

Golden cities, golden towns

By: Madhusree Dutta

*Hey pal! How do I get to town from here?
And he said: Well just take a right where
they're going to build that new shopping mall,
go straight past where they're going to put in the
freeway,
take a left at what's going to be the new sports
center,
and keep going until you hit the place where
they're thinking of building that drive-in bank.
You can't miss it. And I said: This must be the
place.*



Katie Hammond

Ooo coo coo. Golden cities. Golden towns...

– Laurie Anderson

Which city is that? Bombay? Karachi? Seoul? Sao Paulo? Tokyo? Tehran? Metropolises are the settlements in the making, the works in progress. Large and long-necked yellow-coloured cranes have come to be the signifying skyline of a city that is aspiring to be a metropolis, much as the rotating gloves of cement-mixing cars that dot the traffic lines. Construct, demolish, reconstruct, renovate and so on. Phrases such as demolition squad, construction site, redevelopment have become intrinsic parts of the global urban lingo. If these are not part of your social vocabulary, then you must live in a place where the real estate is not going to appreciate. In turn, this means you are not in the upwardly mobile circuit.

In Bombay, that circuit runs from Mira Road to Kandivli to Andheri (E) to Versova to Bandra (W) – the last being the Mecca of the middle class. This ladder, like the map of the city, is linear and not overly complex. Another way to map the journey is from rented dig at the slum-rehabilitation building, to a one-room tenement, to a two BHK (bedroom hall kitchen, for the uninitiated) under some housing society, to an apartment in a 30-storey tower complete with surveillance cameras. Yet another map would be by the neighbours: former slum dwellers of mixed community and mixed cuisine, to Marathi working class with coastal cuisine, to cosmopolitan middle class facilitated by Pizza Hut outlets, to Gujarati upper class in the exclusive vegetarian zone enjoying pani-puri home delivery in silver foil. At each of these junctures, the real-estate price quadruples at minimum. So much for the old romantic attachment with the neighbourhood!

Indeed, neighbourhoods today are for the losers, the ghettos, maybe for the old-fashioned poets. Neighbourhoods made the maps – of work pattern, class pattern and pattern of architecture. The aesthetic art-deco buildings of the European-style Marine Drive are barely seven km from the functional, straight-from-the-road, narrow-entranced, small-windowed buildings of Muslim-populated Bhindi Bazaar or Hindu-populated Khetwadi.

That is real neighbourhood – distinct in look, smell, type of bazaar and clothes lines. In a city, many neighbourhoods can live next to each other, yet all the while remain distinct and overlapping. There was a time when they were not called ghettos just because they looked, smelled and sounded different from the neighbourhood next door.

Rehabilitation and development

Lower Parel, Girangaon and Worli long made up the belt of textile workers' quarters. The neighbourhoods were thick with distinct Konkani boli (a Marathi dialect) and the smell of coconut fish curry. The word chawl came to Bombay with the housing of textile-mill workers. It is usually a three- or four-storey housing complex with one-room tenements arranged in a single row, opening on to a common balcony on each floor. Many Bollywood films, Bombay literature, songs and paintings have long been devoted to this symbol of the organised working class and its living culture. The textile-mill industry has slowly collapsed, following a popular yet suicidal workers' strike that took place during the 1980s. An amateur leadership prolonged the strike, and mill owners indirectly nurtured it along until the mills were finally declared defunct. Since the late 1990s, the mill lands have been leased out to various service industries, though the workers' quarters have broadly remained the same (at least for now). But the workshops, chimneys and godowns are being pulled down with an epical inevitability.

Now, residential skyscrapers, 'intelligent' corporate buildings and glass-wrapped shopping malls share the landscape with the workers' chawls. The wooden window frame of the retrenched worker opens onto the glistening glass wall of the corporate office; the French window of the diamond merchant looks down at the 100-year-old tiled roof of the noisy, stinking fish market. The demography has gone haywire and the various Lines of Control are drawn and redrawn with ferocious zeal. A movement is initiated to demolish all fish markets from the gentrified areas. The majority of residents in the skyscrapers are Gujarati diamond merchants and fanatic vegetarians, while the fish markets on the ground mainly cater to the neighbourhood's Marathi working class. Another movement is launched to evict the non-Marathi migrants, generically called bhaiyas, or residents of Uttar Pradesh, the grievance being that the migrant latter are monopolising all of the menial jobs, thus depriving the 'sons of the soil'.

Nobody utters the old-fashioned word class anymore. Even gentrification has gone out of vogue. Instead, these have been replaced by re-development and sometimes even rehabilitation. Industrial land gets redeveloped into corporate districts, slums into apartment buildings, parks into shopping malls and so on. In all of this, the working class (both organised and unorganised) gets pushed on a return journey in the opposite direction of the route mentioned earlier taken by the upwardly mobile middle class – Worli to Mira Road and beyond, and then out of the city entirely. A good metaphor for mobility in any metropolis is a conveyor belt – the same belt brings some to the foreground, while taking others to the background.

