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Writing the City – Shaping its Conscience

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ABSTRACT

The essay looks at writing on the city as an act and ritual of being one with the city. Writing on the city, especially the many city-biographies are not just the multiple descriptions or different voices talking about the city but they are a way in which the city is closely understood and engaged with. The city shapes itself in many forms – its physical fabric, its people, but there is also the 'mental life' of a city which this essay elaborates as the psychological and intellectual life of a city. Often writings, especially the three books we focus on, are much concerned about the physical development of the city, but they are constantly producing the city in spaces and events other than the built environment or are producing the close links between the built life and cultural existence of a city. The essay briefly concludes on the possibility of writing on a city as an act of developing the conscience of a city – a conscience that challenges and argues with the shape and life of a city.

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Writing the city is a way of knowing and shaping the city. The city is imagined always between its physical fabric and its people, but there is also the psychological and intellectual life of a city. A city exists in the way people think about it – its residents, its citizens, its visitors, its observers, and its viewers. A 'Bombay' or a 'Bambai' exists even outside its physical fabric and geographic location, in the minds of people who have never even visited it. We struggle and argue over planning policies and issues like Floor Space Index as we believe that these shape, make or break our cities; however, every news story on Bombay/Mumbai, every essay or account in popular press or a full length book on the city, writes the city, shapes it, makes it or breaks it.

The psychological and intellectual life of a city can be ephemeral, but is very real; one may not see it, but one surely senses it. The psychological life is the condition of everyday being in the city; it is not a specific scenario but the accumulation of histories and rumours alike, the sense of living and working between morning and night. Similarly the intellectual life is not something that only belongs to a few who consciously discuss the city, but it is the everyday knowledge of its people observing things in the city while living their daily lives. One can map, record, document the physical growth and shape of a city; one can search, pull out of archives or memories the many incidents and events, debates and riots, which happened in a city. But, how does one map the intellectual and psychological life of a city that possibly exists in forms that are neither tangible nor visible, and it also probably changes often very fast. Personally for me this has been the struggle in trying to know the city, and the act of writing is the constant form and medium through which one has tried to get a grip over the pulse and sense of city, its 'mental life', its psychological and intellectual life. The entire process that went into shaping what finally became *Alice in Bhuleshwar: Navigating a Mumbai Neighbourhood* was this struggle.

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The high consciousness of studying cities, especially the kinds of Delhi, Mumbai, Bangalore, or Ahmedabad in India, or Abu Dhabi, Dubai and Shanghai in Asia, or what we would roughly cluster as Indian cities (I would rather say cities in India) or Asian cities (or cities in Asia) has been very popular and an infective activity over the last two decades especially. This has resulted in producing much good writing and many challenging projects; although one has to note here that the popularity of the 'city' as study subject has spawned a plethora of meaningless studies as well! As for Bombay/Mumbai the transition from 1980s to 1990s is tumultuous and I always mark this with two striking events in Bombay – first, the mill-workers' strike in 1982 and the consequent closure of the cotton mills, second, the devastating and life-changing riots of 1992-93 in the wake of the demolition of Babri Masjid by right-wing forces in Ayodhya,

followed by the serial bomb-blasts of March 1993. These events need to be marked against three urban developments in Mumbai – firstly, the coming up of Hiranandani residential complex in Powai in the vicinity of Powai Lake, which is one of the water reservoirs for the city, secondly, the debates on conservation and urban history, including the change of the city's name from Bombay to Mumbai in 1995, and finally the coming up of malls, specially the Phoenix Mall complex on the site of Phoenix Mills.

In this context five books that take birth out of the pulse of its times are – *Bombay: Cities Within* by Sharada Dwivedi and Rahul Mehrotra (India Book House and Eminence Designs, 1995), *Bombay – Metaphor for Modern India* edited by Sujata Patel and Alice Thorner (Oxford University Press, 1995), *Bombay: Mosaic of Modern Culture* edited by Sujata Patel and Alice Thorner (Oxford University Press, 1995), *Bombay and Mumbai. The City in Transition* edited by Sujata Patel and Jim Masselos (Oxford University Press, 2003) and finally *One Hundred Years, One Hundred Voices – The Millworkers of Girangaon: An Oral History* edited by Neera Adarkar and Meena Menon, with an introduction by Rajnarayan Chandavarkar (Seagull Books, 2005).

