

1. Rain

Out there in the rain – feeling it sting, barely able to see for water streaming down my face, wading through the near-river that is rising by the minute, soaking in this luxurious essence of Bombay – in this roaring downpour that I've come out to feel and enjoy, I don't yet understand that this is the stuff of records. July 26 2005 sees the wettest and heaviest few Bombay hours in years. I have no idea of what it is doing to my city as I frolic. I am unaware that there is already catastrophic flooding, that a landslide in a crowded slum has already snuffed out several dozen lives. No, I prance about in unalloyed joy, sharing it with many others who are out in the rain like I am. For now, we dance.

While it lasts, it is a thrill. But it's not long before reality comes home with the water. Within the hour, we start hearing the news. And then, for the next several days, it is dismal.

That night, the rain brings three inadvertent guests. First, the old woman who lives in the nearby flowerbed, a ragged sheet of plastic her only shield from the wet. My wife found her balling out water, or mud really, from the flowerbed; a futile exercise given how fiercely the water buckets down on her. Second, from the apartment downstairs whose owner is away travelling, the young man who works there. He steps outside to clean something, and the wind slams the front door shut behind him. With no way to get back in, he comes up to us. Third, his friend who works in a nearby garment store. With no hope of getting back to her home in a distant suburb, she comes here hoping to stay in their apartment for the night. She ends up in ours. The hours we share in tentative, but growing, camaraderie is something else that is happening across this city that I'm unaware of. Over the next several days, there is an endless stream of stories, heartening in the sadness: strangers finding a way out of predicaments together, urchins delivering biscuits to stranded drivers, college students cooking for bus passengers, constables in heroic rescues...the spirit of this city, they call it, and who would have thought that a great deluge would pull it from our eternally choked roads and drains?

And that was the story of this calamity. The thrill of the water, tempered by the savagery of its destruction, marinated in human tragedy, and all that kneaded with the spirit of a city – the result is this great Bombay story of irony and upliftment, hope and sorrow.

And in some ways, the irony and the story itself were at their most pointed in Saki Naka.



Source: Rajesh Vora

Saki Naka is north of Bombay's airport, a densely-packed area of the city that might just stand for 21st Century urban India.

Grimy workshops and matchbox shacks, alongside pristine glass-sheathed structures – the banks and BPO firms at the leading edge of India's service industry.

The contrast, as so often in India, is ironic, almost surreal. You emerge from some of the world's spiffiest office space right into filth on the road. Vendors have set up their stalls in the muck, people step gingerly through it, traffic stop-starts past it.

Three days after the downpour, there's even more filth than usual. This only heightens the irony.

Up the road from the slush, from the sleek temples of modern India, the rain caused a hill to collapse.

Like fast-growing mold, slum hutments have cloaked that hill in recent years. When the deluge set the slope sliding, the flimsy huts on the crest tumbled onto the mud and boulders, and the entire mess crashed onto more flimsy huts below. Nobody knows quite how many huts disappeared – I hear numbers from 60 all the way up to 300 – but over the next three days, rescue workers brought out 75 bodies.

Three of those emerge the afternoon I'm at the site, and this is how it goes.

With some difficulty, the workers lift a body from the boulders and lay it on their stretcher. "Do it carefully!" voices yell, and "We need some rope!" They cover it with an incongruous gold sheet; over that, they wrap a blanket, then a red sheet, then they tie it all down with a strip ripped from the gold.

The stretcher passes down the long line of uniformed rescue workers. Four men carry it along the muddy road to a door with a handpainted sign that says: "Moon Engineering Works, Saki Naka."

Just so is Sunita Yadav, 27-year-old wife of Ramdayal Yadav who trudges in tears behind her, extricated from this collapsed hillside.

It has taken nearly four days of boulder-shifting and body-extracting to get Sunita – the 71st body – out. Ramdayal has stood here through each of those sad wet hours, knowing his family was destroyed but needing a measure of closure, needing to see their bodies emerge. With Sunita, the rescue men found their three-year-old son, Pravin. An hour earlier, they had brought Komal, their little girl, down from the rocks: a bundle so small, so wispy, that it is only because she's on the stretcher that I know this was once a one-year-old daughter.

The men set all three bodies down side-by-side in the shack that was once "Moon Engineering Works" but that this landslide has turned into a makeshift morgue. Two bored-looking – 71 bodies and counting, after all – city workers spray them with a thin grey liquid pumped from a bucket.

