

# Three Decades of Living in Mumbai: Moments of Joy and Despair

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## **Landing up at Bombay (now Mumbai):**

Belonging to Western Uttar Pradesh and while completing my Ph.D. degree in Sociology at IIT, Kanpur, towards the end of 1978, I never thought of beginning my academic career in City of Mumbai (then Bombay). It was more by default than a planned effort. A colleague-student of mine collected an application form for an advertised Lecturer's post at the Tata Institute of Social Sciences (TISS), Mumbai. Those days, we scholars knew TISS more as the Institute of Prof. M.S. Gore (then Director of TISS) for his well-known name in Sociology Discipline within the country. My colleague did not apply for the post and was kind enough to hand over the application form to me, if I desired to apply. This is how, in Jan 1978, I came to attend interview for the Lecturer's post at TISS. Another reason to apply was to get an opportunity to meet one of my close friends who was employed at the BARC, and lived at Vashi (Navi Mumbai).

Those days, the last station on the harbour line was Mankhurd, and except a small ticket-office there, and nearby a bus-stop for then operating CIDCO buses (between Mankhurd and Vashi, popularly known as the 'green buses' due to their colour), the station gave a deserted look. Even those days, habit prevailed among the commuters to be the first ones in a queue for catching a bus. My friend who picked me up from the V.T. Station and then travelled by the local train to Mankhurd, instructed me to "jump to the other side of the platform" (on the railway track) even with a heavy bag that I carried. Puzzled, I enquired: "Why to take such a risk"? The prompt reply of my friend was: "...that would take

us first towards the bus stop". This was the first shock about difficult commuting life confronted by thousands of daily travelers to their work places in the city.

I stayed for two days with my friend who that time lived at Vashi. Then, this 'new city' (called New Bombay) was seen by Mumbaikars more sceptically — due to its far away location from the main city and its poor infrastructure. By 1978, only five Sectors of Vashi Node were developed, with two small restaurants, two flour mills and a few provision shops. If I recall correctly, there may not be more than a dozen cars, mainly owned by the doctors. The very next morning due to the strain of facing interview for the Lecturer's post at TISS, I got up early in the morning and decided to take a walk on virtually deserted streets of Vashi Node.

That time, the Thane-Belapur Hill (as I understand its name till today) looked so imposing with its panoramic view. I asked a passerby: "What is the name of that hill?" Starting at me with surprised eyes, the gentleman replied: "I think you are new to Bombay... who has time to give names to these hills?" This was the second shocking realisation, so soon, that if I get selected at TISS, the life in this City will be different and difficult. It so happened that I was chosen for the post, and after submitting my Ph.D. thesis at IIT, Kanpur, I joined TISS on May 2, 1978.

## **Staying at Deonar (near Chembur) and Shopping at Dadar**

Those days, beyond Dadar, suburbs including the Sion locality were small entities of habitation. This more applied to the eastern suburbs. The western suburbs developed faster due

to the located bollywood studios and residences of producers and actors. The Gujarati business class also preferred to settle in these developed western localities, or owned properties (including houses if they lived in the main city). By 'mid-seventies' the rapid growth of slums was visible, but concentrated hawking still was confined to the main city. I recall very well that within our limited income (around Rs.1000 a month), we used to go to Dadar for purchasing things beyond the daily use.

Thus, for purchasing items like clothes, shoes, garments, vessels etc. our favourite place was the Western Dadar where hawkers used to sell these items at reasonable rates. Till that period, the prevailing perception in Mumbai was that the poor were an inseparable part of creation of wealth in the city, as was a businessman or a professional. Therefore, tolerance (within existing socio-economic inequalities) was a part of Mumbai life. Though by late seventies, demolitions of slums here and there were visible, so were also the efforts of government towards social housing.

The large number of hawkers and posh market visible today all-around Chembur station were missing those days. The limited income of middle class and much lesser of the lower classes delimited their needs to the 'felt needs'. There was hardly any advertising for consumer products, even on emerging television — a status symbol those days. I recall very well that bringing a cooking gas connection in the house and a 'black and white' set of television during the early eighties' brought so much joy and celebration in my family.



