

# **City Of Mumbai: Through The Eyes Of A Philosopher**

**By Vasant Sanzgiri**





*Mumbai has been my home for the past 45 years and this article is about my experience of the city which has shaped me and made me into much of what I am today. I received my shiksha - educational qualifications here; it is my karma bhumi - where I first started earning my living and it is here that I embarked on the journey of my spiritual development.*

Many are attracted to Mumbai for the opportunity it offers, because it is here that fortunes have been made and lost. It is not without reason that it is called a Maya-Nagari (city of illusions). From the outside what may look spectacular, hides the truth: it is a tough city; like a hard taskmaster who wants your growth, it presents challenges for you to conquer and demands adaptation from you.

When man turned from a nomad to a settler, he created clusters of habitations in areas with an abundance of natural resources like fertile land and water, where he could get a steady source for food. Places with features like natural harbors, perennial rivers with fresh water, etc. were also attractive locations. These settlements over a period grew into hamlets that eventually became towns

and cities and some of these became teeming Metropolises. However, all seeds do not grow in the same way, despite similar potential and conditions, not all cities have evolved into the status of an iconic metropolis as Mumbai has. In my opinion, Mumbai was a special seed that grew into a deeply inspiring city!

Many cities are named after a local hero, a God or Goddess; Athens has been named after Goddess Athena, Rome after Romulus. The etymology of the name Mumbai is from the deity of the city - Mumba Devi derived from Maha Amba or the great divine mother, a form of Parvati, the consort of Lord Shiva (part of the trinity of the Indian pantheon of gods). Legend has it that she was born in a family of fisherfolk as Lord Shiva wanted her to imbibe the virtues of patience and



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perseverance. A temple was built for goddess Mumba Devi in the mid 17th century near the docks at Bori Bandar, but in the late 18th Century it was moved to Pydhonie in central Mumbai (where it still stands today), to make way for the grand Victoria Terminus (currently Chhatrapati Shivaji Maharaj Terminus).(1) The name of the city has gone through various versions over the centuries. The name 'Bombay' is an anglicized version of the Portuguese name, Bom Bahia, meaning 'good bay'.(2) Natives however continued to call it Mumbai and finally in November 1995 its official name was restored to Mumbai.(3)

The form as well as the ideology of a city reflects the ideology of its founders. On the map today, Mumbai appears as a contiguous island, though originally it consisted of many islands, of which 7 were large and note-worthy. The Mumbai island was an attractive location as it had an all-weather natural harbor. It required the imagination of one man - Gerald Aungier, an officer with the British East India Company and the 2nd Governor of

Bombay (1669 to 1677), who visualized the potential of a malaria infested, forested island, as a major trading post for the company. He invited members of different communities to Mumbai to set up their businesses, and he allowed them to practice their religion. Soon places of worship of myriad different religions dotted the landscape: temples of different Hindu faiths, Zoroastrian fire temples or agiyaris, Jewish synagogues, Muslim mosques as well as Christian churches. . . It has been aptly described by historian S. M. Edwardes who states Aungier's great work was "...to weld into one homogeneous mass the discordant materials of Asiatic nationalities, to solve the problem which had never been solved before, as to how a great multitude of men of diverse religions and races should live together in peace and harmony, free from discord within and aggression without,"(4)

The evolution of Mumbai from a cluster of hamlets where the Aagri (salt farmers) and the Koli (fisherfolks) communities lived, to the Bombay of the East India Company was

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furthered due to the vision of Governor Sir Henry Bartle Edward Frere, Governor of the Bombay Presidency from 1862-1867, who expanded the city and built an administrative structure that catapulted Mumbai into the 'Urbs Prima in Indus'.

The seeds of cooperative co-existence and multicultural tolerance that were sown in the late 1600's, strengthened in the late 1800s, defined and developed the cosmopolitan character of Mumbai, still prevalent today, evident more recently, and to me most inspiringly during the unprecedented floods in Mumbai on 26th July 2006, when thousands of citizens left the safety of their own homes, wading through the floods to provide stranded strangers with food, water and shelter.

