Maximum City

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Personal Geography

There will soon be more people living in the city of Bombay than on the continent of Australia. URBS PRIMA IN INDIS reads the plaque outside the Gateway of India. It is also the Urbs Prima in Mundis, at least in one area, the first test of the vitality of a city: the number of people living in it. With fourteen million people, Bombay is the biggest city on the planet of a race of city dwellers. Bombay is the future of urban civilisation on the planet. God help us.

I left Bombay in 1977 and came back twenty-one years later, when it had grown up to become Mumbai. Twenty-one years: enough time for a human being to be born, get an education, be eligible to drink, get married, drive, vote, go to war, and kill a man. In all that time I hadn't lost my accent. I speak like a Bombay boy; it is how I am identified in Kanpur and Kansas. 'Where're you from?' Searching for an answer – in Paris, in London, in Manhattan – I always fall back on 'Bombay'. Somewhere, buried beneath the wreck of its current condition – one of urban catastrophe – is the city that has a tight claim on my heart, a beautiful city by the sea, an island-state of hope in a very old country. I went back to look for that city with a simple question: can you go home again? In the looking, I found the cities within me.

I am a city boy. I was born in a city *in extremis*, Calcutta. Then I moved to Bombay and lived there nine years. Then to New York, eight years in Jackson Heights. A year, on and off, in Paris. Five years in New York's East Village. Scattered over time, another year or so in London. The only exceptions were three years in Iowa City, not a city at all, and a couple more in New Brunswick, New Jersey towns that prepared me for a return to the city. My two sons were born in a great city, New York. I live in cities by choice, and I'm pretty sure I will die in a city. I don't know what to do in the country, though I like it well enough weekends.

I come from a family of mercantile wanderers. My paternal grandfather left rural Gujarat for Calcutta in the salad days of the century, to join his

brother in the jewellery business. When my grandfather's brother first ventured into international territory, to Japan, in the 1930s, he had to come back and bow in apology before the caste elders, turban in his hands. But his nephews – my father and my uncle – kept moving, first to Bombay and then across the black water to Antwerp and New York, to add to what was given to them. My maternal grandfather left Gujarat for Kenya as a young man, and he now lives in London. My mother was born in Nairobi, went to college in Bombay, and now lives in New York. In my family, picking up and going to another country to live was never a matter for intense deliberation. You went where your business took you.

Once, with my grandfather, I went back to our ancestral house in Maudha, which used to be a village in Gujarat but is now a town. Sitting in the courtyard of the old house with its massive timbers, my grandfather began introducing us to the new owners, a family of Sarafs, Gujarati moneylenders, for whom Maudha was the big city. 'And this is my son-in-law, who lives in Nigeria.'

'Nigeria,' said the Saraf, nodding.

'And this is my grandson, who is from New York.'

'New York,' the Saraf repeated, still nodding.

'And this is my granddaughter-in-law, who is from London.'

'London.'

'Now they both live in Paris.'

'Paris,' the Saraf dutifully recited. If at this point my grandfather had said he lived on the moon, the Saraf would, without batting an eyelid, have kept nodding and repeated, 'Moon'. Our dispersal was so extreme that it bordered on the farcical. But here we were, visiting the house where my grandfather grew up, still together as a family. Family was the elastic that pulled us back together, no matter how far we wandered.

It was the *muqabla*, the commercial competition, that had forced my father to leave Calcutta. It was the way jewels were bought and sold in my grandfather's business. A group of sellers would assemble at the buyer's office with the agent at an appointed time. Then the negotiations would begin. The price was not said aloud but was indicated by the number of fingers held up under a loose corner of the seller's dhoti, which would be grasped by the buyer. Part of the *muqabla* was loud abuse of the buyer. 'Have you gone mad? Do you expect me to sell at these prices?' In a display of extreme frustration, the seller would storm out of the office, shouting loudly all the time. But he would be careful to forget his umbrella. Ten minutes later he would be back, to pick up the umbrella. By this time the

buyer might have reconsidered and they might come to a conclusion, at which point the agent would say, 'Then shake hands!' and there would be smiles all around. It was because of this little piece of theatre that my father decided to leave the jewellery business in Calcutta. He could not stand the shouting and the abuse; he was an educated man.

