

## 1

## THE MYTHIC CITY

It is just before two o'clock in the afternoon in April, the hottest month of the year. A tiny speck appears in a cloudless Poona sky, moving steadily toward the Tower of Silence, the funerary place where the Zoroastrians expose their dead to be consumed by birds of prey. It is not an eagle; nor is it a crow, for it could never fly that high. As the speck approaches the tower, its outline grows larger. It is a small aircraft, its silver body gleaming in the bright sun. After flying high above the Parsi place of the dead, the plane disappears into the horizon only to double back. This time, it heads determinedly to the tower, hovers low over it, and then suddenly swoops down recklessly. Just when it seems sure to plunge into the ground, the plane rights itself and flies upside down in large circles. A bright object drops from the aircraft into the well of the tower, illuminating the structure containing a heap of skeletons and dead bodies. As the light from the bright flare reveals this gruesome sight, the plane suddenly rights itself and hovers directly overhead. The clock strikes two. A camera shutter clicks.

The click of the camera shakes the Zoroastrian world. The Parsi head priest of the Deccan region, taking an afternoon nap, immediately senses that foreign eyes have violated the sacred universe of his religion. Parsi priests, who are performing a ritual at their Fire Temple, feel their throats dry up abruptly and are unable to

continue their chants. As the muslin-covered body of a dead Parsi is being prepared for its final journey to the tower, the deceased's mother suddenly lets out a piercing shriek. When the sacred fire burning at a Zoroastrian temple bursts into sparks, the assembled priests agree that a vital energy has escaped the holy ball of fire.

Thus begins “Tower of Silence,” an unpublished novel written in 1927 by Phiroshaw Jamsetjee Chevalier (Chaiwala),<sup>1</sup> a Parsi from Bombay.\* After setting the scene of this grave sacrilege to the Zoroastrian faith, the novel shifts to London. On the street outside the office of the journal *The Graphic* is a large touring Rolls-Royce, richly upholstered and fitted with silver fixtures. In it sits a tanned young man in a finely tailored suit, with a monocle in his left eye. He is Beram, a Parsi who blends “the knowledge of the shrewd East” with that of the West and is a master practitioner of hypnotism and the occult. He is in London to hunt down and kill those who have defiled his religion—the pilot who flew the plane over the tower, the photographer who clicked the snapshot, and the editor who published it in *The Graphic*. This locks him in a battle of wits with Sexton Blake, the famous 1920s fictional British detective, and his assistant Tinker, who are employed by the magazine. As Beram goes about systematically ferreting out his intended victims, with Blake and Tinker in pursuit, the novel traverses London, Manchester, Liverpool, Burma, Rawalpindi, and Bombay. It concludes with Parsi honor restored.

In Chaiwala's thrilling fable of Parsi revenge, the protagonists slip in and out of disguises and secret cellars. They follow tantalizing clues and leave deliberately misleading traces, practicing occult tricks and hypnotism to gain an advantage in their quest. Magic and

\* Bombay/Mumbai: Unless I am referring to the period after 1995, when Bombay was officially renamed as Mumbai, I use the name Bombay, as the city was called, for most of the period covered by the book.

sorcery, however, operate in a thoroughly modern environment. Industrial modernity, in the form of planes, trains, and automobiles, figure prominently. The high-altitude camera and the illustrated magazine reflect a world of image production and circulation. The novel travels easily between Britain and India and comfortably inhabits British popular culture. Imperial geography underwrites this space. Colonialism conjoins Britain, India, and Burma and produces the cosmopolitan cultural milieu that the novelist presents as entirely natural. Beram dwells in this environment while proudly asserting his religious identity. He is no rootless cosmopolitan but a modern subject, deeply attached to his community. His quarrel with the pilot, the photographer, and the editor is not anticolonial. Chaiwala mentions the Gandhian movement against British rule, but Beram expresses no nationalist sentiments; his sole motivation is to right the wrong done to his faith by modernity's excesses, by its insatiable appetite to erase all differences and violate all taboos. He represents a form of cosmopolitanism that is based on an acknowledgment of cultural differences.

The novel bears the marks of its time, but it also presents a picture of Bombay that persists. This is evident as much in the depiction of the city, where Beram and Sexton Blake play their cat-and-mouse game, as in the whole imaginative texture of the novel. A Bombay man himself, Chaiwala celebrates the city's mythic image when he describes it as "gay and cosmopolitan," a heady mix of diverse cultures and a fast life. Its existence as a modern city, as a spatial and social labyrinth, can be read in the detective novel form. The sensibilities and portraits associated with Bombay are inherent in the novel's geographic space, in its characters and their actions.

When I came upon Chaiwala's typescript in the British Library, I found its fictions and myths resonate with my childhood image of Bombay. Cities live in our imagination. As Jonathan Raban remarks, "The soft city of illusion, myth, aspiration, nightmare, is as real, maybe more real, than the hard city one can locate on maps in sta-

tistics, in monographs on urban sociology and demography and architecture.”<sup>2</sup> This is how Bombay, or Mumbai, as it is now officially known, artlessly entered my life. Bombay is not my hometown. I was born more than a thousand miles away in a small town named Hazaribagh. I grew up in Patna and New Delhi and have lived in the United States for many years. Mine is not an immigrant’s nostalgia for the hometown left behind, but I have hungered for the city since my childhood. Its physical remoteness served only to heighten its lure as a mythic place of discovery, to sustain the fantasy of exploring what was beyond my reach, what was “out there.”

