Dilip D'Souza

SLIPPERY SLOPE

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.

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 bailing 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.



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 bodyextracting 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 crueity 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.

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-toface 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 politican, 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 soread filth."

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.

Both of these assertions can stand some questioning.

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

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!".

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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.





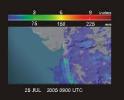
The city walked on the tracks again, with railway tracks on Central Railway going under several inches of water. And nothing moved on the streets, as cars stood bumper to bumper

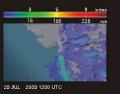
26/7 ghost, not rain, haunts city

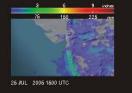
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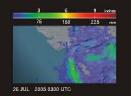




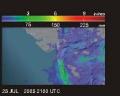


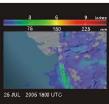


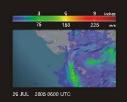












other resident is charged. Few in the middle-class understand that slum dwellers are willing to pay for services, providing always that they exist and are reliable. Charge them and do away with the canard that they sponge off the city. Charge them and acknowledge that they are essential to the economy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

Two, people who need housing must be able to find

must be easily and widely available. But as the

Government's own "Regional Plan for Bombay

creation of new rental housing."

alternatives to slums. That is, affordable rental housing

Metropolitan Region, 1996-2011" observed in 1995, the

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.

modified. Builders must find it profitable to build for the rental market, and particularly for lower income groups,

rent control legislation must go, or be substantially

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

"Rent Control legislation [has] had negative impact on

Large chunk of tax-payers excluded from relief Airline offices take a soaking

Middle-class hit most, but isn't in a position to claim damages; figures show group lacks even a marginal share in relief

ABHIRAM GHADYALPATIL MUMBAI LAUGUST 6

N flood-hit Maharashtra, a victim has to be part of the vote bank to be eligible for relief. Around 5 lakh middle-class people - salaried and tax-paying - are beyond the relief package being extended by the State.

They are from families that have not lost anyone in the disaster so they are not eligible for the Rs 2 lakh ex-gratia from the State and the Centre. They are not farmers either, to claim damage for crops and gain compensation.

Yet, many of them have suffered losses to the tune of lakhs in the form of damage to houses, appliances, furniture, and their morale. "We are giving 10 kilorams of wheat and rice each to

T is true that the un-

last week would put

any city off track. But the

past week also highlighted

Mumbai's worst prob-

lems. Firstly the popula-

tion influx, which the city

clearly has no strategy for,

resulting in illegal devel-

The slums were the

worst flooded areas. See

Kurla and its unending

proper, planned develop-

944 NOT OUT

CONTRACTOR

ment like the one done by

me in Powai had very lit-

cent of the city's popula-

tion i.e. those living in

slums or dilapidated build-

tle flooding.

Conversely,

opment and slums.

usually high rainfall

Blame sprawling

slums and

inadequate FSI'



those set aside for farmers and traders. For traders, he said, banks had agreed to curtail interest rates on existing loans and insurance companies have been asked to settle claims at the earliest.

As per the estimate made by the State, around 8.5 lakh families have been affected by the calamiThane," a secretary said.

Chief Secretary R M Premkumar told The Indian Express that more than 11,000 insurance claims have been filed for settlement "But most of these are from traders. Domestic appliances and furniture are generally not insured.

So people who have lost these

marginal share in the relief work done so far. Deshmukh said around 60,000 quintals of food-grains and Rs 84 crore ex-gratia have been distributed. Of these, Rs 37 crore have been distributed in Thane district and Rs 17 crore in Mumbai

"Most of this has gone to farmers, slum-dwellers and families who

\$10PPED | Latest block on Mumbai's great western drain: airport taxiway extension

One reason a river rebelled

ANUMEHA YADAV

TEMPORARY di-

natural

all the affected families. B we are also giving Rs 100 head per person with a ce Rs 5000 to all such famili Minister Vilasrao Deshmu A version in concern the Mithi

Deshmukh has ruled out

package for the midd

River-western Mumbai's Deshmukh ruled out a much-abused cific package for such peo drain-to save an extra turn and half a minute per plane taking off couldn't have

come at a worse time Diverted 20 metres three nonths ago from its original urse to extend a taxiway, e river rose in its altered ourse by about 10 metres to ndate both nearby slums nd the airport itself.

Debris, household goods and one of the four dead buffaloes brought in by the fury of the water, still lie against Why the Mithi swamped the airport

The Mithi river was diverted by airport officials 20 m from its course three months ago to extend the taxiway for quicker take offs

scaffolding built to support bridge over taxiway. Debris, four dead buffaloes block flow of water

scaffolding. The Rs 14-cr plan was delayed by 15 months: Rs 25 crore

MUTUAL FUNDS

>> The mutual funds segment is well-regulated, offering you protection. LOANS

>> Don't let go of foreign education

The week ended 30 July has seen Mumbal in haves due to fire and water. Heavy rainfall and a fire in ONGC's Mumbal offshore oil platform resulted in the country's commercial capital bearing a huge loss of lives, property and oil. Here is the impact and its implications.