My father's brother had gone to Bombay in 1966, against the will of my grandfather, who saw no reason why he should leave. But my uncle was a young man, and the twilight in Calcutta had begun. In Bombay, he went into the diamond business. Three years later, my parents were passing through Bombay, after my little sister was born in Ahmadabad. My uncle, recently married, suggested to his brother, 'Why don't you stay?' So we did, four adults and two children, one a newborn, in a one-room flat, with guests always coming and going. We lived as a 'joint family', sharing the flat and the expenses, and the space expanded to fit us. How can fourteen million people fit on to one island? As we did in that apartment off Teen Batti.

My father and my uncle found their niche in the diamond business. We moved to a two-bedroom flat above a palace by the sea, Dariya Mahal. The palace belonged to the Maharao of Kutch. A family of Marwari industrialists bought the palace and its grounds; they chopped down the trees on the land, cleared the antiques out of the palace, and put in schoolchildren. Around the palace they built a complex of three buildings: Dariya Mahal 1 and 2, twenty-storey buildings that look like open ledgers, and Dariya Mahal 3, where I grew up, the squat, stolid, twelve-storey stepchild.

My uncle and my father made regular business trips to Antwerp and America. When my father asked what he could bring back from America for me, I asked him for a scratch-and-sniff T-shirt, which I'd read about in some American magazine. He came back bringing a giant bag of marshmallows. I ate as many as I could of the huge white cottony things, and tried to make sense of the texture, before my aunt appropriated them. After one of those trips, according to my uncle, my father had an epiphany while shaving, as often happens when you're facing yourself in a mirror without actively looking. He decided to move to America. Not for its freedom or its way of life; he moved there to make more money.

Each person's life is dominated by a central event, which shapes and distorts everything that comes after it and, in retrospect, everything that came before. For me, it was going to live in America at the age of fourteen. It's a difficult age at which to change countries. You haven't quite finished growing up where you were and you're never well in your skin in the one

you're moving to. I had absolutely no idea about the country America; I had never been there. I was certainly not of a later generation of my cousins, such as Sameer, who at the age of sixteen, stepped into JFK Airport fresh off the plane from Bombay wearing a Mets baseball cap and with half an American accent already in place. I travelled, in twenty-four hours, between childhood and adulthood, between innocence and knowledge, between predestination and chaos. Everything that has happened since, every minute and monstrous act – the way I use a fork, the way I make love, my choice of a profession and a wife – has been shaped by that central event, that fulcrum of time.

There was a stack of *Reader's Digest*s in the back room of my grandfather's Calcutta house, dark, hot, womblike. There, in my summers, I had read true-life adventures, spy stories of the dastardly Communists, and jokes the whole family could enjoy about the antics of children and servicemen. It was my introduction to America. Imagine my surprise when I got there. I was lucky, though I didn't know it then, that of all the possible cities my father could have moved us to, he chose New York. 'It's just like Bombay.' Thus is New York explained to people in India.

In the first year after I got to America I sent for its previously inaccessible treasures, the merchandise advertised on the inside covers of the comic books. I ordered, for my friends in Bombay, the joy buzzer, the floating ghost, the hovercraft, and X-ray goggles. A brown box came in the mail. I looked at it for a few moments before opening it; here was what we had been denied all these years. Then the junk came spilling out. The floating ghost was a white plastic garbage-bin liner with a stick threaded through the top; you were supposed to hang it up and wave it around to scare people. The X-ray goggles were a pair of plastic glasses, like the 3-D glasses given out in science-fiction theatres, with a rough drawing of a skeleton drawn on both lenses. The hovercraft was a sort of red fan, attached to a motor; when you turned it on, it really did rise over a flat surface. The joy buzzer was a small steel device that could be worn on the inside of the palm like a ring; you wound it up and when you shook the victim's hand a knob was pressed and the device vibrated sharply. I looked at the mess spread out on the floor. I had been had before in Bombay; I knew the feeling well. Nonetheless, I sent the package to my Bombay friends, with a letter suggesting possible uses for the gags; the ghost, for instance, could be lowered on a string to flap outside the balconies of the lower floors, possibly scaring small children in the dark.

