

Growing up in Patna during the 1960s, I remember the weekly arrival of the Blitz. When my father returned after a full day at the High Court, he would leaf through the day's mail, pluck the weekly tabloid from Bombay wrapped in its sleeve of recycled brown paper, and retreat with it to his bedroom. After changing out of his court attire, he relaxed on the bed and waited for the servant to bring his tea. As my mother poured him tea, he began devouring the sensational accounts of national and international skullduggery. His face, hidden behind the tabloid held high in his hands, only appeared from time to time to sip his tea.

Nothing interrupted his attention, not even my mother's ritual commentary on the day's routine events and family gossip. Aside from the occasional polite 'hmms' directed at my mother, my father broke his silent attention only when he read aloud in shock the sensational headlines – 'CIA Jamboree in New Delhi.' I sat opposite, drinking my milk while I stole a glance at the last page where, beside the K.A. Abbas column, a pinup greeted the reader with a witty caption – 'Nalini makes a winsome bather, But will someone blow off the lather!'

## BLITZ'S BOMBAY

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As soon as my father was done reading, I would grab it and withdraw to some place quiet to mostly look at – not read – the spunky tabloid's loud and screaming captions and telling photographs. The paper's quality was coarse and the pictures grainy, but there was visual drama on Blitz's pages. Together, the text and graphics evoked an image of an expansive and exciting life and that my adolescent mind associated with the exciting city of its publication – Bombay.

Blitz first appeared on 1 February 1941. It was founded by R.K. Karanjia, who had earlier worked at The Times of India, and had briefly edited the Sunday Standard and the short-lived Morning Standard. He assembled a group that comprised three others: Dinkar V. Nadkarni, who had earned a reputation in journalism by penning sensational crime stories in the Bombay Sentinel, edited by the veteran B.G. Horniman; Zahir Babar Kureishi, who wrote a popular



Source: Bombay, The Cities Within

column under the pen-name of ZABAK; and Nadir Boman-Behram, who was to look after the advertising and business side of things.

All four resigned from the Standard and launched the new tabloid from an old Apollo Street building in the Fort. The inaugural issue introduced the tabloid as 'Our BLITZ, India's BLITZ against Hitler.'<sup>1</sup> Within four months of the inaugural issue, the circulation had reached 20,000; twenty-five years later, the 'people's paper' claimed a readership of one million.<sup>2</sup>

It was not entirely fortuitous that Bombay was the successful launching pad for Blitz. Well before India's independence, Bombay was the most dynamic and modern Indian city. Calcutta and Madras were also important cities, but Bombay was unique. Among urban centres that had grown up under the raj, it was the only one where Indians – most notably the Parsis and Gujarati Hindus and Jains – had significant stakes in its industry, finance and banking. Also, unlike other cities, its thriving capitalist industry and finance outweighed the importance of the government bureaucracy.

This did not change after independence; while New Delhi attracted politicians and political fixers, people from all over India washed up on the island city looking for jobs and opportunities. Bombay became known for its vitality and diversity during the fifties and the sixties. Although Marathi-speakers formed the single-largest group, no regional culture dominated the city's cultural and social life. A range of religious communities – Hindus, Muslims, Christians, Jains, Zoroastrians, and Jews – and linguistic groups – Marathi, Konkani, Hindi, Urdu, and Telugu speakers, and many others made up the urban mix.

Writers and intellectuals from North India flocked to the city to work in journalism and in the film

industry; and educated men journeyed from South India to find work in shipping, banking, and commercial establishments. The partition of British India was a blow to the city's Muslim community and its cosmopolitan air, but the tumult also brought a huge influx of refugees, raising Bombay's population from 1.4 million in 1941 to 2.3 million in 1951.<sup>3</sup>

This bustling, island city was a modern city with all its contradictions. A place of commerce and free enterprise, bourgeois prosperity and brutal exploitation lived cheek by jowl in the city. If Bombay boasted of the posh Malabar Hill, Cuffe Parade, and the panorama of Marine Drive where the legendary merchant princes and textile magnates lived, it was also known for its tightly-packed chawls and pavements that the poor called home.

A culture of money, for which Bombay was legendary, held together these glaring disparities and contradictions. Its capitalist economy shaped Bombay's complex social architecture that housed industrialists, bankers, investors, wage workers, the salaried masses, casual labourers, owners and employees in retail businesses, journalists, teachers, artists, writers, architects, engineers, doctors, administrators, politicians, and criminals. The city was society, and Bombay's social life was lived in spaces and in rhythms of work and leisure that signified modernity.