I think he hopes to move into the free housing colony that the government is planning.

Space on Sale,  
R. K. Laxman

### Social Housing: 'Planning' Still Made Sense

Till the early eighties, regularly employed people in government offices or in industrial organisations aspired for rental housing facility (to be) provided by their employers. Paucity of housing and limited earning capacities did not allow residents from the lower middle or even middle classes to own a house. The growing deficit of housing stock, its rising demand and rapidly growing slums compelled the government to take some positive steps in the direction. The 'twenty year plan' 1973 for the city, still used to be the focus of attention of state government for taking appropriate measures, though

within very limited resources, to promote affordable social housing.

The World Bank, during the mid-eighties, promoted innovative project for creating over 45,000 serviced housing plots (near Malad and other parts of the city) for the slum dwellers and another 30,000 housing units for the lower middle class. Two key public housing agencies — the MHADA (or rather BHADAB) for the main city and the CIDCO for Navi Mumbai — brought hopes among the middle and lower-middle classes for getting a house through the former's social housing schemes. Slum Upgradation Programme (SUP) was also rightly seen as an approach to tackle slum housing, both by the planning and the civil society groups. Till then, the role of real estate remained mainly to the needs of housing and commercial structures for the rich class. The Urban Land Ceiling (& Regulation) Act of 1976 did not allow a free hand to the private developers and real estate forces.

During the late eighties and in such favourable environment, one of my faculty – colleagues at TISS invited me to join a housing society which was coming up on an allotted plot by the CIDCO at Vashi. Though reluctantly, I sold my land in the village, took loan from TISS and booked two-bedroom flat at Vashi. I am so thankful to my colleague and the CIDCO for making it possible. Today, no such housing plots are released by CIDCO. Rather each land plot auctioned by the CIDCO (obviously to the builders with adequate political clout) is full of scams. Today's officials of CIDCO, MHADA or SRA (the in-famous Authority to 'help' the poor to own a house through private developers) are very 'smart' in such deals.

The city, under so-called urban renewal, is on 'sale' by these facilitators for satisfying unlimited greed of builder-mafia and the politician cum entrepreneur. It is therefore not surprising that in the neighbourhood of TISS (the extended suburb of Mumbai) where ready-made bungalows were available for Rs.75,000, in 1980, today small flats are being sold by developers for nothing less than Rs.one crore. I keep on wondering if this is the philosophy of life that a city dweller should spend entire savings on having a roof over his/her head than spending it on comfortable living, family needs and children's future? The logic of 'city planning' is now by-passed by the development-forces, and the former keeps on chasing the latter. The planning of city for average Mumbaikar makes sense more in terms of getting adequate water and electric supply -- uninterruptedly if lucky, and protect his/her family from various day-to-day hazards. Be it in the form of fear of crime, road accident, fear of children's entry into bad company or threat to health due to over-stressed life. The worst is the status of 24 hour breathing of polluted gases. Still, people live in Mumbai with a pride, and thousands of others wait for the day of their entry into this city of 'gold and silver'. By the time they realize the trap of their living a 'dehumanised' life, I think it becomes too late for them to seek other options. The trap is complete, as by that time, their children aspire to live in this city of joy and illusions.

### The Joy of Watching It Raining Heavily

Being a farmer's son, even today it gives me immense pleasure to be closure to the nature -- be it a garden or a hill, and more so, seeing it raining heavily.

In Mumbai when monsoon is active, it pours and pours. It would be sheer joy to be closure to the window and see heavy spells of rain. During the rainy season it would be an added pleasure to see R.K.Laxman's fresh cartoon in the Times of India, and also the weather forecast by the meteorological department which, in majority of predictions, would turn out to be inaccurate. It would therefore be more fun than taking the forecast seriously. "A few passing showers" has been the favourite forecast of the department even if it rains the whole day. It would not be an exaggeration to say that my elders in the village used to predict better about the possible rains on a particular day. Even now I recall a

Weather Forecast,  
R. K. Laxman

Well, the forecast for the next few days, I think, is cloudy to clear skies mainly with one or two occasional showers!...



proverb about the prospects for rain (or drought) in our region: “Din ko baadal raat ko tare...chalo kant jahan hoin nivaare”( “if cloudy during the day and clear skies at nights, all possibility of drought— due to lesser chance of ‘low pressure formation for raining’... therefore, dear husband lets take our children and the cattles to the place where it rains”).