This desire for the city was created largely by Bombay cinema. Nearly everyone I knew in Patna loved Hindi films. Young women wore clothes and styled their hair according to their favorite heroines. The neighborhood toughs copied the flashy clothes of film villains, even memorizing and mouthing their dialogues, such as a line attributed to the actor Ajit instructing his sidekick: “Robert, Usko Hamlet wala poison de do; to be se not to be ho jayega” (Robert, give him Hamlet’s poison: from “to be” he will become “not to be”). No one knew which film this was from, or indeed if it was from a film at all. Ajit’s villainous characters were so ridiculously overdrawn that he attracted a campy following that would often invent dialogues. Then there were Patna’s own Dev Anand brothers, all three of whom styled their hair with a puff, in the manner of their film-star idol. Emulating their hero, they wore their shirt collars raised rakishly and walked in the actor’s signature zigzag fashion—trouser legs flapping, upper body swaying, and arms swinging across the body. Like many others, I remember the comedian Johnny Walker crooning in Mohammed Rafi’s voice, “Yeh hai Bumbai meri jaan” (It’s Bombay, Darling) to the tune of “Oh My Darling, Clementine,” in *CID* (1956).

Hindi cinema stood for Bombay, even if the city appeared only fleetingly on-screen, and then too as a corrupt and soulless opposite of the simplicity and warmth of the village. I understand now that underlying our fascination with Bombay was the desire for modern

life. Of course, the word *modernity* was not in our vocabulary then; we spoke of Bombay's charms with signs and gestures, with wistful looks and sighs, expressing desires for self-fashioning and deprived pleasures. We knew of New York, Paris, and London, but they were foreign places, holding no emotional resonance. To us, the most familiar large city was Calcutta, in the neighboring province of West Bengal. Many, particularly the poor, from my province of Bihar went there to work. But the proverbial Bengali cultural arrogance was a hurdle in developing any lasting love or longing for their city. New Delhi was just a dull seat of government, heavily laden with a bureaucratic ethos, and Madras was too culturally and linguistically remote. Although far away, it was Bombay that held the promise of exciting newness and unlimited possibilities. It reached out across the physical and cultural distance to stir desires and kindle imaginations. Even my father was not immune to Bombay's magnetism. When he built the family house in Hazaribagh, the facade was modeled on the Marine Drive Art Deco apartment buildings that he had seen in photographs.

The Bombay tabloid *Blitz* epitomized the city's mischievously modern spirit. The only one of its kind in India at the time, this provocative weekly unabashedly presented itself as the voice of the citizenry, excoriating officialdom with over-the-top reports and articles. Adopting the loud and brash character of its larger-than-life Parsi editor, Russi Karanjia, the tabloid was identified with the city. So was Behram Contractor, known by his pen name Busybee, who wrote his popular and characteristically witty "Round and About" columns, first in the *Evening News of India* and subsequently in *Mid-Day*, before eventually settling on *Afternoon Courier and Dispatch*, a tabloid he founded and edited. Poking gentle fun at everyone while offending no one, Busybee became known and loved as a classic Bombay figure—at home in its metropolitan chaos while remaining alive to the absurdities of its everyday life. Similarly playfully critical was Gangadhar Gadgil. Trained as an economist, he wrote



1.1. Mario's Bombay. Source: *Illustrated Weekly of India*, October 18, 1970.

both in Marathi and in English with equal facility and prolificacy, his satirical eye alighting on an eclectic choice of subjects—from an encounter with pickpockets in the city to the experience of traveling in its crowded trains to the obsessions and practices of tea drinking in Bombay.<sup>3</sup>

And then there was Mario Miranda, whose cartoons on the pages of the *Illustrated Weekly of India* leaped out at you with their wit and biting commentary. He gave us memorable city figures—Miss Fonseca, the buxom Anglo-Indian secretary; the office clerk Godbole; the corrupt and rotund politician Bundaldass; the seductive actress Miss Rajni Nimbupani; and the Catholic girl Petrification Pereira. Using the cartoon form, Mario's pictorial illustrations were works of art that depicted Bombay's mongrel and chaotic world with humor and acute observations.

The *Illustrated Weekly*, which featured Mario's art, and *Femina*, both owned by the Times group, were two widely circulated magazines that also disseminated the city's metropolitan image. The

*Weekly* lived up to its promise, featuring stories with photographs that showcased modern life. Whether they were accounts of dance bands, cabaret acts, architecture, cinema, and art or famous murder cases, exposés of brothels, illegal gambling, or the manufacture of illicit liquor in the Prohibition era, the magazine covered them all with lavish illustrations. The popular glossy women's magazine *Femina*, which started publication in 1959, featured mainly articles on style, health and beauty, relationships, and celebrities. Its vibrant pages flaunted the latest trends in clothes, cosmetics, and home furnishings. Its splashy coverage and proud sponsorship of the annual Miss India contest paraded Bombay's trendy fashion sense. Addressed as it was to the English-reading public, there was no doubt about *Femina's* elitism. But this only added verve to Bombay's image as a place of high style.