In the last few years some other books that make a timely mark and contextualise the contemporary urban and political sense of the city include *Govind Narayan's Mumbai – An Urban Biography from 1863* edited and translated (original Marathi version titled *Mumbaiche Varnan)* by Murali Ranganathan (Anthem Press, 2009), *Three Merchants of Bombay – Doing Business in Times of Change* by Lakshmi Subramanian (Penguin, 2012) and surely much before Dharavi was the hot subject and everybody's favourite study-subject we had *Rediscovering Dharavi* by Kalpana Sharma (Penguin, 2000).

To these we have recently had two urban biographies add to the list – *A City Adrift: A Short Biography of Bombay* by Naresh Fernandes (Aleph Book Company, 2013) and *Boombay: From Precincts to Sprawl* by Kamu Iyer (Popular Prakashan, 2013). In contrast to the city-biography structure, Neera Adarkar contributed one more edited book to the list, which took on the mantle of getting into the underbelly and 'mental life' of the city through one of its most important building typology – the Chawls, with the book *The Chawls of Mumbai: Galleries of Life* (Imprint One, 2011). In this essay, I discuss them in more detail.

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The books by Iyer and Fernandes produce their Bombay-s and Mumbai-s for us. Both authors, one an architect and the other a journalist, recreate the city from memory and experience, but also love, longing, and angst. Iyer's Boombay shuffles between being a memoir and notes from an architect-planner, whilst Fernandes shuffles role between being a journalist, a commentator, an urban archaeologist, and a flaneur in his A Short Biography of Bombay. What is curious in the narratives generated by both the authors is that the roles they are shuffling between, overlap

into one as they write – the writing merges their different personalities and bring to us a razor-sharp commentary on the shape of the city. Iyer writes the city through the prism of many building typologies that grew and developed in Bombay and Mumbai, and the many planning laws and policies. The book has a fragmented structure as some chapters talk about growing up in a certain neighbourhood and planned precinct of the city, another is a more technical analysis of specific developments in the city such as Marine Drive, and then there are chapters which take position and comment on issues such as urban poverty. The author floats through his vast repository of mental notes and observations he has literarily and diagrammatically made over the years he has studied, grown up, and practiced as an architect based out of Bombay. In fact this precisely was the impetus for this book – Iyer in conversation with many of us who have been his colleagues, students and friends. Iyer is constantly thinking through architecture – the experience of building and the experience of living, and these free ranging but precise thoughts had to be penned down, homed into a book. Iyer is constantly 'thinking' as older resolutions and ideas transform into newer doubts and questions; once these settle into some sort of a thesis, for a few moments at least, they sure enough again get challenged with changing times, and this is the struggle for Iyer the 'thinker' and Iyer the 'author'. This struggle makes the book a richer narrative.

Fernandes is constantly 'looking'. The act of 'looking' and 'searching' defines his intellectual modus. What is Fernandes searching for? He is reading signs all the time in what he sees around him – from advertisements that sell lifestyle and aspirations for urban dwellers, to hidden memorial stones and lost sites such as a police chowki after a riot. His contemporary commentary is as if he is making frantic notes while he walks through the lanes and alleys of Bombay, but his other hand is simultaneously writing down fragments from the city's past, from archives and stories, and leftover signs in the changing urban fabric. There are no titles to the chapters in this book, and one wonders why, as it gets a bit unnerving when one is trying to make sense of the book – but then one is happy to read and navigate through the book just like a lost soul finding his/her way through the texts and stories that the author is weaving simultaneously as you read the book. The chapters weave incidents and stories and observations beautifully, often thematically organised, but after a point it is all the pages together that matter and not the individual chapters. It is the full book that sits as one text, one narrative, one monologue often broken into multitude voices by the people who inhabit conversations and stories, one diatribe which is also the archaeologist's log, notes for an epic poem yet to be written, and the phantom city shaping out of the Arabian abyss.

In both books, sharp and well-researched details make for an intense reading, and more often than once these are details that have been collected over years of work, conversations, and exchanges with colleagues. Love and angst for the city shape their narrative. The architect draws on the many examples he has studied, read in books, read in policy manuals, chanced upon during working as an architect or as a student and teacher of architecture; the journalist draws upon years of work in the field reporting politics and events

in the city on a daily basis, comparing the sights and sounds of everyday urgent reporting to the more paced-down occasions when the author is taking walks in the city as a lover of its history and life, ruminating on debates that are running the city. Both authors are distinctive 'urban characters' themselves – being involved in conversations and living across networks of people and spaces, in the everyday city, which are the active sites of work and thinking, and living in the city!

