Icons of Mumbai

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I have fond memories of growing up in the city of Mumbai. I was fortunate to grow up in a middle class family deeply involved in the political, social, and creative life of the city. Throughout their tumultuous political lives, my parents maintained a balance between pursuing the Gandhian socialist revolution of their dreams and enjoying the artistic, social, literary, and culinary flavour of the city. Some of the key landmarks of Mumbai remind me of a wide variety of experiences that shaped my personality, my curiosity, and my dreams for a better life.

Public Spaces

Every year on 9 August a large group of citizens from Mumbai gather at the statue of Lokmanya Tilak at Girgaum Chowpatty and walk silently to the August Kranti Maidan where Mahatma Gandhi gave the British rulers an ultimatum to "Quit India" on 9 August 1942. Even today the statue of Tilak at Chowpatty reminds me of that ritual.

The Rajabhai Tower in South Mumbai, our own version of London's Big Ben, reminds me of the intellectual traditions of Mumbai. It stands within the Fort campus of the Mumbai University where my father taught nuclear physics for 25 years. I had numerous opportunities to attend citizen's meetings in the University Hall, where community members held passionate discussions on various issues facing the city and the country.

The Chabildas High School, under the Tilak Bridge in Dadar, represents the history of experimental theatre in Mumbai. Within the Mumbai theatre community it was often referred to as the Chabildas movement. To make their way to the Chabildas High School theatre lovers from all over Mumbai had to find their way through the crowded back alleys of Dadar.

Dharavi is also located in Mumbai. It is a part of the Mumbai north central parliamentary constituency, for which my mother ran for parliamentary elections twice. The campaign took me deep inside Dharavi and to other slums, making me acutely aware of the plight of those who have to survive in subhuman living conditions. It is ironic that while, in 2009, Mumbai was named "Alpha World City" (or a global city) in recognition of its direct and tangible influence on global affairs, Mumbai's key problem continues to be the disparity in living conditions of the rich and the poor.I grew up with the realisation that as long as the billion-plus people living in the underdeveloped villages of India do not find opportunities for earning a livelihood near their homes, they will continue to migrate to the cities, and slums such as Dharavi will continue to grow and put pressure on urban infrastructure.

A visit to the zoo in Mumbai's Lalbaug area as a child left a profound impression of Mumbai in my mind.

My first face-toface encounter with the king of the jungle, the lion, was in the Mumbai zoo. Looking at the frail body of this creature made me wonder why he was called the king of the jungle. He looked more like a tuberculosis patient in the KEM hospital. This encounter was my first awareness of the impact of pollution on wildlife.

The beaches of Mumbai – Chowpatty, Dadar Chowpatty, and Juhu – provide one quintessential experience every resident of Mumbai will cherish for a lifetime: eating bhelpuri and pani puri. As I watched people of different cultural backgrounds and economic strata enjoy a plate of bhelpuri sitting on the sands of Chowpatty, I gained respect for the plurality of Mumbai. I also noticed a dark side of the middleclass life at the beaches of Mumbai – lovelorn couples would cuddle up in the corners, hoping to go unnoticed in the crowds. It made me aware of how many residents of Mumbai did not even enjoy privacy in their homes to share a few intimate moments with their loved ones.

I admit that my childhood impressions of Mumbai are tainted by the strong influence of Marathi traditions, middle-class values, and a socialist ideological atmosphere in my home. Therefore icons of contemporary, prosperous, and cosmopolitan Mumbai, such as the Taj Mahal Hotel, the National Centre for the Performing Arts (NCPA), Prithvi Theatre, Kanchenjunga Building, and Malabar Hills failed to leave deep emotional imprints on my mind. As I moved away from Mumbai and lived for extended periods of time in Panchgani, Ahmedabad, New Delhi, Lucknow, Columbus, Ohio, Boston, Massachusetts, and San Francisco, California, my memories have turned into a stew of intercultural awareness.

Working in the field of design innovation, I travel around the world talking to people about their lives and dreams. I have begun to appreciate that people hold different perspectives

on life, and learned to enjoy seeing the world from someone else's point of view. Today when I go back to Mumbai, I look at the city I grew up in with a new lens, inspired more by ideas than by ideologies, values rather than by dogmas, and curiosity rather than preconceived notions. My memories of Mumbai are revived when I visit old icons, and my pride in and concern for Mumbai grows as I see the new icons of Mumbai.

