

## Mumbai in Focus: Two Stories

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### 1. Mental about Mumbai

It was an angry woman, Kitayun Dinshaw, who stepped onto Marine Drive, seeking relief from an issue that had whipped at her mind and made her heart ache with despair. Her city, her beloved Mumbai, was threatened by an underground metro which would strip it clean of five thousand trees. Yes, 5000, imagine! From flowering gulmohars to sturdy banyans, some over a hundred years old, and as much a part of the city's heritage as its Gothic and Art Deco structures. By cutting the trees, the underground water table would be affected; the risk of floods would increase. Had the city planners gone mad? Had they forgotten that terrible flood of 2005, when the city had received, over two days, 94 centimetres of hard rain? Then, the highways had been flooded, the airports had been closed, railway platforms and railway tracks had disappeared underwater. In certain parts of the city, the water level had risen up to four and a half metres. Trees had been uprooted, walls and fences had come crashing down, cars had turned turtle, and a landslide had swept away a hundred lives belonging to the poor. They should know: when it came to floods, Mumbai had a history, or rather a propensity. The drains would choke easily, and sometimes it was days before the floods would recede.

Thinking about this, she had seethed all day. It had happened before and could happen again. Who was that great poet who had said, the great tragedy of human existence is not that we suffer but that we forget? Truly! Truly! The amputations were there for all to see. Along Princess Street, P.M. Road, Churchgate ... all the way up to Cuffe Parade.

She had hurried past the gaping spaces and the stumps, aware of a growing lump in her throat, aware of a rising bilious rage. Heart pounding, she stepped onto Marine Drive, hoping the sea breeze would assuage her anger. It never failed her, this sea-swept expanse that gave the city its fortuitous beauty. It was here that Kitayun walked every evening, in track pants and colour-coordinated sport shoes that capped her feet like stockings. Daily, Kitayun would clock a full three kilometres, from Churchgate to Chowpatty, noting the different walking styles of people and trying to figure out the kind of people they were by their manner of stride. This was only one of the games she played with herself, a game of recreation, of secret impish delight. Then, of course, there was the joy of listening in on conversations: agitated vents about the stock market or the state of the economy, or – in the case of women – about boyfriend troubles, mother-in-law hassles, an absconding servant, and rising food prices. Farther up, past the gymkhanas, she'd get a kick out of seeing lovers snuggle up and steal a kiss and a promise.

This was, perhaps, the only place in Mumbai where life ceased to be agitated, where you were reminded that nature could still prevail over concrete: it could silence man's cravings and greed. Walking here had been her routine for years; it was non-negotiable and worked like meditation, like therapy. Sometimes, Kitayan would pause and watch the sunset. And just the sight of that

bright flaming orb taking its leave of the city was enough to calm her, to inspire within her the awe that was reserved for poets and philosophers.

She could do with that today, she thought; she was in time for the sunset. And turning onto the drive she saw the ball of fire in the sky. And, then, before her, she saw the sadhu, a skeleton of a man lying naked on his back, yes, brazenly naked, his nu-nu hidden in a fuzz of grey. This insolent man, lying on the parapet, stood between her and the sunset.

She looked around quickly to see if anyone else shared her outrage. Then, in the same line of vision, she saw two cops, a man and a woman, both very young, seated on the parapet, laughing and chatting happily. And farther down, standing on the parapet, backs to the sea, were groups of young boys and girls with their arms around one another, posing ecstatically for selfies.

What was this selfie culture? she wondered. People were taking pictures all the time, posting them on social media, and counting the 'likes' and 'shares'. She had been seeing this for months now. Friends hugging like lost-and-found siblings. Families posing like tourists. Lovers sitting side by side, each immersed in their cell phones. She was glad she hadn't been born into this generation, that she had missed it by thirty odd years. But right now what she felt was the black, heaving anger of youth, anger that drove her to the cops to say, 'Hello, don't you see that naked man? Don't you see how he exposes himself? Don't you think there are laws about that? Which you should be enforcing.'

The male cop looked at her and smiled. 'Madam, he is a sanyasi. He has renounced the world. How is he affecting you by lying there? If you don't like what you see, don't look, no. See those youngsters? Are they bothered?' He pointed to the selfie gang.

The lady cop said, 'I too am a woman, I know how bad you feel. But he is not misbehaving. If he did or said something, we will act at once. That we will not tolerate. You can be assured.' The male cop said, 'You just take your walk, no, madam. Enjoy the sea breeze and this beautiful view. Why you bother your head with this madman? See, you have to be a little mad, no, to be like this in public. But why we should bother ourselves with mad people? We should not give them any countenance. We should just ignore them.' He smiled at her again. Kitayun licked her lips.