Not the least important of these spaces was an active public sphere serviced by newspapers, civic leaders, and trade unions and political parties of different ideological stripes. This was the modern city of the late colonial and early post-independence era that acquired a classic image in the representations of Hindi cinema of the period.

Blitz both inhabited this milieu and gave it a characteristic definition. As a newsweekly, it

drew on Bombay's highly developed bourgeois public sphere. A key element of this sphere was the city's newspapers in which Bombay's public life appeared as news and photographs. As is the case with all newspapers, Bombay's press also served a crucial function in making the city legible.

Typically, newspaper readers confront their public world in reports on politics and economics, descriptions of social engagements, crime stories, announcements of job vacancies and tender notices, advertisements of products and entertainment, film and theater reviews, and accounts of sporting events. In an important sense, newspapers actually bring the public sphere to life for their readers, and function as agents of acting upon it. In modern city life, it has been said that the secular ritual of reading newspaper replaces the morning prayer.

Of course, it is safe to say that Bombay's illiterate and poor citizens were free of this secular ritual. For this reason, the public life rendered real by the newspapers was also beyond them. What is more, English dominated the lettered world brought into view by newspapers. In this elitist English-scripted public world, The Times of India was pre-eminent. But a colonial genealogy burdened the Times. The Bombay Chronicle was nationalist, but sober. It was in this context that Blitz appeared in an effort to break open the elite public life with a radical ideology and punky writing. Accepting the notion of public life as the key arena of politics, the tabloid mined it for its radical potential, believing that hard-hitting, two-fisted reports could make a political difference.

Central to Blitz's self-representation as a radical, people's paper was its tabloid form. The tabloid is a classic urban form that seeks to render legible the anonymous reality of everyday life in the modern metropolis in its bold and sensational headlines. As a tabloid, then, Blitz dispensed with the convention of dispassionate observation and balanced opinion, and adopted a charged tone from the very beginning. It took on the role of a

social investigator that dug beneath the surface of everyday life to ferret out the hidden truth that it announced loudly on its pages. The weekly revelled in its self-proclaimed role as a racket-buster, exposing truths concealed by the powerful.

In 1945, for example, D.V. Nadkarni, Blitz's chief 'racket buster', wrote a series of sensational stories on the textile shortage. These accounts claimed to uncover the hidden hand of the big wholesale dealers who, with the alleged help of government officials, were hoarding the stocks to drive up the price while representing it as the product of a natural scarcity.<sup>4</sup>

This was not unusual. Week after week, Blitz exposed truths allegedly buried beneath the surface of random and fragmentary events. The embezzlement of public funds, prostitution rackets, sordid stories of seduction and sex in the name of spiritualism, dark political designs behind high-sounding rhetoric, and the fleecing of the poor by rich industrialists and property developers were staples in the weekly. Even the sports column, called 'Knock Out', took on the racket-busting posture. It was written by A.F.S. Talyarkhan, whose bearded, pipe-in-mouth, face on the page appeared to lend gravity to the charges of malfeasance he made against sports authorities. The poor performance of Indian athletes in international competitions, it turned out, could be explained by petty squabbles and power-grabbing by officials behind the scenes.

In Blitz's world, there was nothing mysterious about reality. Once it had cleared the mist of the surface-level mystery and decoded the outward face of events, the exposed reality always appeared rational – a product of relentlessly instrumental and banal pursuits of money and power. The scandal lay in the fact that people wrapped their ruthlessly rational motivations and actions in tissues of lies and deceptions. This required a careful scrutiny of the misleading

<sup>1</sup> 'To Our Readers', 1 February 1941, cited in Blitz, 25 February 1961, p. 7.

<sup>2</sup> 'Mighty All-party Rally Felicitates Editor Karanjia', Blitz, 27 February 1965, p. 3.

<sup>3</sup> Meera Kosambi, *Bombay in Transition: The Growth and Social Ecology of a Colonial City, 1880-1980*. Almqvist and Wiksell International, Stockholm, 1986, p. 165.

<sup>4</sup> Cited in 'The Racket-Buster', Blitz, 25 February 1961, p. 13.





exteriority of events. The journalist had to act as a detective and plunge into the rough and tumble of life. He examined seemingly disconnected fragments to decipher hidden connections and detect clues to the underlying reality. In this process, the journalist-as-detective functioned as an author who produced written and illustrative political and social texts that claimed to depict modernity's imperceptible reality.

