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Thinking Bombay:
The Urban Decay and Civilisation

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Abstract

An attempt has been made by the author to critically examine the concept of 'civilisation' beyond its celebratory facade, highlighting that cities—which have been the hallmark of human civilisation have its highs as well as lows. In the context of latter, the author focuses on Bombay (now, Mumbai), laying out the city's growth trajectory and examining the claims of its subsequent intellectual and cultural decline since the 1980s, a sentiment echoed by several contemporary scholars. The article attributes the perceived decline to significant events like the 1981 textile strike, communal riots, and bomb blasts. Drawing parallels with other global cities like Manchester and Barcelona that faced similar downturns, the author proposes that Bombay must reinvent itself. Advocating the need for a visionary approach, the author proposes moving beyond a purely financial focus to embrace a multi-state, poly-centric identity that prioritises scientific, design, and educational institutions, fostering knowledge and attracting diverse talent to secure its future.

Keywords: Civilisation, colonialism, Bombay, trade, knowledge centre, de-intellectualisation

The term civilisation is not necessarily a complementary term. When the British came to India, they constantly kept claiming that they are here to civilise Indians. The term 'civilisation' holds within it elements that are close to what constitutes exploitation and injustice. Some eminent European thinkers have commented on the dark side of civilisation. Sigmund Freud argues in *Civilisation and its Discontents* (1930) that 'civilisation' coerces an individual's psyche and can cause psychic disorders. Michel Foucault thinks of civilisation as a kind of a punishment, a social compulsion on individuals, which can often mark out otherwise normal individuals as being insane. Let us, therefore, not think unquestioningly what civilisation is and merely point to the monuments it creates, or congratulate ourselves for having ancestors who managed to build them without looking at the stories of pain and misery concealed under that facade. High philosophy and monuments alone do not make civilisation. The story will be incomplete if one does not look at the same time for the price the marginalised in any given era had to pay for allowing the glorious parts of a civilisation to come into being. The processes that go into the making of a civilisation are complex and, in most cases, difficult to disentangle.

The unceasing human advent—biological, psychological and moral—our intellectual evolution, struggle to form a compassionate society and the articulation of what is good for all, are some of the processes that constitute civilisation. Incidentally, there are no exact synonyms for the English term 'civilisation' in most Indian languages. The Marathi term *sanskruti* or *sanskriti*, is no exact equivalent for *civilisation*. Sometimes, Marathi speakers also use the Hindi word *sabhyata* as an equivalent. Kannada, has *nagarikta* which literally means turning people into citizens. Perhaps that word is closer to the idea of civilisation. Historians maintain that the structure of a civilisation is based on the idea of city, the urban form or the 'civic'.

The idea of civilisation, not civilisations themselves, emerged in Europe's industrial age. The eighteenth-century European historians were greatly amused that there were in ancient time large urban human settlements, later forgotten by the succeeding generations. For example, it was in the mid-nineteenth century that a chance observation by a colonial soldier subsequently led to unearthing of the Indus valley region, leading to further excavations. Europe's modern historians wondered how the ancient people, believed to be primitive, could build such magnificent cities. This tangible aspect of progress made by the past generations aside, not everything was ideal in these civilisations. Let us not delude into believing that there was no social injustice in the Indus Valley Civilisation. There is now evidence coming up on how the Indus valley society was segregated on the basis of people's material standing. Archaeologists have also studied the teeth and skeletons found there and concluded that some people might have died because of diseases and malnutrition. Thus, while it is natural for us to be amazed at the grandeur of these ancient cities, how they were organised in terms of the roads, layouts, water supply and sewerage, it is not the case that the life of everyone living there was led in perfect conditions. The concept of civilisation has its beauties and at the same time it has its dark patches and bleak periods.

We, at the Somaiya School of Civilisation, are trying to look at human evolution across the world and how humans have formed themselves as settlements, clans, sects, communities, nations and society through a close examination and granular interpretation of many sites of civilisation. Among these, the urban space ranks very high. Cities like Mumbai (previously known as Bombay), Shanghai, Rangoon, Karachi, Barcelona and Manchester, to name just a few, are the sites for our planned study. We intend to study these and such other urban spaces in order to be able to draw conclusions regarding the life, thought and action of homo sapiens and their attempts at constructing visions and ideas of the human destiny. It is in that line of enquiry; I make an attempt to comment on Bombay and particularly the intellectual decline experienced by the city during the last few decades.