IMPACT OF MUMBAL **OUR COMMERCIAL**

cording to current rates, while living off the inadequate infrastrúcture. It's clear we have to cre-

ings don't pay taxes ac-

ate more numbers of, and lower priced, housing to keep in parity with the de-

I propose that to stop 2 current illegal development, the Floor Space Index (FSI) should be

To add to that, 70 per CONTINUED ON PAGE 2



. About 1,2% of the total population of Incis. together cover about 9% of the total capital markets tumover.

passenger traffic in the country.

About 26% of the domestic air traffic cargo and an average of 40% of the international air cargo traffic in the country.

About 10% of cellular subscribers;
 A sucurban railway system with the highest passenger nensity in

could take stock of the dam-age, the picture that emerged was dismal. The commercial capital of the country coming to a grind-ing halt.

We, the people, will eventually have to bear the brunt of these losses, directly with higher consumption costs or indirectly through

but planes finally take off

Mumbai: After three days of chaos, order finally prevailed at the Mumbai airport on Friday even as domestic and internation carriers started clearing the backlog resulting from mass cancellation of flights.

For an airport that on a normal ay sees about 480 landings and ake-offs, the last two days were orrendous with over 18,000 pasengers stranded in Mumbai and her parts of the world waiting or the flights to resume, "Indian carriers including Air-India, Indin Airlines, Jet Airways and Air ahara have begun normal operaons," said an airport source. However, there are problems still in store for those airlines whose computer equipment and other installations have been damaged.

Outside the terminal building the main runway (09-27), which re mained inundated for more than 24 hours, is now littered with stones, boulders, and animal carcasses. The instrument landing systems and communication aids on the main runway are being exmined for damage.

"It's a time-consuming task as the instruments were inundated for hours together and so have to e checked thoroughly," said a harried Sudhir Kumar, director Airports Authority of India.

For the pilots though it was yet skies during peak hours as runway 14-32, which was operational luring the downpour and still beng used, is notorious for having a "long runway occupancy time" "Runway 14-32 does not have a roper taxi bay network and so afer landing, an aircraft has to turn back and return to the point where there is a taxi bay," explained an airline pilot Surprisingly though Air-India

international destinations in Euand Africa, Ahmedabad, there was no clamour for seats. "The flights were operated so that passengers affected by non-operation of flights from Mumbai airport for two days could get going. Nor mal schedule will be followed from Saturday," an A-I spokesperson said, adding that "as passengers were largely unaware that servicno crowding". IA operated 16 flights to various destinations in the morning and cleared the back-



increased from 1.33 to 10, with the government selling the additional FSI; that's along the lines of global cities like Seoul.

Further under the slum redevelopment scheme, the number of 220 sq metre tenements built in a given project should be doubled so that one half of these can be sold in the open market at subsidised rates. That will ensure than new entrants do not end up in slums. The money accruing from these measures should be deposited in a dedicated infrastructure fund to put in place improved drainage, build ring roads (which even second-grade cities have), and green spaces. The last can be increased by creating half a kilometre of reclamation along the entire periphery of the Western seafront right upto Madh Is-

Currently, only little over 10 per cent of the seaface is accessible to the public. I do not see merit in the arguments made by environmentalists lately. We are taking the mangrove thing too far and illegal development like slums are preventing outflow through the Mithi River. Its mouth remains unaffected.

To sum up, it's high time Mumbai took charge of its own problems and generated the resources itself rather than whine about the grandfather (the Centre) not paying enough attention and not making the required allocations.

Rights body issues notices to civic agencies over deluge

Mumbai: The Maharashtra State Human Rights Commission has issued notices to prominent civil and government agencies and departments over the 26/7 deluge.

Acting on a complaint lodged by the International Human Rights Foundation, the commission has issued notices to the Reliance Energy Ltd chairman, Maharashtra State Electricity Board head, chief secretary, police commissioner, municipal commissioner and the chief of Maharashtra Metropolitan Regional Development Authority.

It has asked the respondents to file

The rumours killed in Mumbai. But the way they killed gave an idea of the deep impact that the December 2004 tsunami, which struck in Tamil Nadu, had. The rumours started in Powai at four in the afternoon and talked of a dam that had burst. But, by the time it had reached Nehru Nagar and Nirmal Nagar in Vile Parle (West) and Bandra (East), the watery fear had taken the shape of an imminent tsunami. Both pockets had substantial chunks of south Indian (Tamil) population. The rumours also hit Sion and Dharavi, again places with significant Tamil population, but did not have the death-effect there.

