of the town (from Rushdie to Roberts, from Mehta to Chandra) which have showed by and large how illicit earnings are often laundered in the mega-budget productions of the dream factory. What is more interesting, however, is the contiguity of the two world-pictures and their reciprocal reinforcement in inducing ways of life. Not only do the *dons* figure as press heroes as much as Bollywood celebrities, but they are also romanticized by the movies as in the gangland glory period of the Chicago prohibition era. A special affinity binds the two worlds, including also spectators in a special complicity which reinforces the pleasure of stepping beyond limits in a projected, and thus safe, world of every possible excess.

Gangsters and whores all over the world have always been fascinated by the movies and vice versa; the movies are fundamentally transgressive. They are our eye into the forbidden. Most people will never see a human being murder another human being, except on the screen. Most people will never see a human being have sex with another human being, except on the screen. Cinema is an outlaw medium, our torch into the darkest part of ourselves.<sup>23</sup>

<sup>23</sup> Mehta, *Maximum*, 380.

From their point of view, dancing girls and killers receive from the movies confirmation of their social status as stars of a sort, and even the very poor end up looking for shortcuts to success which is felt as the indistinct privilege of show businessmen and criminals. In *Sacred Games*, this logic is analysed in the advancement of the protagonist's great career as an offender, but it is also shown in the sadder story of an ordinary slumdog losing.

The dead boy had wanted more than marriage for his sisters, he had wanted a television set and a gas range and a pressure cooker and a larger house. No doubt he had dreamed of a brand-new car ... What he had dreamed was not impossible, there were men... who had begun with petty thefts and had gone on to own fleets of Opel Vectras and Honda Accords. And there were boys and girls who had come from dusty villages and now looked down at you from the



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hoardings, beautiful and unreal. It could happen. It did happen, and that's why people kept trying. It did happen. That was the dream, the big dream of Bombay.(226)

At every level, from the deep underbelly of the city's slums to its exclusive penthouse suites, life in Bombay tends to be aestheticized and led with an undercurrent inflected by media overtones, a fictional pose which recalls similar attitudes in London, Los Angeles, New York, Shanghai, Tokyo or Hong Kong. The intense fictional charting of its streets and characters and stories and places, recently carried out by cinema, television and literature have immensely added to its recognizability and its progressive transformation into the perfect totem of India's contradictory urban modernity: lively and chaotic, violent and full of hopes. Above all, Mumbai has seen a tumultuous increase in its narrativity; as its most inspired writer has said: "It was an ocean of stories; we were all its narrators, everybody talked at once".<sup>24</sup>

<sup>24</sup> Rushdie, *Moor*, 350.

### The Loss of Innocence

Bombay, long reputed immune to India's ferocious communalism, saw the destruction of its innocence myth in a series of acts of violence perpetrated between 1992 and 1993 in the long bloody trail of terror which followed the destruction by a Hindu mob of the *Babri Mosque* in the northern town of Ayodhya. Spurred on for months by religious zealots, the rabble of fanatics had desecrated the building stone by stone, reducing it to smoking ashes in their belief that it had been constructed by the Mughal emperor Babar over the very birthplace of the Hindu god Rama. What had been acceptable for centuries had suddenly become intolerable.

Of all places, Bombay, the multi-faith, cosmopolitan, tolerant Bombay ignited the fire of blind retaliation and went to war with itself. The tragedy was consumed in three acts. The first saw the largely Hindu police confront a Muslim upheaval. The second wave followed some weeks later, probably fomented by the rumour of Hindu women abused by a "horde of circumcised". Instigated by the leader of the Shiv Sena, Bal Thackeray, the violence left behind it almost 2,000 victims, the majority of whom were Muslims. People were raped, lynched and set on fire; in most cases the police refraining from intervening. Finally, marking for good the transition from secular to post-secular Bombay, even the underworld took sides and the powerful Dawood Ibrahim, *don* of the Muslim mafia, began to smuggle explosives into town. On March 12, on the sadly famous 'Black Friday', ten deadly bomb blasts devastated Bombay in symbolic central locations, such as the Stock Exchange or the Air India building, killing hundreds of people.



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Bombay was never the same again. The tragic dates of the riots and the blasts are each year relived with actual terror and people painstakingly avoid places and routes, with almost superstitious fear. The victims still exhibit their wounds; injuries are still open and aching.