Power

I knew my gifts would be welcome. Whatever their quality, they were 'imported' and therefore to be treasured. In our house in Bombay, there used to be a showcase in the living room. It displayed objects imported from Europe and America, the spoils of my uncle's business trips: Matchbox cars, miniature bottles of spirits, a cylinder of long matches from London shaped like a Queen's guard with a furry black hat as the top, a little model of the Eiffel Tower. There were toys, also, for the children – a battery-powered Apollo 11 rocket, a police cruiser with a blue revolving light, a doll that could drink and wet her diaper – which were almost never taken out for us. The kids in the building would assemble around the showcase and look up at the toys inside – toys we weren't allowed to touch for fear of breaking them.

In America, too, we had a showcase in our house. In it were kept souvenirs from India: a pair of grandparent dolls, Dada dressed in a dhoti, Dadi in a cotton sari; a marble statue of Ganesh; a wooden mask of Hanuman; a little model of the Taj Mahal with a light that glowed from within; a bharata natyam dancer whose head moved sideways on her neck; and a bronze clock shaped like the official map of India with all of Kashmir reclaimed from the Pakistanis and the Chinese. When the new baby was born he wasn't allowed to open the showcase and play with these objects. They were too fragile; he would hurt himself. He spent his time splayed against the glass door of the showcase, staring at his heritage like a wasp at a window.

When I moved to New York, I missed Bombay like an organ of my body. I thought that when I left Bombay I had escaped from the worst school in the world. I was wrong. The all-boy Catholic school I went to in Queens was worse. It was in a working-class white enclave that was steadily being encroached on by immigrants from darker countries. I was one of the first minorities to enrol, a representative of all they were trying to hold out against. Soon after I got there, a boy with curly red hair and freckles came up to my lunch table and announced, 'Lincoln should never have freed the slaves.' The teachers called me a pagan. My school yearbook photograph shows me looking at the camera with the caption, 'It's so strong I can even skip a day,' referring to an advertising slogan for a brand of antiperspirant. This was how the school saw me: as a stinking heathen, emitting the foul odours of my native cooking. On the day I graduated, I walked outside the barbed-wire-topped gates, put my lips to the pavement, and kissed the ground in gratitude.

In Jackson Heights we reapproximated Bombay, my best friend Ashish

and me. Ashish had also been moved from Bombay to Queens, at the age of fifteen. The happiest afternoons of that time were when we went to see Hindi movies at the Eagle Theater. With one letter changed, it had formerly been the Earle Theater, a porn house. The same screen that had been filled with monstrous penises pullulating in mutant vaginas was now displaying mythologicals of the blue-skinned god Krishna, in these films not a breast, not even a kiss was shown. Maybe it was being purified. But I still scanned the seats carefully before sitting down on them.

In the movies I would sometimes catch a glimpse of my building, Dariya Mahal. We spoke in Bambaiyya Hindi, Ashish and I, when we wanted to talk about other people in the subway or to curse our teachers in front of them. It became a language of sabotage. It was a good language to joke in; it was a boys' language. We drank and swore in Hindi. We would walk around the streets of Jackson Heights, Ashish, his neighbour Mitthu, and me, singing Hindi movie songs from the 1970s, when we had been taken away; travelling back on music, the cheapest airline. On spring nights the newly softened air carried news from home, from the past, which in Gujarati is known as *bhoot-kal* – the ghost time. A police car drew up one of those nights. Cops got out. 'What're you fellas doin'?' 'Nothing.' Three young Gujarati men on the streets, singing suspiciously. 'Don't you know you can be arrested for loitering?' It was a jailable offence: loitering in the ghost time. We moved on, waited for the cop car to go, then resumed our singing, softening the harsh Jackson Heights landscape, making it familiar, transforming it into Jaikisan Heights.