Bombay acquired a textual and photographic face in the news accounts and images that sought to represent the reality in its surface-level expressions. No grand philosophy or concept defined this depiction of reality. Rather, the tabloid identified the phenomena in the empirical material itself, in the exemplary spaces and activities of modern life. It traced the contours of Bombay's daily life on its streets and neighbourhoods, restaurants and cinema theatres, textile factories and neighbourhoods, docks and shipping offices, and municipal institutions and public parks. Warnings of 'Death-Trap for Promenaders at Marine Drive Seafront',<sup>5</sup> exposures of 'Super-Market in Sex: Where Vice is sold on Department-Store Basis!'<sup>6</sup> or 'Bombay Municipality Creates Slums'<sup>7</sup> formed the stuff of Blitz's Bombay.

These stories of the city's dark side did not signify cultural pessimism or despair. If anything, Blitz always expressed supreme confidence in modern life. Showing no nostalgia for the imagined harmony of the countryside, it openly embraced the gritty, conflict-ridden, urban milieu of Bombay. While it uncovered tales of greed for money and power, it also provided glamorous accounts of film personalities, and celebrated popular struggles for justice.

On its pages, the city appeared as an immense and exciting mix of multi-layered, contradictory, and restless lives. Everything seemed to be in motion. Fortunes were being made and lost,

swindles were being plotted and exposed, and big dreams were being dreamt and shattered. People jostled for space, and they heroically struggled for survival and justice. Against the shadow of its dark side, Bombay's metropolitan life glittered on the Blitz pages.

Among its many stories on the city, there was one that came to define Blitz and encapsulated its titillating representation of Bombay's metropolitan life. This story related to the Nanavati case, and its central actors were Commander Kawas Manekshaw Nanavati, a Parsi naval officer; his English wife Sylvia; and a rich Sindhi playboy, Prem Ahuja. On 27 April 1959, Sylvia confessed to her thirty-seven year old husband that she had been having an affair with Ahuja.

After lunch in his Cuffe Parade home, Nanavati dropped off his wife, his two children, and a neighbour's child at the Metro Cinema for the afternoon show of 'Tom Thumb'. From there, he proceeded to his ship 'Mysore' where he obtained a revolver and six rounds of ammunition, and then drove to the Universal Motors office on Pedder Road. Upon learning that Ahuja, the car dealership's manager, had not returned from lunch, Nanavati drove to his wife's lover's flat in 'Jeevan Jyoti' (The Flame of Life) on Malabar Hill. The naval officer entered the flat, an argument followed, three shots rang out, and Ahuja lay dead.

Soon afterwards, Nanavati drove to the naval authorities, and surrendered. In the trial, Nanavati claimed that Ahuja was killed unintentionally when the two men struggled for the gun. The jury acquitted him, but the Sessions Court judge, dissatisfied with the verdict, referred the case to the High Court. The High Court convicted him of murder and sentenced him to life imprisonment, a decision that the Supreme Court confirmed. Eventually, he was pardoned by the President, and the Nanavati family migrated to Canada.

This, in a nutshell, was the Nanavati case. In fact, it became much more as soon as the trial opened in the Sessions Court on 13 October 1959. None did more to make a routine murder trial into a classic story of Bombay's bourgeois life than the Blitz. As soon as the trial began, Blitz published nine pages of what it called a pictorial record of the case with a bold, front-page headline 'Three Shots That Shook the Nation.'<sup>8</sup> With detailed text accompanying the photographs of the main dramatis personae, the homicide scene, the witnesses, and attorneys, it made the Nanavati case its top story.

For the next two years that the Nanavati case moved up the ladder of courts, its spotlight remained intensely focused on the case. It offered full-throated support to Nanavati, unfailingly portraying him as a handsome, upright, and patriotic officer. Almost always publishing his photograph in his smart naval uniform, Nanavati was depicted as a wronged husband. Sylvia, who had become a guilt-ridden, remorseful wife during the trial, was portrayed as a beautiful, blue-eyed, and guileless twenty-eight year old cynically seduced by an unscrupulous playboy. Blitz ran a tireless campaign for Nanavati's acquittal. After his conviction, it held public meetings, and conducted signature campaigns to secure a pardon. Karanjia often wrote, defending Nanavati by suggesting that while the naval officer represented middle-class, family values, Ahuja symbolized the corrupt, amorality of the upper-class minority.<sup>9</sup>

As Blitz emblazoned its pages with Nanavati's defense, it also turned the case into a compelling story of love, betrayal and homicide. The tabloid told its readers about the romance and marriage of the dashing Bombay-born naval officer and the pretty Sylvia in England. It affixed on their minds Bombay's social geography by mentioning the posh Cuffe Parade and Malabar Hill as the locus for the drama of adultery and murder. These, in

addition to accounts of how and where Ahuja and Sylvia met and carried on their affair, the publication of their love letters, and details about the Nanavatis' and Ahuja's daily lives, succeeded in portraying the Nanavati case as an exotic story set in Bombay.