Philip Knightley, the Australian journalist, writes of the excitement of the Bombay of the early 1960s.<sup>4</sup> He arrived in the city on a voyage from Britain via Basra, intending to lay over only until a ship was ready to sail to his home country. But he stayed for two years, working for a literary journal. Unaware that the journal was funded by the CIA—a fact he discovered only years later—Knightley ended up playing an unwitting role in a Cold War cloak-and-dagger drama when the KGB also tried to recruit him. In retrospect, he saw the international espionage angle as part of Bombay's dynamic milieu. "Everyone seemed to be on the move," he remembers, "even though they did not know where to."<sup>5</sup>

Harry Roskolenko, an American writer who also made his way to the Island City in the sixties, thought that Bombay was the world's most open city after Tokyo. What he meant by "open" is manifest in the title of his book. *Bombay after Dark* is a racy travel account that he published under the pen name Allen V. Ross. The book describes his sexual romp through Bombay, including the experience of a young college student "pressing her rubbery young body against mine" in a temple during a religious celebration and of his "water

circus” with an Anglo-Indian woman in the Arabian Sea.<sup>6</sup> Though he finds that vice and commerce are “natural handmaidens,” the book is not a judgmental account of the flesh trade but a celebration of “a man’s city, sensual and open to pleasure.” *Bombay by Night*, a book published a decade later by the *Blitz* crime reporter Captain F. D. Colaabavala, adopts a shocked tone, but it too offers a titillating, voyeuristic account of Bombay as a haven for erotic pleasure. While purporting to expose vice, the book invites you to do a little “undercover research” in “Bombay after Dark,” promising that no matter what your desire, taste, or mood, you will find what you want in India’s commercial capital, “where the history of commerce is often written on the bedsprings.”<sup>7</sup>

Such accounts of sex and vice sketched a free-spirited city, a palace of pleasures. A photograph published in newspapers and magazines in 1974 served only to reconfirm the city’s freewheeling spirit. It showed a woman streaking on a busy Bombay street in broad daylight. The nude photograph attracted much attention because the woman was Protima Bedi, a glamorous model and the wife of the handsome model and rising film star Kabir Bedi. The fashionable couple was frequently in the news. In her posthumously published memoir, Bedi acknowledged that the nude photograph was genuine, but she alleged that it had been taken while she was walking naked on a beach in Goa and was then superimposed on a Bombay street to produce the sensational copy. A rival account is that the streaking was staged to gain publicity for the launch of *Cine Blitz*, a new film magazine.<sup>8</sup> Whatever the truth, no one questioned the photograph’s authenticity because it played into Protima Bedi’s image as a model with a swinging lifestyle. The shocking picture also contributed to Bombay’s mythology as a city with an uninhibited and audacious ethos, a place where the “iron cage” of the dull routines—the familiar and regular—of modern life was shaken loose with the energy and excitement of transgression.

If films, newspapers, and magazines broadcast Bombay in glamorous, sunny hues, they also narrated tales of its dark side. These



impressions were powerfully amplified by the lyrics of several film songs penned by progressive poets that inveighed against the unjust social order. So, while Johnny Walker romps on the breathtaking Marine Drive in the film *CID*, sweet-talking his girlfriend in the voice of playback singer Mohammed Rafi, the song warns of the perils that await the unwary in Bombay and offers a biting critique of the industrial city's soullessness: "Kahin building, Kahin tramen, Kahin motor, Kahin mill, milta hai yahan sub kuch, ek milta nahin dil, in-saan ka hai nahin namo-nishan" (In this city of buildings and trams, motorcars and mills, everything is available except a heart and humanity). Though the song speaks of a callous city habitat in vivid and richly textured lyrics, it also offers hope. Johnny Walker's girlfriend responds to his evocation of Bombay's capriciousness and contradictions by rewording the song's idiomatic refrain. In place of "Ai dil hai mushkil jeena yahan" (It is hard to survive here), she sings "Ai dil hai aasaan jeena yahan, suno Mister, suno Bandhu, Yeh hai Bombay meri jaan" (O gentlemen, O my friends, living here is easy, it's Bombay, darling). She does not deny his sentiments about hypocrisy and injustice in the city but counters them with an optimistic one of her own. There is a sense of confidence and optimism, even appreciation for the city, despite its conflicts and contradictions. References to the Hindi-speaking "Bandhu" (friend) and the English-speaking "Mister" suggest a feeling of belonging in Bombay's socially and linguistically mongrel world.