That was the true period of my exile, when I was held back by forces greater than myself from going back. It was different from nostalgia, which is a simple desire to evade the linearity of time. I made, in the back of my school notebook, a calendar beginning early in the spring. I had been told by my father, or so I thought, that he would send me to Bombay in the summer of my junior year. Each day I crossed off the previous one and counted the remaining days like a jail sentence. I was happy towards evening because it was one less day in America and one more towards my liberation. Then, in the last week before the summer holidays, my father told me he couldn't send me to India. He'd send me the next year, after I graduated. I was lost.

I existed in New York, but I lived in India, taking little memory trains. The fields at dusk. Birds flying home overhead, your car stopping by the side of the road and you getting out. Noticing minute things again: the complexity of the gnarled peepal tree by the roadside, the ants making their way around it. You go to take a leak in the bushes and lift your head

and see. It is warm and close and humid; you are protected once again. There are no people to be seen, not in the fields, not around the one hut you can see in the distance. Dinner is waiting in the city, at the house of your aunt, but you want to stop right here, walk across the fields by yourself, walk into the peasant's hut, ask for some water, see if you can stay in this village for a few days. A couple of flies have sprung up and are buzzing around your head; you are trying to piss and wave them away at the same time, ruining your shoes. '*Bhenchod*,' you say.

I missed saying '*bhenchod*' to people who understood it. It does not mean 'sister fucker'. That is too literal, too crude. It is, rather, punctuation, or emphasis, as innocuous a word as 'shit' or 'damn'. The different countries of India can be identified by the way each pronounces this word – from the Punjabi '*bhaanchod*' to the thin Bombayya '*pinchud*' to the Gujarati '*bhenchow*' to the Bhopali elaboration '*bhen-ka-lowda*'. Parsis use it all the time, grandmothers, five-year-olds, casually and without any discernible purpose except as filler: 'Here, *bhenchod*, get me a glass of water.' 'Arre, *bhenchod*, I went to the *bhenchod* bank today.' As a boy, I would try consciously not to swear all day on the day of my birthday. I would take vows with the Jain kids: We will not use the B-word or the M-word.

In my first New York winter, wearing a foam jacket my parents had bought in Bombay which actually dispersed my body heat out to the atmosphere instead of preserving it, and sucked in the freezing winds during my mile-long walk to school and drew them to my body, I found I could generate warmth by screaming out this word. Walking into the wind and the snowdrifts, my head down, I would roar, '*Bhenchod! Bheyyyyyn-chod!*' The walk to school led through quiet Queens residential streets, and the good Irish, Italian and Polish senior citizens who happened to be home in the daytime must have heard this word on very cold days, screamed out loudly by a small brown boy dressed inappropriately for the weather.

When I was seventeen and finally went back to Bombay for a visit, three years after I'd left, the city and my friends in it had grown in wild and strange ways. They all smoked cigarettes, for one, and I did not. They drank heavily, and I did not. Nitin showed me a trick with the quickly emptied bottle of Chivas Regal I'd brought: he rubbed the bottom of it between his hands until the glass was warm and then threw a lighted match down it. A pleasing blue flame shot up for an instant. He knew what to do with the bottle when it was full, and he knew what to do with it when it was empty.

My friends had forsaken the seaside rocks in front of our building, which a shantytown had completely taken over, for the attractions of a video-game parlour. The palace in the compound downstairs, which had become a girls' school, had sprouted an extra storey. I resented this. We need to have the rooms of our childhood preserved intact, the same pictures on the wall, the bed in the same corner, the sunlight to come in at the same angle at the same time of day. I felt that this room had been let out to a boarder, and I could never move back in. I was no longer a Bombayite; from now on, my experience of the city would be as an NRI, a nonresident Indian. But even when I was living there, there were whole worlds of the city that were as foreign to me as the ice fields of the Arctic or the deserts of Arabia.