Quite often, during the last few decades, whenever I spoke to an old Bombay friend, I have detected in the response some sort of worry about Bombay's decline. Some grumbled about the increased rate of population growth. On checking the census data, I found the figures do not bear out the claim. Bombay's population growth rate is slightly lower today than it was during the previous three centuries. Others claimed that the transportation is not good enough; still others point to the declining standard of education, particularly the university education. However, the number of institutions providing higher education has increased, and the diversification in higher education opening up new avenues for learners too has increased. What exactly is the disenchantment about? These episodic comments have often made me wonder as to what may

really be the causes for the anxiety about Bombay's current condition in the minds of the citizens rooted in Mumbai? This question acquired urgency in my mind after I gave two lectures at the Asiatic Society of Mumbai.

The lectures were about the idea of the School of Civilisation and parallelly I also talked about the work done by scholars associated with the Asiatic in that direction. Among the audience was Vidyadhar Date, who wrote a newspaper piece about the lectures, comparing them with another lecture given around the same dates in Bombay. In it, Date had mentioned Aroon Tikekar (1944–2016), a close associate of the Asiatic Society, who published *Mumbai De-Intellectualised: Rise and Decline of a Culture of Thinking* (2009). The title of the book is its theme. Was it Tikekar alone who felt so? Or, were there others as well who had written in a similar manner?

On following upon the curiosity, I came across nearly four or five titles written in a similar vein: One by the eminent sociologist Sujata Patel along with Jim Masselos titled *Bombay and Mumbai: The City in Transition* (2003). The authors argue in it that Bombay, after its renaming as Mumbai around the mid-1990s, started experiencing a cultural and sociological decline. There is also a book by Thomas Hansen titled *Wages of Violence: Naming and Identity in Postcolonial Bombay* (2001). It speaks about the increase in violence in Bombay after, if not because of, renaming of the city. Then there is Mariam Dossal's *Theatre of Conflict: City of Hope* (2010). But perhaps, even more forceful in argument is *Mumbai Fables* (2010) by Gyan Prakash.

The titles mentioned were written mostly in the first decade, or soon after, of the twenty-first century. These authors come from different places. Some working in India, some in the USA, some in the UK, but all connected with Bombay in their own way. Taken together, they have a strong message that something has gone wrong with Bombay/Mumbai. Tikekar's observation is that Mumbai has ceased to produce outstanding thinkers, writers, publishers, journals and ideas. The claim is unnerving and calls for a granular fact-check, as also a serious thinking about how we have arrived here. What might have been the reasons if, indeed, a decay has set in? My simple objective here is to initiate a conversation regarding how to understand what has happened and more importantly, to begin thinking of ways to deal with the present.

Before turning to the question of beginning of the decay, if decay there is, let me ask a simpler question: when does Bombay begin? To answer that, one needs to go back nearly two thousand years, quite up to the beginning of the Common Era. There are sites around the present-day Mumbai that give some idea of human habitation in the area in those remote times. The long history is that several dynasties have ruled in the region, though, of course, what was being ruled was a very small habitation. Mumbai wasn't like Banaras, Kanpur, Delhi or Madurai. It was a string of seven islands each with a minuscule population. Therefore, I am not going over every detail of the early or the medieval history of Bombay.

Bombay came to a full life after the English King Charles II married the Portuguese princess Catherine of Braganza in 1662 CE and received control over these islands in dowry. In 1668 CE, the British East India Company initially rented two or three islands, not all of the seven islands, at a nominal annual rent of 10 pounds from the King. But, acquiring this place on lease did not provide the British a cakewalk. Their existence here was not easy, as they were constantly

getting frequently attacked by the Maratha forces and the Dutch forces. The East India Company, founded in 1600 CE, was still new. It had received the license to trade from the Emperor Jahangir around 1615 CE. and had its offices in Calcutta and Surat at that time. Gradually it also spread to Madras and Malabar. The Company getting the Bombay islands on rent was some change but until 1681 CE not much happened. It was after the demise of Chhatrapati Shivaji Maharaj's death that the company felt emboldened to fully start it activity in those islands.