'Yes,' she said, 'we should just ignore them. But, sometimes, the real mad people are not the ones we see, and yet they do us great harm. They cut our trees senselessly. And we are asked to ignore them. To turn our heads and walk away.'

'What are you saying, madam? We have not cut any trees. All that is decided by people in the municipality and in the government. We have no authority.' The male cop looked at her incredulously. His fingers tightened around the stick he was holding. He felt uncomfortable in the presence of this fair, middle-aged woman with unflinching eyes and high cheekbones.

'No, but you only have the authority to stop us when we try and protect our trees. You don't stop politicians when they hold morchas or when they put up illegal hoardings. But when we try and save our trees, you arrest us and treat us like common criminals.'

'See, madam, we don't know anything about that. We are here on duty only in the evenings. But if you like, we will go and speak to the sadhu. We will request him to go elsewhere.'

'The only place he should go to is prison. Such a man should not be allowed to roam free. He is a menace to decent society. That is the problem with our society. In the name of religion, anything goes. Nudity-fudity, building of illegal temples, shouting and dancing on the streets, and putting up mandaps and hoardings all over. Now are you going to do something about this

pervert, havaladar, or should I?’ Reluctantly, the male cop got to his feet and set off at a lethargic stride. The lady cop followed him. Approaching the sadhu, the male cop banged his stick against the wall of the parapet.

‘Kai re, baba, people are getting upset with you. Don’t you at least have a cloth to cover yourself? Why are you sleeping like this? As though you are in some forest.’

The sadhu turned his head away in the manner of an affronted child. ‘What is wrong with how I am?’ he said. ‘How does it concern you? Go away, you are disturbing my meditation.’ Seeing the cops, some of the walkers stopped and stood at a distance, watching.

Now Kitayan pushed herself forward and stood glowering over the sadhu. ‘Why, you scoundrel! You think we have come here only to look at your private parts? This is a public road, not your father’s house. Are you going to be on your way or not? Or should I ...?’ Grabbing the stick from the male cop, she started prodding the sadhu in the ribs and was surprised to find how soft and spongy his flesh was. The sadhu simply closed his eyes and began to mumble some mantra. The sun filled the sky till it was almost eye-level with the walkers. It glowed and dispatched its last rays of the day, and the ocean shimmered and sparkled, and more lovers and more friends leapt onto the parapet and took more pictures.

Suddenly, the sadhu sat up, and Kitayun lurched back. She averted her eyes from his nudity but was startled to see how young his face was and how large and clear his eyes were. His body, she noticed, had a famished look and his chest and stomach were full of shrubs of grey, scraggly hair.

‘Look, madam,’ the sadhu said. ‘I understand that you women like to dress up and look elegant. But to me, a man of God, all this makes no difference. And if you think this is vulgar, this natural state of mine, then it is you who have an impure mind, you who cannot digest creation. At this point, I am not a human being, madam, or a slave of society, but a creature of God. In as much as the sun and the sky are His.’

He raised his body and from under his buttocks whisked out an orange cloth folded into squares. Rising, he flicked open the cloth and wrapped it around himself with remarkable speed. ‘Now that I am decent enough for you and your society, madam, tell me something,’ he said. ‘It is the face that wears a thousand masks and lips that spout a thousand lies and yet, yet, it is the body we must cover up. What logic is that? What sense does that make?’ He paused, then said, ‘I am sorry, madam, sorry to have ruined your evening. That was not my intention. I am not a harsh man, nor an unkind one. I was only being one with nature. Looking at the sky, when all others are busy looking at themselves.’ With that, he began to walk away, so quickly that his legs barely seemed to touch the ground. The onlookers indicated their bewilderment to one another; then resumed their walk and forgot about him.

The male cop turned to Kitayun and said angrily, ‘See, I told you. He is a holy man, a sanyasi. See, how decent he was. And it is not good to disturb a sadhu, madam. Not good to upset him. He might have blessed us. Now I am sure he has cursed me. He has said something in his mind that will make me suffer.’ The lady cop placed a kindly hand on his shoulder and Kitayun noticed she had small fingers and blunt, unvarnished nails.

‘Arrey, forget him, no,’ she said. ‘If your faith is strong, then nothing can happen to you. No curse will work. Just say the name of God, a few dozen times, and all your troubles will vanish. Just like that!’ She clicked her fingers and smiled at him with warm, reassuring eyes.