In broadcasting a Bombay story nationally, Blitz disseminated an image of the city nationwide. A few years later, a Hindi film very loosely based on the Nanavati case, *Yeh Raaste Hain Pyaar Ke*, starring Sunil Dutt, Leela Naidu and Rehman, was released. An echo of Blitz's portrayal of the case is identifiable in the film, but it was faint and entirely forgettable. Blitz, on the other hand, had carried out its campaign with great panache. It had taken a quotidian city episode and transformed it into a story for consumption in the bourgeois mass culture throughout India. Implicit in its energetic coverage of the Nanavati case was the confidence both in the wider significance of a Bombay story and in the importance of the bourgeois public sphere. A city paper, Blitz called itself Asia's foremost news magazine. It originated in Bombay, but it reached into the city's rich tradition of public life, gave it a radical content, and then confidently proclaimed its concerns as national.

There was something of Bombay's self-assurance about its modernity in Blitz's attempt to become a medium of mass culture. This was visible from very early on as the tabloid's brash tone was set to orchestrate a relentlessly nationalist line strongly inflected by leftist themes. An unapologetic supporter of Nehru, it vigorously championed secularism, supported socialism and planning, denounced capitalism, and poured scorn on right wing and communal politicians. It coupled this ideology with a leftist internationalism. It lauded Afro-Asian solidarity against the capitalist West – the Egyptian President Nasser was its hero – and it loudly and regularly unveiled dark, CIA plots against India and Third World leaders.

The presence of several columnists with communist sympathy on its ranks – Ramesh

<sup>5</sup>. Blitz, 2 December 1961, p. 3.

<sup>6</sup>. Ibid., p. 17.

<sup>7</sup>. Ibid., 13 March 1965, p. 8.

<sup>8</sup>. Ibid., 24 October 1959.

<sup>9</sup>. 'Defence of Nanavati!', ibid., 19 March 1960, p. 1.



Sanghvi, A. Raghavan, and K.A. Abbas – contributed to the leftist flavour. Bombay was the headquarters of the Communist Party until the end of the forties. The city's film industry also attracted several communist writers, journalists, artists, and intellectuals. The communist Girni Kamgar Union, which was the most important trade union of the city's textile workers, also added to the leftist presence in Bombay.

While these were undoubtedly important factors, it is also clear that Karanjia revelled in playing the advocate for socialism and the champion of the Third World cause against American interests. A characteristic example of his posture was the front page story in the early sixties headlined 'Editor Karanjia Crashed U.S. Curtain into Cuba.'<sup>10</sup> The report, datelined from Havana, triumphantly noted Karanjia's arrival in Cuba at Fidel Castro's invitation in spite of the obstruction placed by the denial of a transit visa by the US to permit him to fly via New York. When Nasser visited the city in 1960, Blitz declared: 'President Nasser Captivates the Heart of Bombay!'<sup>11</sup> Five years later, Nasser bestowed Karanjia with the highest award given to a foreigner. Exultantly, Blitz reported that despite torrential rain thousands of Bombay's citizens turned out to felicitate Karanjia.<sup>12</sup>

The editor's ideology and personality defined the tabloid. Belonging to the minority Parsi community, Karanjia's commitment to secular politics was understandable. But he combined secular, modern values with a full-blooded anti-imperialism that was not common among the Parsis. In this respect, Karanjia's political views closely echoed those of his idol, Nehru, who also saw a robust national identity and anti-imperialist cosmopolitanism as complementary. Indeed, the endorsement of Afro-Asian solidarity, the admiration for the Soviet Union and the distrust of

the United States, and the support for socialism and planning formed parts of an ideology that was widely shared in the decolonized world during the fifties and sixties. So, Karanjia was not alone in espousing these ideas; like the intelligentsia in many other newly independent Third World nations, he too envisioned the fulfillment of modern nationhood in anti-imperialist internationalism and socialism.

But Karanjia's journalistic creation was no ordinary left-nationalist fare. Throughout its existence under its flamboyant editor, Blitz's signature was its muckraking, over-the-top stories calculated to provoke and enrage. It thrived on controversy, and Karanjia was frequently embroiled in defamation suits, which the tabloid wore as a badge of honour and showcased on its pages even when it lost. Its opinions were full-throated, and its likes and dislikes of political personalities and parties were unconcealed.