For grasping the transformations taking place in Mumbai, fast forward to 1771 CE to 1881 CE, and then from 1881 CE to 1981 CE. I would like to measure my understanding through these four periods. From 1681 CE to 1781 CE, the volatile, unstable existence of Bombay continued. There was not much activity but the strength of the British increased at least enough so as to cope with the Marathas and to insulate and make secure Bombay in some ways. There was an attempt to connect the islands and to build a dockyard for ship making. From 1781 CE to 1881 CE, is many ways a period of very rapid growth of Mumbai. William Hornby became the Governor of Bombay in 1771 CE. A decade later after taking the charge, he embarked on a project to connect the islands in 1782 CE. A few years later, in 1789 CE, the *Bombay Herald*, the city's first English newspaper was published. In 1790 CE, the *Bombay Courier* was established.

Between 1803 CE and 1804 CE, two major calamities threatened the existence of Bombay. It is important to note that whenever in its long past Bombay was struck by any calamity, the very next day the residents were seen in action and start rebuilding. In 1803 CE the city was engulfed in a huge fire. When London was caught in flames, the city residents had to move over to the opposite side of the river Thames; but in Bombay, surrounded by sea on its three sides, there was no such chance. Then in 1804 CE, there was a deadly drought in the Western parts of India. In Bombay there was water shortage, yet Bombay survived and returned back to life more vigorously. Between 1803 to 1805 CE, there were several conflicts between the Company's armed forces and the Marathas. In the Battle of Assaye of 1803 CE, the British forces defeated the Marathas and finally in 1817 CE, they compelled the Peshwa Baji Rao II to surrender, contributing to the downfall of the Maratha Confederacy. After this, the East India Company made rapid advances over other parts of the subcontinent, compelling the rulers to accept the English suzerainty. In 1822 CE, the Elphinstone High School was created. The building is still in existence. In 1825 CE, a new mint was created by Elphinstone. In 1830 CE, a simple carriage-road up to the Bhor Ghat, south of Pune, was built. These were major achievements.

These developments led to in active in-flow of commodities and population growth. In 1833 CE, the town hall was built, where the Asiatic Society is located today. In 1835 CE, the Elphinstone College was established and in the next year, 1836, the Chamber of Commerce was formed. In 1840 CE, the Bank of Bombay came into existence and in 1844 CE, was established the cotton exchange. That was a great stroke of good luck for Bombay. It is through the cotton exchange and after the American War of Independence in 1861 CE, that the trade in Bombay multiplied manifold. 1845 CE saw the foundation of the Grant Medical College. In 1852 CE the first political association—the Bombay Association—was allowed to be established. In 1853 CE, the first railway line between the Bori Bunder and Bombay's southern end, Thane, was laid, and soon after, in 1855 CE, the Bombay to Baroda Central India Railway (BBCI-rail) line came up. In 1857 CE, the city saw the establishment of the University of Bombay.

The opening of the Suez Canal in 1869 CE improved navigation and this boosted the cotton trade in Bombay. The city which aspired to be connected to the world now actually got connected. The opening of the rail line to Baroda connected Bombay to India beyond the Narmada River. This river holds a significant place in Indian history as armed forces in the north rarely managed to cross the river without making a long detour. In the south, as a harbour, Bombay got connected with the rest of the world. In 1872 CE, the Bombay Municipal Corporation was established and in the same year Bombay Electricity and Transport Company (BEST) was formed. This was the time when other urban settlements in India hadn't even dreamed of having such an organisation. Throughout the nineteenth century, Bombay remained ahead of other Indian cities in every walk of life. Compared to many other medieval cities like Mysore, Hyderabad, Meerut—as they were during the nineteenth century, the colonial Bombay was much ahead. This was the trajectory of Bombay from 1771 CE to 1881 CE.

The Asiatic Society mentioned earlier was established in 1804 CE as the 'Literature Society of Bombay'. Several Indian scholars who came from different places like Konkan, Gujarat got associated with the Literature Society. Even if we look at the trading locations, we see migrant groups like the *Kamathis* from Hyderabad, the *Parsees*, the *Bohras*, the *Bhatias*, the *Lohanas*, and the *Jains*. The colonial officials in this period also produced a phenomenal amount of literature. We tend to forget that at the base of Bombay is knowledge production. Bombay very much is about ideas, not just about its local trains, film studios and cricket grounds. When one thinks of the Asiatic Society, one normally thinks of Calcutta where William Jones proposed that Sanskrit, Latin and Greek were interconnected in some way since early ancient times. At the time when Jones and later his successor were producing knowledge about India's history and literature, there were scholars working in Mumbai well. The Asiatic Society of Mumbai has brought a series of booklets on scholar who came together at the beginning of the nineteenth century and produced fascinating books on history, politics and society.