Their fervent passion, personal interest and generous contribution to Mumbai, is evident when we look beyond the undeniable functionality of the institutions they built, and view them as examples of immense beauty. Two areas of significant focus were Medical facilities

and Educational Institutions. The hospitals provided a new level of health care specially for the women and children in the city. The University and colleges exposed the young minds to new ideas and perspectives, in areas of civil liberties, governance, Law and all of which sowed the seeds for the future freedom movement in India.

Buildings are meant to provide covered for a specific purpose – as residences, offices, education institutions. Walking around the Fort area, it is evident that the awe inspiring stately buildings fulfilled their integrity to both design of form and practicality of purpose admirably.

Architects like F. W. Stevens used motifs to depict the local flora and fauna as decorative and symbolic architectural detail. To me, this has always reminded me of the concept of being one with nature. Architect George Wittet combined both Persian and Indian elements in buildings that to me today, tangibly embody the harmonious synthesis of vibrant and varied

cultures, and in a subtle way reduces the separation between the different communities.

A stellar example is the beautiful fountain in front of the St. Thomas Cathedral, a Protestant church, commissioned by Sir Cawasji Jahangir (CJ) a Parsee. The fountain enhances the beauty of the Gothic styled Cathedral and inscribed on it is the sentence:

***Whosoever Drinketh Of The Water That I Shall Give Him, Shall Never Thirst.***

### **Grand structures of Imperial Mumbai**

There are, among the numerous architectural marvels in Mumbai, 5 personal favorites, which to me are physical metaphors for many of the intrinsic values and virtues that I try to imbibe in some small way from this fascinating city:



### **The Chhatrapati Shivaji Maharaj Terminus**



This monumental building, designed by F. W. Stevens in 1888, is breathtaking in its grandeur. The diversity of its architectural features and at the same time its simple elegance makes it my most favorite building, and through the multitudinous throngs that use the reliable and punctual railways every day, I take the inspiration of strong work ethic; the discipline of holding one's rhythm of work no matter what the external challenges.

### **The Banganga Tank and the Venkateshwar Balaji Temple**



Located in the oldest recorded inhabited center of pilgrimage in Mumbai, the large water body of the tank itself emanates a pious tranquility that is surprising, given that it is enveloped today by a brisk and busy precinct of a bustling metropolis. The Balaji temple (1798) is replete with symbolic elements from one of the oldest Hindu epics, The Ramayana, whose myths have served as an inspiration for me throughout my childhood, and as I understand the symbolism in a deeper way, the concepts of Fraternity, Loyalty to a higher cause, and holding to the principle of Truth above all, has left an indelible mark within me.

### **The Mumbai Municipal Corporation building**



Expecting an unkept government office, this building surprises with its artistic character. Designed by F. W. Stevens (1893), I am sure its beauty continues to inspire and motivate those who manage the administrative affairs of Mumbai.

For me, it is a reminder that every place we spend a lot of time in, our homes, and especially our workplaces can be transformed with a little effort, in however small a way so that they can invigorate and energize us.

### **The Taj Mahal Hotel**




Designed by Indian architects Sitaram Khanderao Vaidya and D.N. Mirza, this renowned hotel incorporated various styles of architecture (Moorish, Rajasthani, Islamic, Neo-classical, Gothic, Italian Renaissance) in a harmonious manner to create a unique structure that, to me is a symbol of how many varied streams of thought can come together smoothly, and add to each other.

## The campus of University of Mumbai



Being a student of this University, I have a natural bias towards the awe-inspiring buildings on the campus; its convocation hall, library, the Rajabai clock tower and the central lawns around which are the lecture halls. The scale and beauty of these magnificent buildings, reminds me to strive to always bring both height and depth to my work, to remember to combine a larger vision with crucial detail, and to amalgamate all thought and action with both function and beauty.



In conclusion, I believe that the founders of Mumbai, in designing their vision of a city, brought in a deeper meaning that is reflects till today in its social fabric: Vasudhaiva Kutumbakam, meaning The World Is One Family. This invisible thread of unity, living with harmony, the sentiment of mutual respect and multicultural co-existence is starkly visible to me in this city, and affords me moments of reflection and inspiration almost every time I pass these majestic monuments as I commute through this compelling city I call my home. 

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