Now Mushtaq doesn't even know when to shit. He has been circling the city yelling mother-sister abuses for eight years, ever since his laundry-cum-clothes-rental shop at Anjeeerwadi was gutted by neighboring slumdweller. It was the night after the masjid was broken. The night people stopped being neighbors, cobblers, tailors, bakers, vendors, or drivers, and everyone turned Hindu or Muslim, Hindu against Muslim. It was the night some Hindus wished they weren't Hindu and most Muslims wished they weren't Muslim. When the curfew lifted three days later, Mushtaq rushed out like other anxious businessmen. He searched Anjeeerwadi for his shop, not finding it where it should have been, as if shops could be mislaid. He ran in and out of the slum's gullies, refusing to believe that *that* fifteen square feet of ashen heap was his shop.<sup>25</sup>

<sup>25</sup> Tirewala, *No God*, 156.

With the atrocities of 1992-93 a certain symbolic geography which saw Bombay as a sort of city-state, independent and insulated against the landmass of the subcontinent and its communalist excesses, was irrevocably changed. It became painfully apparent that Mumbai had progressively transmuted into a centre of parochial sectarianism, whose declared intent was to change the value of its original cosmopolitanism into a threatening miscegenation and convert the image of its multiracial citizenship into a sort of hierarchical grid of internally homogeneous but rigidly separated communities. This drastic change in social climate was mainly due to the fundamentalist political organisation Shiv Sena, born in the mid-1960s as an anti-immigrant party, named after a warlord hero who had fought the Mughals off Maharashtra in the seventeenth-century (Shivaji). However, its aim was to keep the trappings of Bombay affluence within a single closed community of 'original' and 'pure' citizens, represented by the Marathi-speakers in a city of never ending immigration, disclaiming the rights of the last to come, and branding them as thieves of resources, houses and jobs. As a result, the selected victims of chauvinism kept changing, producing the somewhat paradoxical sensation that the demonised other was never the same...

The Tamil had once been the feared newcomers into the city, the ones denounced and hated by the Rakshaks as the threatening outsiders who supposedly stole jobs and land. Now they were old Mumbaikars. ...

So now the Rakshaks protested about the Bangladeshi menace, and told 'unpatriotic' Indian Muslims to leave the country.<sup>26</sup>

<sup>26</sup> Chandra, *Games*, 219-20.

Even though the targets of their animosity would prove changeable, the Shiv Sena and its leader Bal Thackeray irretrievably inoculated the germ of

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son-of-the-soil patriotism in the organism of the liberal city and tainted it with the ills of hatred and discrimination. Paradise was lost for good.

<sup>27</sup> Rushdie, *Moor*, 376.

“It was no longer my Bombay, no longer special, no longer the city of mixed-up, mongrel joy” laments the Moor, mourning over the desolate fate of his fallen mother-town:<sup>27</sup>

O Bombay! *Prima in Indis! Gateway to India! Star of the East with her face to the West!* Like Granada ... you were the glory of your time. But a darker time came upon you, and just as Boabdil, the last Nasrid Sultan, was too weak to defend his great treasure, so we, too, were proved wanting. For the barbarians were not only at our gates but within our skins. We were our own wooden horses, each one of us full of our doom. ... We were both the bombers and the bombs. (372)

The myth of the inclusive and peaceful town of the first post-independence years was shattered. Previously unthinkable scenarios opened both in fantasy and unfortunately also in reality. In *Sacred Games*, the participation of the criminal underworld in religious confrontation sees the gang-leader Gaitonde become entangled in a nightmare of destruction. Embracing a Hindu identity not only gives him political endorsement but also propels him into the arms of a plotting megalomaniac who plans to unleash a nuclear attack on the city. The novel conjures up the image of a Mumbai completely annihilated by a final act of cosmic violence and mass murder with the population of the metropolitan island reduced to a million stinking corpses.

But the news has not lagged behind. Under global media coverage Mumbai has become the latest spectacular scene of international terrorism with billions stuck to TV screens following the fate of its people and the temples of its worldly, tourist soul such as the Taj Mahal Hotel (the source, it was later calculated, of 80 messages, or ‘tweets’, sent every 5 seconds through the *Twitter* social network to communicate to the world in real time what was happening). On the one hand the city was targeted by terrorists because of its secular and westernised identity. On the other, the fact of being hit in the attacks and being subject to global media coverage highlighted and reinforced that very identity: a symbol too potent to be ignored by the forces of integralism, too lively to be destroyed. Once again the city represented India and was hit for this, but it was also the image of an India opening to the world, projected outside itself and hence hit again. The aura of a democratic, hospitable, broadminded community had faded but the ambiguous, contradictory city was still considered India’s most symbolically important gateway. India’s door has been slammed, we are confident it won’t be permanently closed.