William Erskine—who came here on Mackintosh's invitation, translated the *Babarnama* from Persian into English; Vance Kennedy, a major-general in the Company's armed force with a remarkable command over Persian and several other Indian languages, produced a Marathi–English dictionary; John Briggs translated the *Tarikh-e-Ferishta* along with works tracing the rise of Islamic dynasties in India; Captain James Mcmurdo produced works on the histories of Gujarat, Kathiawar and Sind; William Sykes, an ornithologist, compiled useful catalogues on Western India; George Buist, editor of the *Bombay Times*– precursor of the *Times of India*, shaped the prose in journalism which in turn impacted the prose in Marathi and Gujarati; Henry Carter undertook the study of geology and the study of Indian ocean; Philip Anderson, a clergyman by profession, provided an insightful analysis through his book English in Western India; Alexander Forbes wrote the *Rasamala* on the history and culture of Gujarat. In fact, the three institutes founded by Forbes still exist— the Gujarat Vernacular Society in Ahmedabad, Andrews Library in Surat and the Gujarat Sabha in Bombay. Peter Peterson was the last European Professor of Oriental Languages at the Elphinstone College in Bombay. John Fleet was a scholar of Sanskrit and Kannada. His works on the history and epigraphs of medieval Karnataka established the modes for scientific study of Indian epigraphs. Under the influence of such orientalist scholars, a new knowledge of India emerged.

At the same time, a new philosophy of historical linguistics developed in Germany and France, which started classifying languages into language families. Initially it was claimed that all Indian languages had grown out of Sanskrit but gradually the Dravidian language family was proposed by Robert Caldwell in 1856 CE. It is good for us to remember that in this tiny city, towards the end of the eighteenth century and the beginning of the 19th century, a group of fairly young authors started writing books about our regions, trees, animals, ocean, agriculture, geology, history, languages. Bombay connected itself with the rest of the world and produced knowledge which went out through those connections to the rest of the world. This made Bombay what it was. One is curious to know what the population would have been at that time. It seems that by the end of the eighteenth-century CE, Bombay had just about a hundred thousand population. By the end of the nineteenth century CE, it had grown to nine hundred thousand, quite close to a million.

1881 CE according appears to be a crucial year in the history of Bombay. Soon after, Bombay seems to have taken the responsibility for the rest of the nation. In 1885 CE, the Congress had its first meeting in Bombay. Much later when the Quit India Movement was launched, it was from Bombay. From 1881 CE to 1981 CE, Bombay excelled in the field of theatre and cinema—an entirely new form of art. After 1981, the equations stared to change in most fields. The city is also home to some of the big scientific research institutions. Be it history, economics, sociology, science, in every field, Bombay was leading. 1881 CE to 1981 CE, Bombay produced individuals who shaped the destiny of modern India like Mahatma Gandhi, working here in Bombay. Dr Babasaheb Ambedkar based primarily in Bombay. Many outstanding lawyers, jurists and judges emerged from the city. Many great Marathi as well as Gujarati writers were based here. The city is home to the JJ School of Art. It was there where ideas were proposed which changed how India looks at graphics. Why was it possible for Bombay to create and nurture institutions and talent? The main reason is that Bombay was open and welcoming to people who moved into the city from all parts of South Asia, and beyond. When displaced people from Sind came to India, Bombay welcomed them. Many who came from Pakistan after the partition came to work in the film-industry here. Bombay did not depend on any divine blessing or the state power to do things for it. People here strived to connect and gain new knowledge. Whichever calamity came, Bombay learnt to survive and thrive.

The year 1881 proved to be a turning point for the city as the first Factory Act was passed. It was an Act that took cognisance of the worker's interests. It is a sad irony of history that exactly a hundred years later, in 1981 CE, a grim strike of textile mill workers led to the decline of the mills in Bombay. This strike was a highly complex historical phenomenon. However, the 1981 strike proved a back-breaking moment for Bombay. For some years following the strike, workers families kept migrating out of the city. Then came the 1992 communal riots. Nearly 900 persons died in the riots. In the past, the work space in Bombay was largely secular in character. In 1993 CE, bomb blasts took place, and the rage that followed, let the communal feeling seep deeper. During the years from 1981 to 1993, he seeds of Bombay's decline had been sown.