Ironically, even as the song celebrated Bombay's mongrel world, a political movement for the creation of the linguistic province of Maharashtra, including the fabled city, was heating up. This was followed by the rise of the Bal Thackeray-led Shiv Sena, a nativist party named after Shivaji, the seventeenth-century Maratha warrior. The Sena's growing influence signaled the eclipse of the radical aspirations that socialist lyricists expressed. The challenge came not just from the Sena's right-wing populism but also from political stirrings among the formerly "untouchable" castes. The strong protests against centuries-old caste discrimination included the rejection of

the name “untouchable” because it carried the stigma of the Brahmanic caste hierarchy. Demanding equality, justice, and dignity, the leaders of the discriminated castes called their group Dalit (the Oppressed). Like the African Americans’ proud embrace of the term “Black” during the 1960s, the adoption of a new name signified an insurgent consciousness. The parallel with African American militancy and its influence went even further when the poet Namdeo Dhasal formed the Dalit Panthers in 1972, a powerful group of writers. The Panthers penned insurgent poetry and prose that challenged the centuries of discrimination and exploitation the oppressed castes had suffered.

The Dalit Panthers added to the sense of crisis that gripped the city in the 1970s as sharp challenges from below tested the governing political and social order. The populist mobilization against elected governments, led by the Gandhian socialist Jai Prakash Narayan, and the National Emergency that Indira Gandhi declared in 1975 pointed to the erosion of liberal democracy and constitutional politics. National events and political crises bore down on Bombay, taking the shine off its image. But what gave the city’s portrait a decidedly dark turn were the Hindu-Muslim riots of 1992–93. The riots were followed by a series of bomb blasts—ten in all—on March 12, 1993.

The communal violence and the explosions left many wondering if Bombay’s cosmopolitanism had been just a facade, now as charred as the buildings damaged by the explosions. After all, Mumbai is no ordinary city. An island city of nearly twelve million, according to the 2001 census, it is the *ur*-modern metropolis in India. Kolkata (Calcutta), Chennai (Madras), and Delhi are also major Indian cities, but unlike them Mumbai flaunts its image as a cosmopolitan metropolis by transcending its regional geography. The map locates it in Maharashtra—the cartographic fact is the product of political agitation in the 1950s—and Marathi-speaking Hindus constitute the largest group. However, the city’s population remains dazzlingly diverse.

Attracted by the city's position as the hub of manufacturing, finance, trade, advertising, media, and the film industry, people from all over India have washed up on the island. They speak different languages—Marathi, Gujarati, Hindi, Urdu, Bengali, Tamil, Malayalam, English—and practice different faiths—Hinduism, Islam, Christianity, Zoroastrianism, Jainism, Judaism. Historically, immigrants from villages and small towns have managed their assimilation into the modern metropolis by maintaining their native tongues and cultures in their homes and neighborhoods. Mumbai's map is a jigsaw puzzle of distinct neighborhoods marked by community, language, religion, dress, and cuisine. As a means of communicating across differences, the city has even concocted a hybrid but wonderfully expressive vernacular for everyday communication—Bambaiya.

For a metropolis that prided itself on its cultural diversity and that staked its claim on being a modern capitalist city where the worship of Mammon trumped the worship of all other gods, the communal riots and bomb blasts appeared atavistic. When the Shiv Sena-led government officially renamed Bombay Mumbai in 1995, the rechristening seemed to formalize the transformation that had already occurred.

The breakdown of the cosmopolitan ideal occurred against the background of a runaway growth in population and the closure of textile mills and deindustrialization, which together dismantled the image of the old Bombay. Where once the city had hummed to the rhythm of its cotton mills and docks, now there was the cacophony of the postindustrial megalopolis. Working-class politics that had once formed a vital part of city life now barely breathed, leaving the toilers unorganized and defenseless. State policies and urban government had done little to relieve, let alone improve, the condition of those who struggled to survive. Armies of poor migrants, slum dwellers, hawkers, and petty entrepreneurs occupied the city's streets, pavements, and open spaces. Mumbai appeared under siege, imperiled by spatial mutations and occupation by the uncivil masses,

a wasteland of broken modernist dreams. Currently it enjoys the dubious distinction of being home to Asia's largest slum, Dharavi.

Sudhir Patwardhan, a leading Bombay painter, poignantly registers the anxiety caused by urban change. Patwardhan, a politically conscious artist, had made a name for himself as a social realist painter of the city during the 1970s and the 1980s. A radiologist by profession, he had used his penetrating vision to focus on figures set against Bombay's social and spatial contexts. The destruction of working-class politics, followed by the 1992–93 communal riots and the ruination of liberal ideals, introduced a discernible change in his art.<sup>9</sup> His *Lower Parel* (2001) depicts the space of the old mill district worked over by deindustrialization and globalization. In *Riot* (1996), we see communal vitriol at its rawest. The image of society as a collective recedes.

If Patwardhan paints a violence-ridden, splintered city, writers depict Mumbai as a place stalked by corrupt politicians, shady real estate tycoons, bribed policemen, brutal underworld bosses, and compromised film stars.<sup>10</sup> Mumbai pulsates, but to the throbbing beat of greed, ambition, jealousy, anger, communal passions, and underworld energies. Suketu Mehta's "maximum city" is a place bursting with not just urban desires but also urban problems.<sup>11</sup> Here and there, Mehta finds honest and straightforward characters, but his city is a cabinet of curiosities peopled by violent policemen, vicious killers, crazed communal rioters, brutal underworld foot soldiers, and troubled but kindhearted beer-bar dancers.