Now Kitayun who was thinking of the sadhu's words – the face that wears a thousand masks – remembered how many letters she had written to the state government. To its various departments, officials, and ministers. Dear Sir, trees are the veins and arteries of Mumbai. They allow us to live, allow us to breathe ... it becomes our God-given duty to protect them.

And then some reassurances had followed: Oh, yes, yes, madam. Surely! Surely! We too know the importance of trees. In nature there is God. We see that. Feel for that. Respect that. But none of that was observed, none of that had been honoured. What had followed, instead, was this indiscriminate felling, even where it was not required, where there were no tracks to be laid. She had a name for that. The 'hacksaw murders,' she called them.

She tapped the lady cop on the shoulder. 'Which God is that? Which God will take away your troubles by simply uttering his name? Tell me, too, so I can ask him to save our city.' Without waiting for an answer, she began to walk away. She walked for about ten minutes, and soon the sky was filled with an orange-grey light. The sun went down, peeping like a schoolboy ordered to bed. Vendors came out and proffered their wares, children were gathered by their parents and ordered not to wander, and, at the side of the road, the traffic slowed and thickened.

Approaching the gymkhanas, Kitayun heard the sound of a bugle, a long-drawn-out wail that ripped through the silence of the evening. This was followed by another wail and another. She turned. She looked. And what she saw filled her heart with wonder. Coming up the road, in the midst of the traffic, was a procession of Victorias. There might have been twenty to thirty of them, all in a row: the silver carriages gleaming, the horses crowned with a crest of feathers, and in each carriage a uniformed trumpeter blowing a bugle, and a horseman – with the reins in his hand – turning and bowing to the onlookers with folded hands. Oh, what a sight this was! What a pleasure! thought Kitayun. And what pain, too! For this was the Victorias' last ride. The carriages had been banned after being a part of the city for almost three hundred years. They had been banned by the Mumbai High Court on grounds of animal cruelty and would never ply again.

It was almost like the city was saying goodbye to its history, thought Kitayun. To its trees, its traditions, its birds, its heritage. And how long before I too am part of the city's history? she wondered wryly. But this was not a moment to miss. It was a proud moment, a historic moment, and it needed to be captured and shared. Removing her cellphone from her pocket, Kitayun moved to the kerb and pushed her way through the groups of youngsters who were ready with their cellphones.

'Come on, guys,' she said. 'Make way for a lady! Learn to show some respect for age.'

## 2. The Gypsies of Grant Road<sup>1</sup>

*There are over 300,000 homeless people in Mumbai. They have left their villages and come to the city in search of work. Their lot is far worse than slum-dwellers, for they cannot afford to pay any rent. They survive entirely on daily wage work, and the pavement is their home. This makes them vulnerable to rats, disease, accidents, and displacement during the monsoons. As per a survey, the state government was expected to build 125 permanent shelters. The centre had allocated 1500-million rupees toward this project. But, to date, there are only seven shelters, most of them in a decrepit condition. This essay is a reminder of how Mumbai is constantly being called on to sacrifice its public spaces in order to accommodate its homeless.*

The gypsies had been there ever since I could remember. There were men, women, and children. The men were dark, surly, and unwashed. They looked older than the women, who seemed too young to be mothers. And yet they were mothers, with babies at their breasts and runny-nosed infants to chase and berate for daring to venture beyond permissible limits. That venturing out could kill them, for this was outside Grant Road Station, on the main road.

The area occupied by the gypsies was a large quadrangle separated from the main road by an old rusted railing. The gypsies had made this their home, their camping ground. Where did they come from? From somewhere in North Gujarat, said the cops who were positioned outside the station, inside the quadrangle, cheek by jowl with the encroachers.

The cops had their office inside a chowky no larger than a tent. The chowky had a desk, two chairs, a wall calendar, and a small bench. The cops rarely sat inside. Only when the afternoon sun came up, you could see them sheltering inside, or when they had their ears picked by the ear-cleaners and did not want to be seen by passersby. Besides, the cops needed to be outdoors, where the action was.

Opposite the station, facing the gypsies' enclosure, were two bars: one, a ladies' bar, the other a country liquor bar. There was no door at the entrance of the country liquor bar, just a mouldy curtain on which people wiped their hands as they came in. The ladies' bar had a thick silver-plated door that gleamed like a dance backdrop in a Bollywood film. Its entrance was guarded by two bouncers, who were dressed alike, in black safari suits, and looked like twins.