Thus, Blitz screamed 'Lies, Mr. Patil – black, bald lies!' denouncing the right-wing Congress leader, S.K. Patil.<sup>13</sup> The occasion was the parliamentary election campaign of 1967 in Bombay. Krishna Menon, denied nomination by the Congress at the behest of leaders including S.K. Patil, had joined the electoral fray as an independent candidate supported by the Left. Blitz hailed Menon as a socialist, and offered enthusiastic support to his candidacy from North Bombay. Its front page even proclaimed 'Menon Has Won' in bold headlines even before the election had occurred, explaining it as a rising crescendo of public opinion.<sup>14</sup>

When he lost the election, Blitz thundered 'Rape of the Ballot Box', followed by the subtitle, 'Patil, Barve and SS Out-Hitlered Hitler.'<sup>15</sup> 'SS' referred to Bal Thackeray's Shiv Sena, which, according to Blitz, had terrorized voters, particularly South Indians whom the new nativist party had already made targets of its violent campaign. The tabloid

was unrelenting in exposing the Shiv Sena's violent tactics. Issue after issue, it spotlighted the Sena's terror politics.

Blitz's opposition to the Shiv Sena was not just due to electoral reasons; the Sena fundamentally negated Blitz's cosmopolitanism. Referring to the hoodlum tactics of the Sena, Karanjia wrote: 'Never before was this proud city, with its splendid cosmopolitan traditions and secular culture, so brutally soiled, shamed, violated and dishonoured as today.'<sup>16</sup> Significantly, Blitz had hailed the creation of Maharashtra, and had lauded Shivaji as a Maharashtrian symbol,<sup>17</sup> and the Left had played a leading role in the struggle for the new linguistic state.

But once the Shiv Sena twisted the desire for linguistic identity into a violent drive for nativist supremacy, Blitz's Bombay became endangered. As the Sena pummeled the communist trade unions, the Congress colluded with Bal Thackeray, and the politician-builder-underworld nexus increasingly invaded Bombay politics during the seventies, the ground beneath the tabloid shifted. It continued publication through the seventies and eighties, and even after being bought by Vijay Mallya in 1996, but the tabloid's modernist vision had lost its confident, radical tone at the end of the sixties.

The waning of Blitz's self-assured modernism signalled the diminishing appeal of the Nehruvian vision, and formed part of a larger historical transformation. When I visited Patna on holidays from college in Delhi during the early seventies, I noticed that our household in Patna had remained a loyal subscriber. My father continued his weekly routine of unwinding from work with Blitz, but it seemed more habit than interest. I too found the tabloid less alluring. Perhaps my father's concerns were focused

elsewhere, and I had also grown up and moved on. But the tabloid had also changed. The coverage was more obsessively political, and the anti-establishment tone rang hollow in view of its full-throated support for Indira Gandhi's cynical rhetoric of socialism.

Most of all, Blitz's Bombay had lost its shine. The city appeared as a place of shrill political rhetoric and deep social divisions. Corruption, and violence had become endemic, and the air was pessimistic. This presented a striking contrast to the optimistic image of Bombay as the promised city of modernity that Blitz had so effectively disseminated across India during the fifties and sixties. It is tempting to view this change nostalgically, and represent it as the death of the cosmopolitan Bombay.

In fact, what died was Blitz's idea of Bombay. It was an elitist ideal, one that rested on a deep belief in the authority and centrality of the bourgeois public sphere, law, and the modern nation-state. This elitist imagination may have lost its compelling appeal with the demise of the Nehruvian vision, but underlying Blitz's representation of Bombay was the projection of the city as modern society – the city was made to stand for the promise of modern conditions of freedom and democracy in post-colonial India. In an important sense, this remains an urgent issue today.

<sup>10</sup> Blitz, 25 June 1960, p. 1. Below the main story was another headline, 'Did US Spy Chief Dulles Meet [the Naga leader] Phizo?'

<sup>11</sup> Ibid., 16 April 1960, p. 15.

<sup>12</sup> Festival of Indo-Arab Amity', Blitz, 3 July 1965.

<sup>13</sup> Ibid., 21 January 1967, p. 1.

<sup>14</sup> Ibid., 18 February 1967, p. 1.

<sup>15</sup> Ibid., 25 February 1967, p. 1.

<sup>16</sup> Ibid., 'Citizens' Ultimatum to Patil, Barve, Shah and Co: Disown Shiv Sena – or Quit Bombay!' 4 February 1967, p. 1.

<sup>17</sup> See, for example, the 23 April 1960 issue that welcomed the creation of the new state, and paid rich tributes to Shivaji's legacy.