In 2002 *Outlook*, a popular newsmagazine, published an issue on the city that stated, "Yes, Mumbai exists, but India's most liberal, economically vibrant, multicultural metropolis is no more."<sup>12</sup> The lead article recited killer statistics and facts. The population, already a "scary 11 million," was estimated to reach 28.5 million by 2015, making Mumbai the world's most populous city; the infrastructure in this city of slums and high-rises has already reached a breaking point, and the suburban trains are packed four to five times

their capacity.<sup>13</sup> A picture of Queen's Necklace, Marine Drive's signature nighttime image, on the magazine's cover was emblazoned with a bold title: "Bombay: The Death of a Great City."

Literary writings on Mumbai register the anguish over what has occurred. Salman Rushdie's *Midnight's Children* (1983) portrays the Bombay of his childhood as an island of raucous and colorful coexistence of different communities. In *The Moor's Last Sigh* (1995), however, the Island City is lashed by angry tides of ethnic strife churned up by cynical and corrupt politicians and businessmen. The chaotic but robust coexistence of different communities and cultures now appears as a remote figment of the city's imagination. In Rohinton Mistry's 2002 novel, *Family Matters*, a character called Mr. Kapur desperately seeks to recapture the spirit of the shining city on the sea, "a tropical Camelot, a golden place where races and religions lived in peace and amity."<sup>14</sup> But he despairs of ever resurrecting his tropical Camelot: "Nothing is left now except to talk of graves, of worms and epitaphs. . . . Let us sit upon these chairs and tell sad stories of the death of cities."

Events in the twenty-first century appear to give credence to the prophecies of Mumbai's demise. On July 26, 2005, the rain gods attacked Mumbai with relentless intensity. Over thirty-nine inches of monsoon rain lashed the city within a twenty-four-hour period, submerging some areas under fifteen feet of water. Transportation came to a standstill, flights were canceled, the stock exchange was closed, and schools and colleges were shut down. People in the streets tried to wade or swim to safety. Over four hundred people drowned or were killed in stampedes while trying to escape the onrushing water.

When I arrived in the city on July 29, the affected neighborhoods were still slushy. Cars and motorcycles stood forlornly, covered in mud. A sense of the wet, mildewed aftermath hung in the air. The brightly lit shops on the main streets could fool you into believing that nothing had happened. But the garbage piled on the sidewalks broke this air of eerie normality. Mumbai's streets are not clean at the

best of times. But this was not the usual litter and trash; it was heaps of household garbage refuse and commercial merchandise covered by a rotting, deep black sludge. It was as if the water had forced the city to bring its innards out into the open, exposing its decaying, putrid secret.

The idea of a city destroyed by a deluge is the stuff of myths. The 2005 flood evoked just such a primeval image, of nature biting back, punishing humans, its fury leveling their prized creation—the city. The urban government and infrastructure appeared defenseless against the wrath of the celestial powers. Just a few months earlier, business and political elites had been retailing dreams of turning Mumbai into a “world-class” city, of transforming it into another Shanghai. But those dreams had literally gone down the clogged drains. Monsoon waterlogging is commonplace, but this was a frighteningly different sight; the city was sinking inch by inch.

Mumbai’s confidence was shattered. Every time it rained over the next few days, one could detect anxious looks. This was unusual, for the monsoon is always greeted with happiness in India. In the countryside, a timely monsoon augurs a good crop, and in the cities it spells relief from the searing summer heat, but the experience of that terrible Tuesday had changed Mumbai’s disposition. It was as if the urban motion arrested by the flood had spilled onto people’s nerves and battered their psyches. Mumbai appeared imperiled; it was no longer a dream city but a nightmare.

A Bhojpuri music video called *Museebat mein Bambai* (Bombay in Trouble) conveys the gloomy mood.<sup>15</sup> A mournful ballad, serving as the background score to images of the flood, tells us:

Kahal ja la Bambai kabo sute la nahin

Kabo ruke la nahin

Kabo thake la nahin

It is said that Bombay never sleeps

Never stops

Never tires

Cutting to visuals of cars and trains screeching to a halt, a voice intones:

Lekin ai bhaiyya chabbis July din mangalwaar ko  
Bambai ruk bhi gayil  
Bambai thak bhi gayil  
But Brother, on Tuesday 26 July  
Bombay stopped  
Bombay tired

A little later, accompanied by images of people repeatedly trying to make calls on their mobile phones:

Band hoi gayile sabke phonwa mobile  
Bambai pe jaise baadalwa tooti aayee  
Bijli katal tab le bhayil ba andheriya  
Every mobile phone went silent  
When the cloudbursts struck Bombay  
Darkness prevailed when the power went out

As the ballad relates the city's sudden collapse, it locates the catastrophe in the abrupt failure of the machinic city. One would think that the experience of floods and their destructive force would be familiar to rural immigrants. After all, almost every year the monsoon submerges roads and villages in the countryside. But Mumbai? How could anyone imagine a devastating flood here? It was as if the country, banished by urban modernity, had stormed back to the city with the rage of the repressed.