The fun of ‘guessing forecasts’ by the concerned department about rains in Mumbai still remains though Laxaman’s cartoons are missing in the newspaper. The monsoon is round the corner and the department has started sending the punches. Only yesterday (May 29, 2011), the department gave a forecast in newspapers that it would take two or three more days before this season monsoon reaches the Andaman islands. Today’s news is that the monsoon has already struck the eastern parts of Kerala.

### **The Theatre Culture: Bonanza to Its Lovers**

Among a few distinct plus points of living in the city of Mumbai, to me, are its uninterrupted electric power supply (thanks to the Tatas), and its positive work culture (even in government offices). About its heavy rains, I have already written in the preceding para. Rich theatre culture is an added bonanza particularly to the theatre-lovers. Whether it has emerged as a logical extension of very rich “tamasha” & theatre culture of Maharashtrian society, or an spill-over of the Bollywood culture, multi-lingual theatre has been flourishing in the city for decades. During my early years of career building, which usually brings stress to all of us in the initial phase, one thing that kept my passion high was

the visit to theatres whenever a good play was staged. Belonging to a village from Western Uttar Pradesh, my passion for viewing “nautanki” (equivalent of “tamasha” in Maharashtrian society) was endless. In Mumbai, to some extent, it was compensated by the Hindi & English theatre. Till today I repent for not learning Marathi and therefore missing a great opportunity of seeing Marathi plays. Even before the Prithvi Theatre took shape, under the able leadership of Jennifer Kapoor (Shashi Kapoor’s wife), a few plays (in Hindi) were performed at the Chhabildas High School Hall at Dadar, then by the team of Sulabha Deshpande, Arvind Deshpande and Nitin Seth (unfortunately the latter both great theatre personalities are no more). Once Prithvi Theatre took shape the IPTA and the group of Dinesh Thakur brought, first time, the Hindi-Theatre in limelight, which otherwise, was nowhere compared to the Marathi and even the Parsi theatre forms. Dinesh Thakur singlehandedly, contributed significantly to the Hindi theatre, and even today his passion for performing on the stage has not subdued.

An interesting event is worth-recalling here. Mudra Rakshas, a Hindi writer wrote a play: “Aala Afsar” in Nautanki-style. It was adapted from a famous play, “The Inspector - General”, written by Russian-writer, Nikolai Gogol. Dinesh Thakur decided to perform the play at Prithvi Theatre. With great difficulty, a “nagaara” player (a large drum as the main charm in “nautanki” performance) was summoned from Uttar Pradesh. The house was fully packed with the audience. Then, it was announced by Dinesh Thakur himself that the “nagaara” player while travelling in the

local train got lost at Vile Parle Station, and his colleagues are trying hectically to trace him. For next half an hour, Mr. Thakur waited with the audience and in his style chatted with it, as nothing could be done in absence of the ‘nagaara’ player. Finally the person arrived at the scene and the play was performed as a memorable event at the theatre.

Though it was a costly affair those days : purchasing a drama ticket for two rupees and spending another two rupees on to and fro bus travel all the way from eastern suburb (Deonar) to western suburb (Juhu-Church). It also meant returning home by mid night if the show timing was 9 p.m., and then facing quarrel in the family. But my passion was such and I could see good performances of plays, like: “Aadhey Adhurey” (written by Mohan Rakesh); “Urdhwast Dharamshala” (written by G.P. Deshpande); “Giddh” (original “Gidhare” written by Vijay Tendulkar); “Aur Tota Bola”; “Evam Indrajit”, and so on. Those days, Amrish Puri, Om Puri, A.K. Hangal, Dinesh Thakur, Safi Inamdar and Reema Lagu were some of the favourite artists. When the NCPA (now the Bhabha Theatre) came into existence at the Nariman Point, it gave more options for seeing performances, but the stumbling block emerged in the form of heavy traffic with thousands of vehicles on city roads. The cost of tickets also went up steeply. With great disappointment, I reduced visiting these theatres. In couple of past few years, I might have seen only a few plays, performed very occasionally by one or two theatre groups at Mysore Association Auditorium at Matunga. This is the only possibility in terms of distance due to my living at Vashi for last several years. Though there is a huge auditorium

at Vashi, there are no performances of Hindi plays there. I do not know its reason.