Just so do Sunita, Pravin and Komal – this mother and her two children who died when the hill fell out from under their shack and the boulders crushed them as they tumbled through the rain and mud – just so does Ramdayal's entire family get their last rites. The Bombay Municipal Corporation sprays them with disinfectant. Watching this happen, I begin to feel like a voyeur, looking in on these lives destroyed. So I turn away, and nearly bump into Dr Manoj Pande. The doctor is trying to find a particular family. Leaning into a dark room filled with silent injured men, he asks: "You know where they are? That tall man with the bandage on his face, remember him? Where's he? I have to find him quickly!" The silent men don't know. Dr Pande has a crumpled, damp sheet of paper torn from a school notebook, and he needs to give it to the family in question. In a slanting scrawl across the faint blue lines, the sheet has these lines:

This is to certify that Baby Radha and Baba Durgash Bhahraiche is suffering from cut And wound pain because major landslide in Hill no 3 Sakinaka Mumbai 72. Please urgent admit in hospital.

Thanks, yours.
Jatinder Khandage
Senior Inspector of Police, Saki Naka police station.

Radha and Durgash and their father, nobody knows where they are. But if they want medical attention after this disaster, they will need this wet note. Which is hard to believe. For why shouldn't a hospital simply take note of the kids' wounds and admit them? Why should they need a letter from the police that certifies not just their complaint, but that it was caused by this landslide? Who knows?

So Dr Pande continues down the road. Asking, asking. Dejected, I return through the mud to the hillside, and now there's more irony to get used to. This is not the first time, I learn; this hill has collapsed before. "The last time, in two-zero-zero-one", says a man standing near me, spelling out the year in English for no clear reason. That slide wasn't nearly as disastrous as this one. But within days in two-zero-zero-one, huts were back on the crumbly slope. Why would anyone actually choose to live with risk like this? One answer: it's not much of a choice, really. In 21st Century Bombay that generates jobs hand-over-fist, affordable rental housing is a mirage that too many people chase. There are reasons for that, and this is hardly the place to go into them, but the mirage is real enough for millions. So the one relatively easy way to get a few square feet to call home is to pay some slum tough a few thousand rupees. In turn, he might set you up on the Saki Naka hill.

And another irony is that in the periodic paroxysms of "slum clearance" that convulse this city, some people from this Saki Naka hillside were actually housed in apartment blocks nearby, built under various slum "redevelopment" schemes. But many who moved there could not afford the few hundred rupees (about \$15) they had to pay each month. So their electricity and water supplies were cut off. So they moved back. You pay the slum tough, at least you get a place to call your own, access to water and even a possibly stolen electricity connection. With all that, you're willing to take the risk of the ground falling out under you. The cruelty of life, and death, in India's biggest and richest city. Reaching the site of the landslide, where rescue machinery and personnel are at work, is difficult. It is a much potholed road, nearly blocked off at one point by a huge pile of trash, and suddenly our rickshaw cannot go further. We walk the rest of the way, through lanes wide enough only for one, lined with open drains and trash, awash in rainwater. They lead us through the innards of the slum in a series of abrupt turns. But the final stretch is nearly a boulevard, wide enough for a truck to use. Underfoot is mud – slippery, gleaming mud in rutted heaps left by truck after truck, that we have no choice but to step into. This strip slopes gently up to a roughly rectangular space right against the hill, where we are surrounded by the enormous boulders and assorted rubble of the landslide. On top of the rubble, like praying mantises waving huge arms, are four excavators clearing the debris with their articulated limbs, squat dervishes swivelling about. Make that three excavators. One lies still, even more incongruous for being so. The terrain is so difficult that its looped tread has actually come off the wheels. Using crowbars, three men try to fit it back. Their very demeanour says they know they won't succeed. Apart from those three and their silent hulk, everything on the hill works to an efficient rhythm: no haste, no idleness, just steadily going at it. The digging and probing, the lifting of rubble, the loading and coming and going of trucks.

But when the men are ready to bring out a dead body, everything stops. There on the rocks, another poor victim of this muddy catastrophe gets a moment of respect. Watching the excavators at work, you can't help wonder: how did these machines get here? Answer: like the rest of us did, along that muddy boulevard. And here's one final irony in this hillside tragedy. Remember, there was no road before the deluge. To take rescue equipment to the site of the collapse, the Municipality had to drive a road through the slum. To do that, they had to raze several dozen more huts. To reach the victims of a landslide that destroyed over a hundred huts, the rescuers had to destroy still more huts. The cruelty, once more.