When one visited Bombay in the decades before the 1980s, one normally came across several wonderful writers. There were writers and poets representing the self-proclaimed 'cultured class' as well as the angry young writers. There were artists representing worker's

movements and the many shades of the *Dalit* movement. The Marathi literature being produced here was at par with some of the best literature elsewhere in the world. But after 1990, not just literature, the city seems to have fell short of being able to make any epoch-making movie. Bombay today is waiting for a great book, a great movie, a great scientific idea to be born here. The population growth rate here is also not at par with the population growth rate of Delhi, Chandigarh or Bangalore. It was in view of the alarming changes that the scholars mentioned at the beginning of this lecture felt that Bombay was on a decline.

I do not deny the sentiment. There are similar changes happening in many parts across India; of course, that is no justification for what Bombay has gone through. However, if one looks at the trajectories of the cities like Barcelona, Manchester and New York for the same historical period, one notices a comparable situation of decline beginning with the 1980s. For instance, Manchester declined with the decline of the textile industry there. In its case, it was not any debilitating strike—though the England of the 1970s and 1980s witnessed several other industrial and mining strikes—but just that the nature of the textile industry changed world-wide. Manchester, however, revived itself. The city decided to bring in lots of talented young people and decided to focus on designing and software as its lead industries instead of returning to the diminishing textile or automobile production. It created housing to accommodate nearly a hundred thousand students close to the city centre.

In the case of Barcelona, normally described as the Manchester of the southern Europe, and with a history somewhat similar to that of Bombay—it also fought for independence for Catalania—the city declined despite a revival bid through hosting Olympic games. The city then turned its energy towards promoting tourism; even then it did not succeed. It just kept sliding down and became an unlivable city today. The old quarters of the city are now frightening spaces. New York went through a similar cycle of rise and decline. But it has managed to revive itself by bringing in new international institutions. It has now emerged as a global city with most offices of the United Nations located there.

Bombay, London, New York come in common conversation, like the film title *Amar, Akbar, Anthony*. These are multilingual spaces, located close to the sea and are, commercial capitals for their continents. Can Bombay re-invent itself beyond this decline? This is a question which we need to reflect upon. Bombay is rightly described as the financial capital of India. Because it was here a small group of persons with a rustic background came up with the idea of establishing a stock exchange. Today the stock exchanges of BSE and NSE, are driving engines for the nation, indicating that Bombay will continue to grow as a financial centre. While textiles and manufacturing have now gone out of the city, Bombay will have to find a new area of investment—financial and cultural. It cannot compete with Bengaluru and Hyderabad in terms of IT. Bombay is still good at the pharmaceuticals, particularly the biotech.

Bombay will have to think further on the lines of connecting of the seven islands in its past: in north up to Vapi, which is not very far from here, and beyond that Surat; in the south and east going up to the Ghats. Bombay needs to reimagine itself as an extended metropolitan region. Some might remember the struggle for Bombay to be a part of Maharashtra. But perhaps Maharashtra has turned out to be a bit of an unviable burden for Bombay. Setting aside the sentiment of regional and linguistic pride, Bombay can think of itself as a multi-state city, that is

to think of itself as a larger space and draw to itself talent, not just skills. The city will have to create several more scientific, design and educational institutions which nurture knowledge, not just the financial instinct.

The population growth rate has started declining. The city is facing a possible, imminent ecological disaster. Taking cognisance of this challenge, the city will have to find new ways to attract new talent, offer a secular work space, and think beyond the god and the state. The talent will not merely come by building management schools. We will really have to think together. The city's cultural institutions are dying. A study on such institutions suggests that previously, they were concentrated in the Fort area. Later, the activity moved to Dadar and Bandra; but now culture and business have become polycentric. Maybe cultural activity will be revived from the areas as farther as Vapi, Bhiwandi, or the places above the Ghats. Bombay will have to think as a culturally poly-centric and linguistically as well as socially diverse multi-state city which leads not just India but Asia as well. If the intellectuals, artists, social activists, leaders of business and industry do not rise to the occasion, Bombay may get relegated to a historical memory. Bombay still has a future, if Bombay decides to secure it.

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