Mumbai has three new icons. The first one is the Bandra-Worli Sea Link. To me it symbolises the engineering excellence India has achieved over the years. Today Indian professionals are recognised worldwide for their innovative, entrepreneurial, and managerial skills. I feel proud that the Bandra-Worli Sea Link adorns the skyline of Mumbai. At the same time, I also remember the small fishermen whose livelihoods were dependent on catching fish around the Mahim Creek. As a child I visited the Fishermen's Colony, built as an alternate accommodation by the government when the original homes closer to the water were demolished for reclamation. I wonder now what happened to those same fishermen when we built the Bandra-Worli Sea Link over the waters they once fished in.

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Another icon of Mumbai is the numerous malls that have surfaced in different parts of Mumbai. Malls worldwide have become key symbols of consumerism. They stimulate economies by enticing people to buy things they do not need, entertain teenagers by providing public spaces to hang out in, and they stand out as a visual barometer for economic strength. The malls near

my middle-class community of Dadar remind me of the hundreds of thousands of mill workers who fought a losing battle against clothing mills shutting down under the leadership of Datta Samant for several years. The malls, constructed at the sites where clothing mills once provided livelihoods to many workers who migrated from their villages, make me wonder what happened to the families of those workers. I wonder if India's liberalised economy has provided new opportunities for them to earn a living.

A recent addition to Mumbai's new icons is Antilia, the single-family home of India's richest industrialist, Mukesh Ambani. The 176-metre-tall building is Mumbai's tallest. Each of its 27 floors has a ceiling height that is twice as high as a standard apartment. The Ambani home has three helipads on top, hanging gardens, a swimming pool within the structure, a two-story health centre, parking spaces for 168 cars (spread over six floors), a floor exclusively for servicing these automobiles, and a floor for home theatre with a seating capacity of 50. The house has a staff of 600 to serve a family of six – Mukesh, his wife, three children, and his mother. The Ambani home stands out as a symbol of new Indian riches. It reminds me of the Palace of Versailles in France, which even today represents the lifestyle of a monarchy that was oblivious to the hardships of its people.

The architecture and interior features of Antilia reveal a lot about the mindset of its occupants, compared to the homes of other billionaires. Warren Buffet, an American investor, industrialist, and philanthropist was ranked as the world's second wealthiest person in 2009. He is

known worldwide for his adherence to the value-investing philosophy and for his personal frugality despite immense wealth. He has pledged to give away 99% of his fortune to philanthropic causes. With a net worth of $36 billion, Buffet lives in the same home in Omaha, Nebraska, that he bought in 1958 for $31,500. All the homes in his neighbourhood are more expensive than his.

Bill Gates, the world's richest person, has built a home on the side of a hill overlooking Lake Washington in Medina, Washington state. The 66,000 sq ft (6,100 m2) house is noted for its design and the technology it incorporates. It is nicknamed Xanadu 2.0. Key features of Bill Gates' "home of the future" include centrally controlled music, "smart" lighting, and video-wall entertainment.

Bill Gates, Warren Buffet, and Mukesh Ambani have all built homes that reveal where their sense of self-worth comes from. Warren Buffet's modest dwelling is characteristic of his humility, and Bill Gates' home reflects his commitment to transforming the world with technology, whereas Mukesh Ambani's new home symbolises a culmination of a life spent in pursuit of wealth, power, and influence.

I recognise that like Bill Gates and Warren Buffet, Mukesh Ambani has

the right to build a home that reflects his self, his riches, and his success in building a mammoth industrial empire. The success of the Ambani family inspires millions of stockholders of Reliance and many other ordinary citizens of India who hope to emulate Dhirubhai's rags-to-riches story.

The new icons of Mumbai are representative of the contemporary, liberalised, capitalist mindset of India. India is surging into the future, and it is a matter of natural consequence that Antilia should rise above all the other buildings of Mumbai to remind others across the ocean that India is catching up with the rest of the world. Antilia rises high above the Gateway of India, our own Arc Du Triumph and a reminder of India's days of slavery under the British rule. It rises above the Rajabhai Tower, a symbol of intellectual traditions of Mumbai.

It rises above the Lokmanya Tilak statue, a reminder of a long-abandoned 9 August ritual. Antilia and Mumbai have a very interesting relationship. The residents of Antilia can look down upon Mumbai feeling good about the life they left behind, whereas the ordinary citizens of Mumbai, on a clear day, can look up into the sky and dream about a better life, a view of which will, on most days, be lost in dark clouds of corruption, red tape, and social, cultural, and economic disparities.