My family tried to involve me in the diamond business. I would wake up and go with my uncle to his office. It was not a successful apprenticeship. I got very quickly bored by 'assortment', the arranging of the glittery stones into different lots depending on their imperfections. I made mistakes. 'You goof,' my uncle's business partner said, in 1980, 'like President Carter.' I didn't join the business, but I kept going back and forth, spending longer and longer periods in India, up to six months at a time. It could not be called travelling; it was more like migrant work. I would get my commissions from the West – I had begun writing about India – and fulfil them in the East. I went back every four years, then every two years, then every year. In recent years, I have been going back twice a year, to write about the country. 'Look at Suketu,' one of my friends pointed out encouragingly to another friend, who had returned to India from the States and missed America. 'He's become almost a commuter.'

I also went back to Bombay to marry. I had met my wife, who was born in Madras and raised in London, on an Air India plane, the perfect metaphor for a meeting of exiles: neither here nor there, happiest in transit. I was going to Bombay and Sunita to Madras. We talked about exile – and I knew at once.

My mother had come here to study at Sophia College in the 1950s, all the way from Nairobi. My father would take the train from Calcutta for three days and get her at her hostel, on Marine Drive, and they would walk to Nariman Point. Then they would walk back, all the way to Chowpatty, the young suitor and his teenage fiancée, and eat *chana bhaturas*, chickpeas and big puris, at Cream Centre or go up to the Café Naaz and drink milkshakes. Sometimes they would go to the Jehangir Art Gallery. Thirty years later, without conscious intention, I found myself revisiting the

cartography of my father's courtship with another Indian girl from abroad. We walked along the bay; we took in the pictures at the art gallery. Bombay is where my family found love. It is where my uncle, newly arrived from Calcutta, spotted my aunt at a fun fair. We came back from distant places – Nairobi, Calcutta, New York – to chase love here.

The day after my first date with Sunita, a cousin was going to Kanpur and I went to Victoria Terminus to drop him off. As the Gorakhpur Express pulled into the station, an enormous horde of migrant workers going back to their villages rushed it. The policemen beat them back with lathis. There was an immense clamour, and I stood to one side, watching, despairing. I thought of the girl I had just met, her beauty, her Englishness. She was the way I could distinguish myself from this herd, prevent myself from getting annihilated by the crowd. At that moment I realised I was in love. Being with her, with a fine woman like her, would make me an individual.

The next day, in love, I took her to Juhu Beach. The sea washed her feet and made her languorous, vulnerable. I could put my arm around her, and she allowed her head to rest on my shoulder. On our third date, at the Sangam Bar overlooking the Arabian Sea – where, I found out later, my father had wooed my mother, and my uncle took my aunt – after seven bottles of London Pilsner, I proposed to Sunita. She laughed.

In the playground in New York my first son, Gautama, was always hesitant; he would look at the other children from a distance. I would watch him smiling at the other kids, rocking back and forth. Even when they returned his smile, came forward, and sought to include him in their gangs, he would run away, run to me, maintain his distance. At a very early age, too early an age, he became conscious of his difference.

I took Gautama to his first day of preschool, at the Y on 14th Street. All the two-year-olds were speaking English except my son. We had raised him speaking Gujarati at home. The teachers led the kids through a drill, telling them when to raise their hands; they sang songs. My son could not understand. I sat with him, feeling miserable. The kids in our building said about him, 'He can't talk.' He looked up at them hopefully, but they didn't invite him to play. When he sat in the garden downstairs, eating his *khichdi* – which the British had changed into kedgeree – from his little bowl, the girl living across the hall screwed up her face. 'Eeeuww.' This was what colonialism, fifty years after the Empire ended, had done to my son: it had rendered our language unspeakable, our food inedible.

Then our second son, Akash, was born. More and more we thought: we have to take the children home. Our children must have the experience of living in a country where everyone looks just like them. Where we can go into a restaurant in a small town in the country and all heads will not automatically turn to stare at us. In India they can grow up with confidence; they will get a sense of their unique selves, which will be welcome in the larger self. Home is not a consumable entity. You can't go home by eating certain foods, by replaying its films on your television screen. At some point you have to live there again. The dream of return had to be brought into the daylight sooner or later. But to what place would we return, my Bombay, Sunita's Madras, or some place cheap and lovely like the Himalayas? In 1996, I had been in Bombay for two months, to write an article about the Hindu–Muslim riots. It was the longest span of time I had spent in the city since leaving, and it felt hospitable to me. Sunita could go back to school, for a master's degree. There are many Bombays; through the writing of a book, I wanted to find mine.