The book on Chawls edited by Neera Adarkar looks at the quintessential Bombay typology to get a sense of what this city's history and social life has been all about. The Chawl is home and neighbourhood, as I myself illustrate in the contribution to the edited book; the chawl is architecture as well as urbanity. From defining the idea of home in the city, to defining the essential urban space and public place of events and negotiations - the Chawl is the fabric that Bombay and Mumbai are. The edited structure of the book allows many voices and many methodological approaches to the subject, however the book does have a stronger narrative bent where stories and experiences drive the nuances and different understandings of how this typology has shaped the political, cultural as well as 'mental life' of the city. Adarkar's book is a good example to understand the shaping of city's psychological and intellectual formation where the Chawl was literally the physical shape of this city, as well as its crucible; the Chawl in tectonic and spatial ways wrote the biography of this city in many modes.

The physical fabric of the city, its struggle over living and real estate, space and hope for another tomorrow are constant themes in the three books we detail in this essay. Together, these books are essential for us to review what the nature and shape of this city has been, while drastic development projects threaten to change the city overnight with sweeping brush-strokes. Change is inevitable and a part of the city's life always, as even these three books constantly indicate and discuss, but the question is what is the pace and sensibility of this change? Is the psychological and intellectual life of this city ready and accepting

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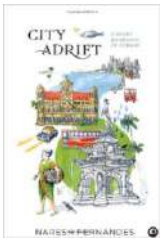
of the physical changes? Does the speed of change of the city's psychological and intellectual life match the drastic and abrupt nature of its physical transformation? The three books are timely in this sense - they are in many ways an appeal to understand the pace of change in cities, and that even if cities change and grow there is logic and sensibility, a pace and structure that needs to be realised. The logic of precincts and the logic of neighbourhoods are critical and crucial; in the books by Iyer and Adarkar neighbourhoods have the clarity of a physical geography; and especially with the Chawls, the shared mental space is central to the idea of the neighbourhood. With Fernandes, it is the walks that map the logic of the city and its interconnected life across places, areas and neighbourhoods.

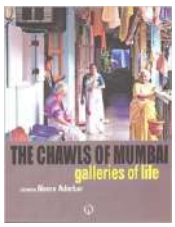
In my own research, the logic of walking a city and the neighbourhood are central structures of intellectually and psychologically understanding and knowing the city; and one has written extensively in the past on the subject. A few weeks ago in an essay titled 'The Neighbourhood as an Urban Lexicon' written for a book to be published on the Kala Ghoda precinct, I wrote thus – "The neighbourhood is precisely this entity of exchanges and exhibitions – where culture and aspirations encounter the reality of daily work and everyday life, to produce a part of the city, which is local, urban, and global all at once. Its architectural shape and face, as well as its urban fabric are indicative of these various scales at which the neighbourhood operates. As much as some aspects of the architecture become sacrosanct over time, there are parts of the fabric that will change; but their change needs to be understood and projected in certain ways such that the 'ethics of space' remains maintained. […] urban growth as the nature of spaces we have and we want, and what is the relationship of these space-structures to the 'mental life' (as Georg Simmel would phrase it) of a city."

I closely read these books in this context, and also ask - what new conversations can these and newer books set up for us? As we all write about the state of this city and the threats it faces from drastic and unwarranted and unkind changes, we also rescue and recover the city in our writings. Are all these writings the conscience of the city? Producing the city in these writings as a mode of sympathy with, or challenge to, or an argument with, the everyday conflict, complexity and contradictions in the life of a city and its denizens; hoping to engage in conversation the city and its many reflections and self-imaginations – in many ways, building its conscience. These three books are now a critical addition to a series of books on Bombay/Mumbai that build and shape the conscience of the city; and their approach to writing the city produces the city one more time, accumulating a newer set of nuances and details to the ever-growing, ever-changing, and constantly challenged sense and sensibility of this city. ■



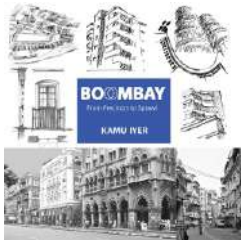
Excerpt from A City Adrift: *A Short Biography of Bombay* by Naresh Fernandes (Aleph Book Company, 2013), pp. 56-57