A year later, just as the city had recovered its spirits, signs of trouble reappeared. In early July 2006, the monsoon pelted the city with high-velocity winds and heavy rains. There was a sense of *déjà vu*. Frustration with both the city and nature boiled over. The authorities were excoriated for their inaction in spite of the previous year's terrible events, and a newspaper columnist threatened to file a lawsuit—against the monsoon! No sooner had the ground dried than on Sunday, July 9, the Shiv Sena, Mumbai's nativist party, went on a

rampage. Seeking vengeance for the alleged desecration of the statue of Meenatai Thackeray, the wife of their supreme leader, Bal Thackeray, the Sena mobs stopped traffic, burned vehicles, smashed shop windows, and shut down Mumbai. The shuttered city trembled helplessly in ghostly silence.

Two days later, on July 11, the silence was shattered by a series of terrifying bomb blasts in Mumbai's commuter trains, within minutes of each other. They occurred with sickening regularity—6:24, Khar; 6:25, Jogeshwari; 6:25, Mahim; 6:26, Borivli; 6:27, Bandra; 6:30, Matunga; and 6:31, Mira Road. With all local train service suspended in the city, everyone took to the roads. Cars, taxis, buses, trucks, and auto rickshaws blared their horns as they snaked through streets clogged with pedestrians. Traffic slowed to a halt on highways packed with panic-stricken people who, in desperation and with no alternatives, had decided to walk home. The commuter-hour traffic jam escalated into an exodus.

The television networks flashed images of mangled bodies, severed limbs, blood-soaked bags, shoes, umbrellas, and newspapers belonging to either the victims or those who had escaped the carnage. Frightened survivors spoke of their brush with death and the pain of seeing their fellow passengers consumed by the explosions. The hospitals were choked with the injured and their grieving relatives and friends. Politicians and officials appeared on television to condemn the blasts and to reassure the public that the administration was acting to help the victims and to catch the perpetrators. Television “experts” speculated that the culprits were Kashmiri militants and jihadi terrorists, masterminded by Pakistan's intelligence agency. The next morning, screaming newspaper headlines promptly named the tragedy 7/11, as if the American 9/11 had become the global frame for viewing violence.<sup>16</sup>

In spite of attempts to process the carnage as a story of terrorism and statecraft, the dominant response at the experiential level was confusion and a mixture of fear, grief, trauma, and fatalism. Ac-



count after account in newspapers and conversations on the street highlighted the suddenness of the experience. One moment a person was standing at the doorway of the packed compartment talking to a friend, the next he found himself sprawled on the tracks, with no memory of what had occurred in between. Some passengers in the second-class compartment remembered hearing a loud blast before they were caught in the stampede to escape from the mangled smoke-filled compartments. Many were so paralyzed by the shock of the deafening blast that they remained rooted to their seats, moving only when other fleeing passengers ushered them out. One survivor said that when he heard the blast, at first he thought that it was an earthquake. Before losing consciousness, he was convinced that he was going to die but then was saved by the slum dwellers who live along the tracks. Another recounted how a young woman collapsed when she saw the lifeless body of her husband pulled out from the train. They had been married for only six months.

The city was shaken. Wild speculations and alarming rumors flew rapidly. There were reports of a panicked citizenry taking to vigilante actions. A mob attacked four men who were thought to be carrying suspicious-looking packages; they turned out to be North Indian immigrants looking for jobs, and the dangerous-looking parcels contained nothing more lethal than their lunch. Commuters picked on people they thought were loitering suspiciously, and bomb squads were summoned to inspect numerous harmless abandoned bags and packages. Suspicion and fear became the common currency.

Two years later, the terrorist attacks on November 26, 2008, reignited the fear and the sense of catastrophe. For nearly three days, the terrorists ran amok, holding and killing hostages at the Taj Mahal Hotel, the Trident Hotel, and the Jewish Center at Nariman House. They rained bullets on unsuspecting commuters at the crowded Chhatrapati Shivaji Terminus (formerly Victoria Terminus) and shot at the staff and patrons of the popular Leopold Café. Although

the brutal assault on civilians was confined to particular locations in South Mumbai, bomb explosions and shootings elsewhere created an impression of roving terror squads. By the time the security forces rescued the hostages and killed all but one of the attackers, at least 164 civilians and police personnel lay dead.

Unlike the deluge of 2005 or even the 2006 train blasts, the terrorist assault on the city was catapulted into a geopolitical event. Part of the reason was the presence of foreigners in the two luxury hotels. The attack on the Jewish Center with Israeli citizens also ensured international coverage. The around-the-clock television broadcast of the three-day ordeal circulated the brutal drama widely, turning it into a global media event. The carnage at the train station that claimed the lives of many ordinary citizens became a mere footnote to the attention showered on the Taj, the Trident, and Nariman House. Hysterical on-the-spot reports by television correspondents, frenzied news anchors, and heated talk shows whipped up fear and paranoia. As the media reported details about the attackers' Pakistani origins, their hijacking of an Indian fishing vessel on the high seas, and the details of their murderous actions, Pakistan bashing and war talk became common.

While those who were held hostage, killed, and injured were subjected to unspeakable horror, for the rest of the city the event was a media experience. The spectacular images of flames engulfing the historic Taj and the bloody battle between the security forces and the terrorists produced intense fear and anger. The police, ordinarily reviled for its corruption and ridiculed as incompetent, suddenly rose in the public's estimation. The fallen policemen became instant heroes, and the security forces personnel were showered with bouquets and garlands. The verbal brickbats were reserved for the politicians.