Just before I left New York, I walked into a magazine store where I had often browsed in the afternoon. I had never before spoken to the cashier. I picked up a magazine, took it to the counter, and realised I had forgotten my wallet. I set it down and told the cashier I would be right back. 'You can give me the money later,' he said, waving me on. 'I know you.'

I walked out of the store, exhilarated. In these last five years, I had made the East Village my home. Home is where your credit is good at the corner store. New York, under Major Giuliani, had experienced a rebirth. We left a safe city, where you could come out of a club at 4 a.m. and still find people on the street, couples, lovers. A city that worked, where the garbage got picked up, the fallen snow was cleared within hours, the traffic moved predictably, and subway trains were frequent and air-conditioned. There were parties at every corner.

But each time we have got comfortable in a place we have moved. Each time we have got to know a group of people, we have needed to go somewhere else to find people we didn't know. We were now going to India, not as tourists and not to visit relatives, either. Other than my uncle in Bombay and my aunts in Ahmadabad and Kanpur, I have almost no relatives left in India. They've all moved – to America, to England. India was the New World for me. And Bombay was landfall.

Coming back from a trip to Elephanta Island, and seeing the wedding cake of the old Taj Hotel, the imitation skyscraper of the new one, and the

Gateway of India in front of them, I feel the slightest souvenir of the quickening of the heart that European travellers to India must have felt, through all those long centuries. After a long journey, after rounding the Cape of Good Hope, after many perils and storms and illnesses, beyond this massive gate lies all of India. Here are tigers and wise men and famines. A hurried stop, a quick halt to take a bath and get a night's sleep on solid land, before the train departs early the next morning to the real India, the India of the villages. Nobody back then came to Bombay to live there for ever; it was just a way station, between paradise and hell. You came to Bombay to pass through it.

It was called Heptanesia – the city of seven islands – by Ptolemy in AD 150. The Portuguese called it Bom Bahia, Buon Bahia, or Bombaim – Portuguese for 'good bay'. In 1538 they also called it Boa-Vida, the island of good life, because of its beautiful groves, its game, and its abundance of food. Another story around its name concerns the Sultan Kutb-ud-din, Mubarak Shah I, who ruled over the islands in the fourteenth century, demolished temples, and became a demon: Mumba Rakshasa. Other Hindu names for these islands were Manbai, Mambai, Mambe, Mumbadevi, Bambai, and now Mumbai. It is a city of multiple aliases, like gangsters and whores. Waves of rulers have owned this clump of islands: the Hindu fisherfolk, the Muslim kings, the Portuguese, the British, the Parsi and Gujarati businessmen, the *sheths* (joined by Sindhis, Marwaris and Punjabis later), and now, finally, the natives again, the Maharashtrians.

If you look at Bombay from the air; if you see its location – spread your thumb and your forefinger apart at a thirty-degree angle and you'll see the shape of Bombay – you will find yourself acknowledging that it is a beautiful city: the sea on all sides, the palm trees along the shores, the light coming down from the sky and thrown back up by the sea. It has a harbour, several bays, creeks, rivers, hills. From the air, you get a sense of its possibilities. On the ground it's different. My little boy notices this. 'Look,' Gautama points out, as we are driving along the road from Bandra Reclamation. 'On one side villages, on the other side buildings.' He has identified the slums for what they are: villages in the city. The visual shock of Bombay is the shock of this juxtaposition. And it is soon followed by violent shocks to the other four senses: the continuous din of the traffic coming in through open windows in a hot country; the stench of *bombil* fish drying on stilts in the open air; the inescapable humid touch of many brown bodies in the street; the searing heat of the garlic chutney on your *vadapav* sandwich early on your first jet-lagged morning.