Among the truths Bombay holds to be self-evident is the fact that it is cosmopolitan. The first time the word appeared in the Times of India in the context of the city was in 1878, in an article about Afghans visiting Bombay. The paper noted that groups of these men from the north, of whom 'nothing is finer than their physique, nothing worse than their morals', could frequently be spotted in 'the cosmopolitan bazaars of Bombay'. To inspect the roots of that heterogeneity, it's instructive to walk among the tombs of the dead in a neighbourhood that's recently come to be known as Wadala East. Just over a decade ago, it was called Antop Hill, a gritty industrial zone with gigantic storage tanks belonging to the Indian Oil Corporation and the factories of India Steel and India Hume Pipe Company. Antop Hill began to change early in the new millennium, a process driven in no small part by the construction of the Dosti Acres housing complex, where flats sell for around Rs. 22,000 a square foot. But before the factories and the residential towers, Antop Hill was a necropolis. Since 1872, the neighbourhood has housed a burial ground for Sunni Muslims, a crematorium for Hindus and another, not so far away, for leprosy patients. It is also where the city's smallest communities have been allotted graveyards: the Armenians, the Chinese, the Baha'is, the Prathana Samaj and the Jews- or to be precise, Jewish prostitutes.



Excerpt from 'Overview' by Sandeep Pendse, Neera Adarkar, Maura Finkelstein, pp. 1-2, in *The Chawls of Mumbai: Galleries of Life*, edited by Neera Adarkar (Imprint One, 2011).

Bombay/ Mumbai has a history of reclamations, migrations and segregations. The development of the chawls is intrinsically connected to these critical moments in the city's history and must be understood within the wider context of the development of the city over last 150 years. Bombay's initial cluster of seven islands, surrounded by mudflats and marshy land, through gradual reclamation over the course of the 18th century became the city as it is recognised today. As the commercial activity (under British domination) shifted from Surat in Gujarat, investments in the opium trade and cotton trade, in existing agricultural land and later in manufacturing especially in the cotton textile mills provided an opportunity for Indians to accumulate wealth. The labour required for the functioning and growth of trading and manufacturing activities was provided by impoverished migrants from the hinterland of Bombay. Unfortunately, the need to house such a large number of migrant workers was addressed neither by the colonial authorities nor by the employers. Therefore newly arrived labour initially lived in huts, sheds and even in the open, outside the gates of the mills. In 1890 when the city boasted of 70 textile mills, it was estimated that around 100,000 people slept on the roads or footpaths.



Excerpt from *Boombay: From Precincts to Sprawl* by Kamu Iyer (Popular Prakashan, 2014), pp. 67- 72

In response to the plague, the British set up the Bombay Improvement Trust in 1898 with members of the Indian Civil Service as well as engineers, architects and a host of specialists to execute projects. The trust was given extensive powers to clean up the city and develop new planned neighbourhoods. [...] The trust planned 91 schemes, of which 75 were executed. They varied in size from a single street to infill estates and Greenfield projects like the Dadar-Matunga and Mahim schemes. While many infills were about existing villages, for the Greenfield estates the trust had to acquire land, a difficult task because compensation was always contested by land owners and often led to the Trust being drawn into elaborate arbitration. In the next step, the land was laid out with roads, house plots, parks and sites for civic amenities. The process of making a layout was also challenging because it meant balancing economic returns with social objectives, deciding on the number and sizes of plots, affordability and so on.

[...] The Improvement Trust had a vision of how a planned settlement should look. Layouts and planning and building rules were intended to create a coherent visual fabric. To make sure that individual buildings did not become isolated entities, architects had to submit for approval the elevations of the building along with details of the entrance drawn to quarter- and half- scales. Approvals always came only after discussions with the chief architect of the improvement trust, who kept reminding the architects who submitted plans for approval: "Your building is only a part of the estate. The individual building is subsumed in the context."

The trust did not insist on uniform facades, and the buildings in these layouts differed from one another in external appearance. However, they coalesced into one harmonious visual entity because they were not designed to be iconic, stand alone buildings. Some architects felt that the volumes and setbacks imposed by the improvement trust were restrictive- but most were content with expressing their individuality subtly through design innovations within the permitted rules.