This issue has a race feature only as much as class can be defined in terms of race. The popular stereotypes are that the UP bhaiyas as vendors or taxi drivers, Gujarati baniyas as diamond merchants, Marathis as mill workers, and so on. But there is also the Gujarati

corner-store fellow who fell prey to the shopping-mall spree, the Marathi professional whose family house in Dadar has escalated in price more than 500 times in the past few decades, and the UP businessman who runs the largest food chain in the city. But Bombay needs to be polarised for the convenience of all parties concerned, and those stereotypes help in mobilising sectoral interests. As the linguistic/communal/regional identities are formalised through street fights and electoral battles, more chimneys get pulled down and more cement-mixing cars roll in to change the face of the neighbourhood. Nobody pays much attention – the chimneys and the cement cars have no racial or linguistic identity!

To put up a skyscraper

In ‘re-development’, re- is the crucial part of the word. Obviously there is a recurring characteristic involved here. Here is something of a master script for ‘re-development’ in Bombay. First there will be a construction site, to be developed out of marshland. Construction workers will be brought in from outside, and housed around the construction site in shanties. The marshland will be filled in to build roads, airports, residential colonies, and the number of shanties will inevitably swell through the years of construction. By the end of the process, the workers will be publicly dubbed illegal migrants, and there will be violent attempts to evict them from the site. Some will be pushed out, while some will manage to stay back as domestic help and watchmen in the new buildings they have helped to construct.

Slowly, some of the shanties will coalesce and develop into an informal slum – and a considerable vote bank. A slumlord will eventually emerge, and more and more people will be brought in as lodgers. Over the years, the land occupied by the slum will become precious due to the construction of new flyovers and corporate offices in the vicinity. As such, a builders’ lobby will become increasingly attentive to it. A movement will be sponsored to formalise and ‘re-develop’ the slum, while another movement will spark to evict the slum-dwellers outright. The government will finally step in to merge the warring movements into a single scheme, and offer the land for peanuts to a local builder. The slum will be re-developed into modest buildings, and during the time of construction the slum dwellers will be shifted to the outskirts of the city. Most of the daily-wagers will lose their livelihoods due to the location change. Out of desperation, they will either sell their under-construction, ‘legalised’ houses, or they will give them out on lease. The class character of the slum-turned-chawls will slowly but inevitably change from wage workers to migrant white-collar workers and Bollywood aspirants. In a few years’ time, the construction of the building will be found to have been of low quality.

In the meantime, the government will increase the FSI (floor-space index), thus making more construction area per plot available on which to build. So, the clusters of buildings will be slated for yet another re-development into skyscrapers, with shopping malls, multiplexes and international schools thrown into the mix. This time around, the international building agencies will also be invited to bid on the projects. The class character will change yet again, as the affluent class moves in, displacing the middle class from the high-maintenance skyscrapers. This cycle in demography change takes around three to four decades to complete. But some slums show the temerity to resist this cycle,

and in the process get declared as the dreaded zones. The whole world knows of their notoriety: the Dharavi, the Behrampada, the Jari Mari, all known as ‘ghettos’ in the public consciousness. Meanwhile, the ones that follow the line are erased from popular memory. Nobody counts how many Rajiv (after the former prime minister) Nagars, Indira (after another former prime minister) Nagars or Bharat Nagars are disappearing from the map every single day.

There are other remedies available to the adamant ghettos, however. One of the most useable is simple structural and visual obscurity. The gentries need not witness them every day. The 2.4-km JJ flyover, for instance, make the citizens literally fly over the Muslim settlements around Mohammed Ali Road. The 1300-meter skywalk helps the thousands of commuters in Bandra East to walk over the shanty town of Behrampada. The next highlight is the 5.6-km Bandra Worli Sea Link, which every morning will carry the suburbs to the main city over the sea, thereby bypassing the fishing hamlets and Muslim ghettos of Bandra, Mahim and Worli. The inner cities are not walled in anymore, they are flyover’d. Either way, the metropolis maintains its ‘work in progress’ status.

Playhouse

One of the main grievances on the part of the ordinary citizens of Bombay against the neo-migrant bhैया taxi and auto-rickshaw drivers in the city is that they do not know their ways around the town. They do not know how to get to Lotus Cinema, a popular landmark at Worli that disappeared 20 years ago to make way for a Shivsagar Shuddha Shakahari (pure vegetarian) restaurant. But citizens, even those born after the demise of the cinema, still insist on calling the area by the old name – almost maliciously challenging the migrant taxi drivers’ already meagre knowledge of the city. It would be easier for everybody if the area were simply to be signposted by the Atria Millennium Mall, which opened four years ago on land preserved for former quarters of physically handicapped workers. The association, the visual and the name could be then in synch with each other. For one reason or another, however, it appears that Bombayites have something about identifying an area by the name of a cinema theatre, and thus the Lotus will undoubtedly continue to rule.