Come seven in the evening and young sexily-clad women would draw up in cabs and step out into the bazaar, which was, again, exactly opposite the gypsies' enclosure. They would shop for fruit and vegetables, paying the vendors the prices they demanded. The vendors' delight knew no bounds. These women were the real memsahibs, they would think, as they watched them disappear into the ladies' bar. The cops would not interfere in the running of the bars. They were never seen crossing the road to check whether the women in the ladies' bar were actual waitresses or pick-ups and whether the male customers behaved appropriately with them.

The cops were well-mannered, self-contained, and polite. They had been positioned here after the bomb blasts. They didn't have much to do. Crime in this area was negligible, which was why the cops could, sometimes, step outside their line of duty and perform small acts of kindness. Such as when a senior citizen would call and request them to bring some medicines or ask them

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<sup>1</sup> 'The Gypsies of Grant Road' first appeared in *Panorama: The Journal of Intelligent Travel*, in a slightly different form.

to hail a cab. These seniors were bereft of support, their children having moved to the suburbs or out of the country, leaving them alone in large, crumbling apartments.

The gypsies would fight like starving animals. It was always the men versus the women. The men would snarl, abuse, and rush at the women. It was almost always over money. The men were luses, wastrels, and wife-beaters. They lived off the women, who made garlands and baskets or traded in old clothes or hopped onto trains, selling combs, trinkets, and hair clips. The women had to bring in the mullah. For that, they even did a bit of ragpicking from the garbage dump outside the station. There was enough waste in the city to feed its poor. And the gypsies and the dump were old neighbours.

When the gypsy men would beat them, the gypsy women would scream abuses at them. They had louder voices than the men, and more anger. After that, they would slip under their blankets, pull up their saris, and wait. Wait for the unspoken truce.

The gypsies were great breeders. Over time their population grew, a whole colony sprang up. Noise levels increased, as did fights, dissensions, and quarrels. Yet the cops did nothing. Then, one day, while entering the station, I saw an eviction in progress. The gypsies were being removed. Cops, wielding sticks, threatened them, while their belongings were dumped into the back of a truck. The gypsy women were hysterical: they shrieked curses onto the cops, onto the government. The men look stunned and defeated. The children were crying. I asked a cop what was happening. He said: 'These people make too much noise. The residents in the opposite building have complained. Besides, these people have now been allotted flats outside the city. They each have a home of their own. There is no reason for them to live on the road anymore. It is public property, after all.'

A squint-eyed gypsy woman rushed up to me. 'They are lying, sahib,' she screeched. 'Look! We have got official documents: ration cards and voting cards from here. Why should we go elsewhere? How does it bother those buildingwallas if we are here? Their building will come down one day. And they will get a new flat in the new building. But it will be in the same area, no? They won't be forced to go where they don't want to. To a place where there are no trains, no life, no work, no garbage to pick.' Her voice was anguished, her face stained with tears.

After the eviction it felt strange, seeing the quadrangle empty. A sense of foreboding pervaded the area. It was as though the gypsy women's curses hung in the air. The cops kept a close watch on the quadrangle. They patrolled regularly. Then, after a few days, the old railing that separated the quadrangle from the main road was dismantled and a new line of demarcation comprising round metal poles was erected. Immediately, a team of dabbawallas swept in and set up a hub in the quadrangle, a collection point for their tiffins. The gypsies had no hope now. They might as well begin to enjoy their new home, which, by the looks of it, was the overhead skywalk. Yes, they had resisted the move to a place outside the city and occupied, instead, the skywalk that emanated from the station and emerged on the main road. There was enough walking space, sleeping space, cooking space, and room to play on the skywalk.

There the gypsies waited and watched, safe in the realisation that it was outside the jurisdiction of the cops. And the cops knew, too, that there was no point getting involved in things that did not concern them. Things like the ladies' bar and the country liquor bar and the mounting garbage dump outside the station.

From the skywalk, the gypsies enjoyed a fine view of the city. They could stop passersby and peddle their wares, while keeping an eye on their infants, who would be fascinated with the

view. And the street dogs had joined them, too, in this vast dormitory of space. And, once in a while, the gypsy women could stand up and rail curses at those buildingwallas, with whom they now stood eye to eye. Ha, ha, let them see, let them know – those sahibs and memsahibs! – that they had not gotten away with their evil designs. The city had found the gypsies a home. At least for a while.