In the media-generated frenzy, the fury against politicians was second only to the rage against Pakistan. Reports on the apparent ease with which the terrorists had sailed into the city, the unpreparedness of the police, their inadequate equipment, and the three-day blood-

bath whipped up antipolitician hysteria. A socialite-cum-journalist coined the slogan “Enough is enough” and directed it against politicians, which went viral. The slogan resonated particularly with the South Mumbai elites, who rarely bother to vote. They loudly proclaimed that the people had had enough of vote banks and slogan mongering; the need of the hour was accountability for the security failures. This opinion received prominent coverage in the media, and banners attacking politicians went up at key venues.

Underlying the antipolitician sentiment was a desire for politics as administration. This sentiment expressed frustration with the messiness of democracy and construed politics to mean the clean and efficient management of society. Even though this emotion was stirred up by the elites, it found resonance in the general public’s widespread dissatisfaction with politics—its dysfunction, cynicism, and corruption and its power brokering and influence peddling. Sensing the hostile mood, the politicians made themselves scarce. Even the Shiv Sena, which is usually first out of the gates in going after all things Pakistani, chose to remain invisible.

The terrorist attacks once again brought forward the frame of “crisis” to represent Mumbai’s condition. Only this time, it appeared larger, graver than on previous occasions; Mumbai’s problems became national and international. Underlying this sense of mortal crisis was an apprehension of total dysfunction expressed in the public’s antipolitician reaction. Mumbai could not even govern itself.

In light of the recent events, the dystopic mood about Mumbai’s future is understandable. It is a mood that echoes the current discourse among urban theorists who speak of the city as a thing of the past, its identity overrun and scrambled by explosive urbanization. There is no doubt that urbanization is a central force in the contemporary world. According to UN estimates, the world’s urban population has risen from 30 percent in 1950 to 47 percent in 2000, and it is expected to reach 60 percent by 2030.<sup>17</sup> Much of the developed world has been predominantly urban at least since the early twentieth cen-

tury as a result of capitalist industrialization and colonial and imperial expansion. The recent spurt in urbanization, therefore, is concentrated in the developing regions of the world. Mexico City, São Paulo, and Mumbai are experiencing explosive growth, outstripping the populations of cities such as London, Paris, and even New York. If Mumbai points to the future of urban civilization on the planet, Suketu Mehta writes, “God help us.”<sup>18</sup>

The spurt in urbanization is a matter not just of numbers but also of changes in the urban form. Suburbanization and “edge” cities encapsulate the transformation in the urban landscape in North America. Paris is no longer just the city that Baron Haussmann built but includes the towns connected to it by roadways, airports, and metro lines. The megacities of the developing world, swollen with rural immigrants, are burgeoning with slums and squatter settlements, pointing to the increasing urbanization of poverty and raising the specter of a “planet of slums.”<sup>19</sup> As the urban network extends to fill the spaces between the city and the countryside, we can no longer speak of a strict divide between the two. Increasingly, there are regional urban complexes, huge urban corridors (for example, the one connecting Hong Kong to Guangzhou), and not the earlier city-hinterland configuration. Cities are no longer internally coherent and bounded entities but parts of vast urban networks that are often regional and global in scale.

Urban theorists contend that capitalist globalization has also overwhelmed the modernist city of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.<sup>20</sup> Prototypical political movements and ideologies nursed in the heyday of modernist cities have lost their appeal, and new informational networks and “pirate modernity” have marginalized old urban solidarities.<sup>21</sup> As globalization produces different kinds of legal regimes and citizens, new hierarchies of cities and urban dwellers, it poses a new set of questions for citizenship, identity, and politics.<sup>22</sup> The nonlegal basis of urban existence and politics in the slums and squatter settlements of the global south mocks the classic ideal

of the city as the space of civil society and rational discourse.<sup>23</sup> Never realized in practice even in European cities, this ideal lies in ruins. The contemporary urbanization and its global processes and representations have destroyed the halo of this modernist urbanism. Today it is difficult to sustain the paradigmatic notion of modern cities as unified formations, securely located within their national borders and with clearly legible politics and society.

The media theorist Paul Virilio had predicted the dissolution of the city by media and communication.<sup>24</sup> But it was left to the architect and urban theorist Rem Koolhaas to celebrate the death of the modernist city and hail the emergent urban form—the “Generic City.” Writing in 1988, Koolhaas, the enfant terrible of urban theory, emphasized a shift from the center to the periphery, of fragmentation, and of spontaneous processes and described his research on the contemporary city as “a retro-active manifesto for the yet to be recognized beauty of the twentieth-century urban landscape.”<sup>25</sup> He followed this up by announcing and celebrating the arrival of “generic cities,” urban spaces indistinguishable from one another and modeled on the contemporary airport.<sup>26</sup> Koolhaas argued that like these airports, the emergent “generic cities” will look like one another—the same constellation of shopping malls and spatial arrangements, the same lack of uniqueness. Architecture and urban design will be uniform, freed of the weight of history and tradition. The generic city will be like a Hollywood studio lot, constantly destroyed and rebuilt.