### **The Bollywood Culture: A Mix of Reality and Illusions**

A lot has been written on the Mumbai’s ‘filmi culture’, I need not to repeat it. Only a few observations will be worth-mentioning. If Mumbai’s film industry produced most of the “masaala” movies (a mix of everything), it also had to its credit several great performances by actors, directors and musicians. I can’t forget movies like “Daamol”; “Bhumika”; (old) “Pyar Kiye Ja”; “Angoor”; “Padosan”; and “Jane Bhi Do Yaaro”. Recently, comedies like “Hangaama”; “Khosla Ka Ghosla” and “Maalamaal Weekly” have been my favourites. Particularly, “Khosla Ka Ghosla” – I might have seen it more than 20 times (on T.V.) due to its wonderful script, being so close to the reality of ‘real estate’. My researching on ‘mega cities’ got lot of inspiration from the film through its focusing on the emerging opportunism and money culture, and high arrogance of the neo-rich, particularly in the city of Delhi. The city of national capital is virtually in the grip of brokers, thugs and opportunists who are spread all around in forms of politicians, babus, builders, business groups and professionals. Given the situation, the poor gets worst treatment in this city, leaving even Mumbai far behind.

Coming back to the Mumbai’s filmi culture, I salute the lyricists and music composers of old Hindi Film music, who crated immortal songs. A majority of them came from the “faakamasti” (ordinary) background but created the genius that would never be repeated. These songs interpreted Indian society

and its culture in so many ways and so vividly. The lovers of music of very old days should not miss a recently brought out compact disc (CD) by the Times Music (under its “Sa Re Ga Ma’ series) entitled: ‘The History of Indian Film Music, 1930s and 1940s’. Its really a sad commentary that when millions of rupees are offered to musicians today, there are no talents worth the name which could produce to any extent such an appealing music of the olden times. Particularly on Mumbai City’s life, the song: “Yeh Hai Bombay Meri Jaan” of the film: CID (composed in 1956), song written by Sahir, and sung by Rafi and Geeta Dutt is relevant even today in depicting the multi-facet life (and struggle) of common people in this city.

While closing the discussion on ‘Bollywood Culture of Mumbai City’, it would be worth-mentioning the state of affairs of T.V. serials, in the context of my passion for theatre and Nautankee. Though the ‘business’ always drived the wheels of Bollywood or T.V. productions, the “Saas-Buhu” serials and so-called realty shows meant for 10-12 years old children for dancing and singing (and thus exposed to the ‘glamour’ world at such a tender age) have done pretty harm to Indian family values, and are virtually destroying the very concept of healthy entertainment. A parallel event happening on T.V. screen is the ‘comedy (laughter) shows’. These were started with a very positive and wonderful entertainment show compered and presented by talented Shekhar Suman, and named as “Movers and Shakers”. The talented and humourous programme may not have proved viable for its business prospects, and therefore, it paved way for a more common entertaining programme:

the ‘comedy show’ which, in fact, is a ‘modernised’ version of “swaang” --- an inseparable part of Nautankee or Tamaasha of the olden days. The latter would be performed by the jokers (sometimes also the “sutradaar”) who would do ‘fill in the gaps’ by entertaining audience through their jokes, manytimes with ‘double meaning’. Today, the “swaang” form has taken multi-forms (through competitive pairs) for inacting comedy on T.V. through mimicry and (vulgar) jokes. The sad (or surprising) part of such shows is that their vulgarity in dialogue delivery has far surpassed the “swaang” forms. Not only that, popular T.V. actors are making beelines for such shows. In any case, what is vulgar or non-vulgar is fast losing its meaning in the present media-dominated world.