2. The issue

The July 26 deluge brought residents of this city face-to-face with many of the maddeningly intricate urban tangles here. One of those: migration into the city, whose great volume is often cited as the reason we have slums like in Saki Naka. Have to stop the immigrants! the cry will go up from time to time, and they'll get beaten up at railway stations, or commentators will write importantly about the need for a permit system to control the numbers entering the city. And in the hubbub, there are two things you will hear most often about migration into cities like Bombay. One, that yes, people are flooding in. The figure of 300 families a day has been repeated for at least a generation. In an April report, "Newsweek" upped that, reporting that migrants are "pouring into the city at the rate of some 400 families a day." Two, that migrants are criminals who live on the streets and turn the city into a cesspool. A local politician, Raj Thackeray, recently pronounced to the paper "Mid-Day" that while "educated people, decent people, have been coming and living here for years," his problem was with others who "come and spread filth."

Both of these assertions can stand some questioning. In 1995, an organisation called the Centre for Research & Development published a "Socio-Economic Review of Greater Bombay". The CRD was chaired by a man who used to be the senior-most bureaucrat in the state. His team included senior Government officials and professors at Bombay University. Data came from different Government departments, agencies such as the Municipality and the Metropolitan Region Development Authority, census figures and other publications. The point is, there should be no doubt about the authority of this Review, nor the credentials of its authors. In the decade 1981-91, the Review says, 2,83,000 people migrated into Bombay. That is, on each day of that decade, 78 people entered the city. Taking the generally accepted norm of 5 people per family, that's 16 families. Not 300 or 400, but sixteen. Migration was at its peak in the '70s, when it averaged less than 60 families a day. Besides, measured as a fraction of the city's growth, migration sank below 50% during the '60s and has continued to fall. And what about that other contributor to growth, babies? In 1991, says the Review, about 2,17,000 babies were born in the city, or 595 each day. Compare to the migration figure of 78 a day. Or: for every two people who travelled into Bombay during 1991, 15 more were born here. The Review notes this trend: "Natural increase contributed most (83%) to the growth of Bombay's population in 1981-91." A caveat here: The Review notices that migration declined sharply during the '80s, and speculates that the 1991 Census likely undercounted Bombay's population to an extent. But even using "more plausible" projections from earlier data, the Review concludes that migration into Bombay in the 1980s was at 241 people a day. Or 48 families. The 2001 Census only confirmed the decline (see, for example, "Bombay Times", May 5 2003): in the 1990s, 200 people entered Bombay every day. 40 families. It's easy to blame migrants for the conditions in the city, as people did on that disastrous July 26. It's as easy to blame only those migrants who end up on streets, or in slums. The image of a tide of filthy immigrants is one of those cherished middle-class myths, polished and put on display from time to time. "Those dirty illegal encroachers!" I've heard people say of slum dwellers, and "they breed like rabbits!" Thackeray told "Mid-Day": "These people don't pay electricity bills, don't pay water tax, they don't pay rent!" And one memorable time, a friend offered this: "They only come here to make money! I don't approve of that at all!"

White collar, middle class people who move to Bombay get no blame. They are, Thackeray would have it, "decent people." "Decent people", I suppose, come here only to fly kites, or roll in the surf at the beach. Even if it's a good bet that most "decent people" evade income tax: this is a country where just one in every five eligible taxpayers actually pays up. That aside, the truth remains: the major contributor to the growth of the city is natural. Births. So if Bombay seems ready to burst, the fault is overwhelmingly that of its own fertile residents. And so you don't prevent disasters like at Saki Naka merely by closing the city's doors.

3. Lessons

Saki Naka was by no means the only area of the city affected in the July downpour; and other areas were affected in different ways. Yet that landslide captures something of the urban conundrums that we all face in this vast city: housing, poverty, migrants, slums, garbage, drainage. About slums in particular, four brief lessons: One, what Saki Naka says is that you cannot tackle the problem of slums by demolishing them. Last December and January, the city government razed some 90,000 slum shacks, leaving half a million residents suddenly homeless. Now nobody would willingly live on a dangerous slope unless there was nowhere else to live. But demolishing slum houses only leaves a huge pool of people who need housing. Unable to find something affordable, they move into other slums, or create new ones. Some of those, on dangerous slopes, for it's all they can afford. If years of slum demolitions have shown us anything, it is that they only perpetuate slums.