Koolhaas’s nightmare scenario is meant to provoke, but there is a grain of truth in his interpretation and predictions. It is undeniable that certain generic urban forms and architectural designs are visible in city after city across the world. Shopping malls, cafés, restaurants, multiplex theaters, entertainment complexes, tall office towers, and apartment buildings dot the urban landscape worldwide. These are spaces that invoke a feeling of placelessness.

Drive through Shenzhen, the special economic zone in Mainland China, across from Hong Kong. Mile after mile, you will come across

fields of office and residential towers sporting a uniform style. Cafés, restaurants, and art spaces with a global look are springing up even in the old *hutong* areas of Beijing, now refurbished as traditional neighborhood theme parks. Walk into a mall in Tardeo or Andheri, or eat in the chic restaurants of Colaba and Bandra offering Mediterranean or nouvelle cuisines, and you could forget that you are in Mumbai. Coffeehouses filled with young cappuccino sippers dressed in generic global styles and fast-food chains crowded with families have become familiar sights, displacing the Irani cafés that have served the city's working and lower middle classes since the early twentieth century.

Gleaming apartment and office buildings that tower over tenements and slums in the old mill districts promise to transport the tenements' occupants away from the grim ground reality of Mumbai's poverty and grime. Media and advertising relentlessly express aspirations of global lifestyles and consumption. Place these developments alongside new infrastructure projects, including the recently commissioned Bandra-Worli Sealink, which is seen as a harbinger of developments to come that will lift Mumbai out of its communications misery, and you come face to face with the urban elites' dream of turning Mumbai into Shanghai. Never mind that many planners see these projects as exacerbating the overburdened north-south axis of the city. There is also the fact that, unlike China, India is a democracy. Thus, Mumbai's robust activism functions as a brake on the drive to impose from above the fantasy of a global city. Still, this does not prevent the elite from pushing for forms that look toward the "generic city." In fact, the Chinese example inspires builders and planner-bureaucrats to circumvent public scrutiny while promoting their schemes of malls, apartment and office towers, entertainment complexes, and infrastructures.

Urban change is indisputable, but the narratives of change from Bombay to Mumbai and the rise and fall of the city are deeply flawed. They conceive change as the transformation of one historical stage to

another, from the bounded unity of the city of industrial capitalism to the “generic city” of globalization, from modernity to postmodernity, from cosmopolitanism to communalism. However flawed, you cannot miss the widespread presence of this narrative. Pick up recent novels on the city, read nonfiction writings, turn the pages in newspaper and magazine files, talk to people, and you will be confronted with a story that purports to tell us what the city was as Bombay and what it has become as Mumbai.

This narrative is widely shared and deeply believed because it presents itself as historical fact. The nostalgic “tropical Camelot” and the dystopic city of slums appear as compelling bookends of Mumbai’s story because they seem to have the force of historical truth. In fact, it is a trick of history, inviting us to believe its Bombay-to-Mumbai tale as an objective reading of the past when it is a fable. To accept it at its face value is to get ensnared in the fabulous spell that history casts. What requires examination is the history of this fable. What enabled the composition of the city’s image as a “tropical Camelot” in the past, and what has produced the picture of the dysfunctional, out-of-control city of the present?

To ask what lies behind the very powerful fable about the city’s past and its present is to excavate the history of Mumbai’s life as a “soft city”; it is to examine what permitted the telling of certain stories and not others. My goal is not to strip fact from fiction, not to oppose the “real” to the myth, but to reveal the historical circumstances portrayed and hidden by the stories and images produced in the past and the present. I am interested in uncovering the backstories of Mumbai’s history because they reveal its experience as a modern city, as a society built from scratch. To some extent, all modern cities are patched-up societies composed of strangers. This is all the more the case with Mumbai, a city of immigrants that was sired by colonial conquest. What did it mean for people belonging to different castes, different religions, different regions, speaking different languages, to work and live together as a society? How was the image

of the cosmopolitan city composed to represent the patchwork of its ethnic and cultural multiplicity, at what cost, and how did it unravel? What social fantasies and imaginations has the city repressed and expressed through the course of its history? The backstories behind the fable promise to reveal Mumbai's experience of the modern city *as* society.

Now that the images of the cosmopolitan city lie shattered, deprived of the "aura" that they enjoyed in their own time, a new historical understanding of the past becomes possible. The fables of the city can be unraveled to reveal how they came to be. We can cast a fresh look at the remains of its Portuguese history and at the monumental structures erected by the British, turn over the soil of reclaimed lands, and read between the lines of official and unofficial documents. The shuttered textile mills, now overrun by residential and commercial towers, invite a fresh scrutiny of the enchantments of industrial progress that they once exuded and the aspirations and desires they stifled. The yellowing newspaper records and archival documents, the travel writings, social commentaries, and political treatises that exist outside their time promise to reveal what was masked in the past.

The whole city is open for an archaeological excavation, for turning over the material remains of its history to disclose what remains hidden under the weight of the petrified myths.<sup>27</sup> We can now uncover the historical experiences of forging a modern collective of different religions, classes, castes, and languages and undo the fables to lay bare the history of the city *as* society.

With these thoughts in my head, I hit the streets of Mumbai.