#### The Crime Culture of Mumbai City

No Mumbaikar is unaware or ignorant about the decades long crime culture prevailing in the city. Since long, the city has had a dubious distinction as the ‘financial capital’ and also the ‘crime capital’ of India. The ‘under world’ concept of western world took its form and firm roots in the city. It is not intended to write a treatise here on this crime culture in the city, but only a few passing comments. These become relevant due to one of my Ph.D. students writing a Ph.D. thesis on the “Youths in Hardcore Crime in Mumbai”. In the process, I became interested in trying to understand the relationship between ‘development’ and crime. I greatly enjoyed cartoons of R.K. Laxman in the Times of India, under the brand-title: “You Said It”. He made several excellent cartoons on crime, criminals and law-and-order agencies (particularly the Mumbai police). Traditionally, crime

in the city grew along with the dubious business and deviant acts (smuggling of goods, “hawala” rackets -- money laundering, thefts on sea-port, betting, and so on). With growing business (more with unaccounted money), the small time criminals formed their gangs and gradually expanded them through “extortions” and “protection money” rackets. Once the real estate boom gripped the city through the builder mafia, the extortion and protection money to the underworld brought a turn over of 10 to 15 percent of the builder’s profits. The ‘crime-companies’ (as popularly known in the crime world) threatened the security of business activity, more so during the early nineties. The government had to finally crack down on the underworld in a big way. Over 140 hardcore criminals were shutdown. One can find a vivid account of the crime world in a confidential report for the Crime Branch, prepared by the former Police Commissioner of Mumbai, Mr. M.N. Singh.

By this time, the so-called ‘white collar crime’ took over the crime culture from hardcore criminals to the world of business, politics and “babus”. Scams after scams started unfolding (or remained concealed) due to unholy nexus between the three, who in the name of ‘urban renewal’ and turning Mumbai into a ‘world class city’ turned the spaces of city from their use value to exchange value and finally into the forces of development. In the process, the distinction between a gentleman and a criminal got blurred — again, so wonderfully portrayed by R.K. Laxman through several cartoons. One such cartoon that I would never forget referred to a constable who was overwhelmed due



to catching a pick-pocket red-handed. He took the pick-pocket to the Police Station and expected the boss to put him behind the bars. Instead of getting complements for his brave act, his boss shouted at the constable: “Are you crazy! Where shall I keep this pick-pocket? There are only five shells for detaining the criminals. The first one is occupied by Mantriji (the Minister), the second by the Managing Director of a Company, the third-one by one of our own police official... leave this pick-pocket free immediately”. This is the changing form of crime in India: ‘development induced crime’. I wish that some good research institute emerges in the country to

Hello, it's me! Now that everyone knows about the nexus. I thought I could come through the front door!