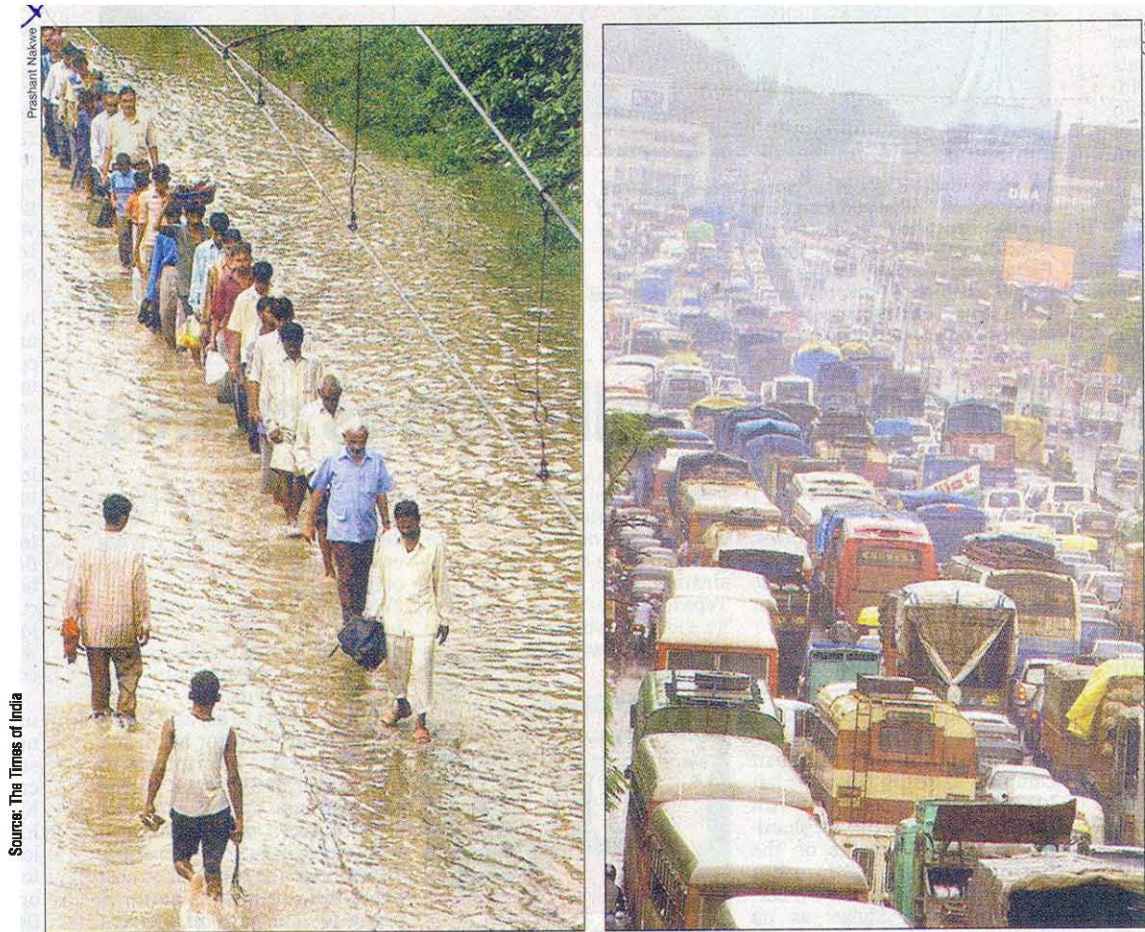
Two, people who need housing must be able to find alternatives to slums. That is, affordable rental housing must be easily and widely available. But as the Government's own "Regional Plan for Bombay Metropolitan Region, 1996-2011" observed in 1995, the "Rent Control legislation [has] had negative impact on creation of new rental housing."

As in other parts of the world, rent control, dating back to just after the War, is the single greatest barrier to building rental housing. Side-by-side with not demolishing slums, rent control legislation must go, or be substantially modified. Builders must find it profitable to build for the rental market, and particularly for lower income groups, neither of which they are motivated to do today.

Three, give slum dwellers electricity and Municipal services like any other residents, charging them like any other resident is charged. Few in the middle-class understand that slum dwellers are willing to pay for services, providing always that they exist and are reliable. Charge them and do away with the canard that they sponge off the city. Charge them and acknowledge that they are essential to the economy of the city.

Four, it bears repeating: the economic well-being of the city depends on the activities of all its people – rich, middle-class and poor. So plans for disaster management, or urban development in general, must take into account the situation and needs of all of this city's residents.

All of us, and all the time. Not just when a deluge sets a hill in destructive motion.



Source: The Times of India

The city walked on the tracks again, with railway tracks on Central Railway going under several inches of water. And nothing moved on the streets, as cars stood bumper to bumper

26/7 ghost, not rain, haunts city

Source: www.brim.gsfc.nasa.gov