Cinema theatres as locations of desire are and were as much about the locations, as well. The Bharatmata and Hindmata theatres were founded in the mid-1950s for the Marathi working class from the neighbouring textile mills. In the early days of industries, the homesick migrant workers would have a tendency to escape to their villages fairly often, thus affecting the mills’ productivity. So, the mill owners built these temples of desire, to catch and hold the workers’ interests in the city. These theatres exclusively showed Marathi films, and ticket prices were minimal. During the Nehruvian mid-1950s, they were appropriately called Bharatmata and Hindmata. But while the Marathis remain, much else has changed. Hindmata has been demolished, while Bharatmata is still clinging to its existence.

The foremost location of desire has always been Pila House, marked as the entertainment district by the British. Pila House, a bastardisation of ‘playhouse’, initially catered to the floating population of the port city and the surrounding bazaars (Null Bazar, Chor

Bazaar, Kanda Batata Bazaar, Chira Bazaar, Bhindi Bazaar, to name just a few). The theatres here used to stage Parsi stage productions in a plethora of languages – Hindustani, Urdu, Gujarati, Marathi and occasional attempts in English. These theatres were surrounded on one side by Kamathipura, the red-light area, and on the other side by Congress House, where lived traditional musicians and dancers, including the much-romanticised and much-abused tawaifs, or courtesans. Congress House sheltered performing artists who had migrated to the city following the erosion of feudal patronage.

Along with the bazaars, the ports, the red-light area and the Congress House performers, the Pila House theatres were an intrinsic symbol of urbanisation and urbane entertainment at the beginning of the 20th century. Marathi folk of Tamasha and Lavni, Hindustani Qawalis, semi-classical Thumri and Ghazals of tawaif culture, and the multi-lingual Parsi theatre all kept this ambience vibrant. The theatres themselves reflected the city's European presence, and were given such names as the Alfred Cinema, the Royal and Ripon theatres, and the like. These would draw their audiences from diverse sources within the Hindu middle-class neighbourhoods of Khetwadi and Girgaum, the working-class populace of the textile mills, Muslim and Parsi traders from Bhindi Bazaar and Byculla, and even the European gentry from the Fort and Malabar Hill.

Super-urbanity

Pila House is still there today, and no matter how much the city has changed, it remains right at the heart of the city. The textile industry area of Girangaon has metamorphosed into a commercial hub, Bhindi Bazaar has been veiled by a flyover, the bazaars have been pushed out of the city limits or shrunk in size dramatically, the ports are largely defunct, the red-light area has been thoroughly censored, the Parsi community is dwindling and commercial theatre is all but dead – yet Pila House itself is still going strong. Around the 1920s, the theatres in Pila House slowly began to adapt to the new cinema culture. In the early years, a reel or two of silent film would be screened during the breaks in the stage plays. Indeed, there were some occasions when the audience became exceedingly upset with such alien interventions, and tore up the film screens. Yet, inevitably, film culture took over the prime space in public culture. When sound was eventually introduced, many theatres changed their names to announce their new facilities; thus was born the Royal Talkies, Ripon Talkies, etc.

These theatres, a cluster of a dozen in the Falkland Road area, still run at least three shows a day, with tickets still priced at just 12 to 15 rupees a piece, as opposed to 150-250 in the multiplexes. Today's audiences are the much-maligned migrants, the Biharis and the bhaiyas, the menial workers living in the vicinity in arrangements where 15 people are housed in a single 10x10-foot tenement. The fare they are shown include forgotten Hindi flicks, such as a Reena Roy or Manoj Kumar starrers, or Iranian romantics or Spanish adult films, all without subtitles. Their technical inability to screen contemporary films has made these movie houses innovative in finding prints from rare sources – a very distinct popular culture for a very distinct audience.

Almost all of these theatres have a quirky characteristic. There are many dargahs and mazars within the compound of the theatres – at the basement or next to the canteen,

sharing the same wall with the cinema screen. One can often see audience members praying at the dargah before rushing to catch an x-rated film. The dargahs are not hidden, nor are the explicit ingredients of the films. Is this an instance of a complex and more honest public culture? Or does it simply showcase a more tolerant, more flexible aspect of urban life? Is it part of that super-urbanity of Bombay that many of us choose not to remember anymore? Or maybe this is just a simple extension of our traditional culture, where the sacred co-habits with the profane in a public space. Either way, Pila House is neither a ghetto nor a neighbourhood – it is just a Play House where the show of the city goes on. It is neither a norm nor subversion, nor even a transgression. It is just not that city.

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