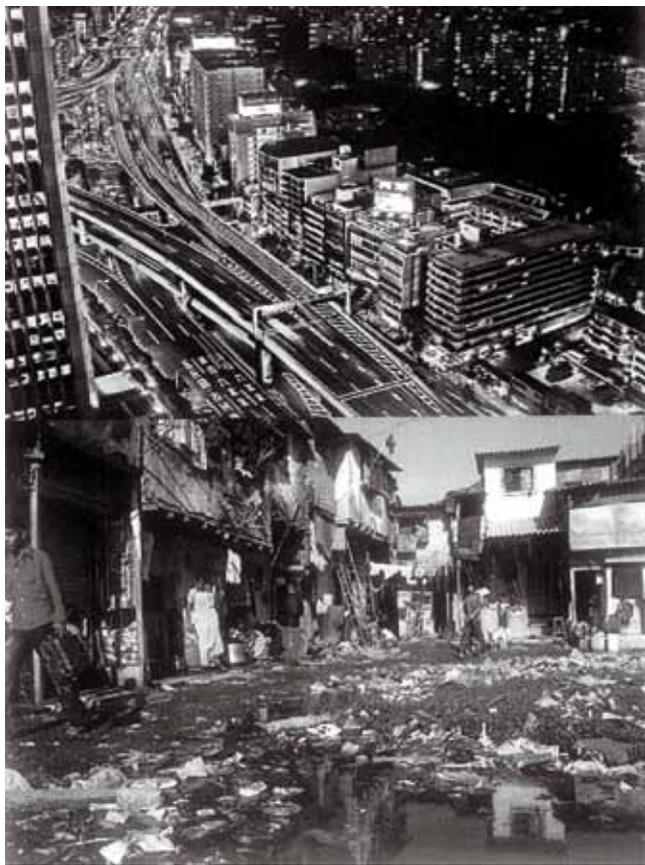
Criminal Nexus,  
R. K. Laxman

research the fast changing forms of crime. Presently, a few studies on the subject are more in the tradition of 'governmental criminology' and poorly done.

### Turning Mumbai into a 'World Class City': The Final Blow to Average Mumbaikar

About a dozen of key mega cities in the country control and command the direction of use of capital, mainly the (super) profit seeking capital. These cities are not only sucking their regions of influence but even far reaching areas. The talk of 'regional' or 'sustainable' development has turned into rhetoric

Mumbai Contrast



in the 'shining India'. Mumbai in any case continuing a key role as financial capital of the country, took the lead into its transformation for attracting foreign capital and turning it into the city of 'quality living' for international experts, CEOs, the neo-rich and the wealth-amassing politicians and bureaucrats. "Adarsh" (a housing society) with its mis-nomer name as 'ideal' presents a tip in the iceberg. Even the schemes meant for the poor are turning into instruments of corruption, greed and mockery of urban planning. As stated in one of the issues of 'Mumbai Reader' only, 'the poor has turned into currency in the housing market in the form of TDR' and 'the planning now chases the construction boom'.

In the process, the unprivileged poors of Mumbai are being displaced in thousands from their dwellings located in 'strategic' places and being dumped into the city-peripheries. The 'right to city' (David Harvey) stands infringed and encroached upon in favour of the privileged. The struggle for survival of the poor in this city has intensified further. The mega projects (or mega-scams) have become the logic of planning, or planning in conventional sense has lost its meaning in a highly divided city for its citizens.

### BEST: The Best

As mentioned earlier, a few things/activities have remained unique and remarkable in this city. The uninterrupted electric power supply (Thanks to the TATAs), the BEST buses and a high work-culture, to me, are a few such assets of the city. One should not over look the contribution of ever-running local trains. But the BEST buses are really a wonderful gift to commuting-citizens,

thanks to the great contribution of their drivers, conductors and the management. I have been travelling for over 20 years by BEST buses between Vashi (in Navi Mumbai) and my work place (the TISS at Deonar). Though it's a relatively short commuting distance, but through what I observed, the patience of drivers and conductors of BEST buses deserves all the praise. More so inspite of the fact that, everyday, they inhale poisonous gases for 6 to 8 hours. I have never seen them losing their patience even on occasions of dispute. Even the bus breaks down and accidents are quite rare. My salute to the BEST and its driving forces. Local trains perform a similar role, but seeing commuters huddled like animals in train-compartments, I keep on wondering whether this is the philosophy of 'dignified life' of citizens of a city? Is it also necessary that over one crore people should live, more a dehumanized life, and breathe poisonous gases for 24 hours a day? That also in a country which consists of over 5000 cities and towns? I doubt whether the paradigm of development under 'shining India' shall now disperse the agglomeration economies to small cities and towns, which have turned into 'children of lesser god'.

To conclude, I lived a rather mixed life in Mumbai with moments of joy and despair. Many more, like me, may have similar or dis-similar views about



this 'great' city. TISS brought me a good academic career and a purposeful life, for that, I am grateful to this institution. I have expressed my views on the Mumbai-life as I experienced and understood. I have to leave the city (due to family compulsions) next year, on my retirement from TISS. I shall move to a small city, and in the last phase of my life, I would seek some fresh air and open spaces – which are now a rare possibility in Mumbai City.

The driver? He has gone to have lunch and will be back before the jam clears up.

Traffic Jam,  
R. K. Laxman