

Suketu Mehta's *Maximum City* (2004) is a novel that represents one foci of the new millennium writing-the interface of divergent strands of the Indian global impetus.

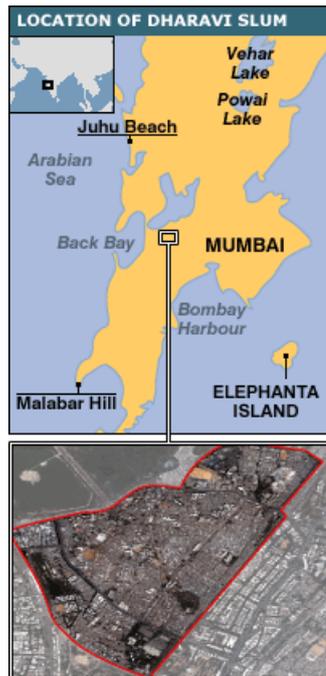
As Vyjayanthi Rao puts it

How does a city like Bombay become a subject of writing? Increasingly, the city's dystopic qualities are becoming the focus of a number of analyzes informing prophecies about cities of the future and the future of cities. The quintessential modernity of nineteenth and early twentieth century metropolises such as New York, London or Paris have ceased to define the contemporary telos of modernity in the world of urban studies and reflection. Instead, places like Mumbai, Lagos and Dubai are increasingly beginning to define the terminal conditions of modernity. This tendency is not without serious problems. More often than not, the idea of the city, of modernity and of the injustices materially embodied by the conditions of these places is tied to their colonial and neo-colonial histories and to their place within empires, old and new. In writings about such places, including Mumbai, heroic tales of survival and social movements seeking redemptive and distributive justice compete with stories about abjection and hopelessness and visions of coming anarchy and violence (Rao, 2005).

It is Bombay that he writes about, "the biggest, fattest, richest city in India" (MC, 18), the country's commercial, financial and entertainment hub. It is not just a city but rather a nation state and Suketu Mehta journeys its length and breadth finding stories in its crevices and corners and he seems to be data collector, a fact finder, a story gatherer and an architect of tales. His format is to take up major aspects and dominant personalities in the city and give them each a detailed and richly woven emphasis. From investigating its endless and often horrific underbelly where poverty, crime, conflict and the mafia survives. He includes the beauty and the affluence of the city as well. So, we have an array of gangsters, policemen, bar girls, slum dwellers and the elite, avante garde as well. Through the curly cues and byways of this meandering city he paints a picture of light and shadow, an insider and outsider.

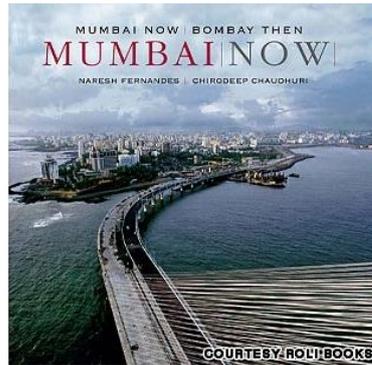


Mumbai





*Zara hat ke zara bach ke, yeh hai Bombay meri jaan-* Lines of the famous song from the movie C.I.D(1956)



Sea of People



Marine Drive



Malabar Hill



Mumbai



Cuff Parade, South Mumbai



Mumbai Slum

As a literary subject, Bombay first became available to a global audience through the success and notoriety of Salman Rushdie, whose novel *Midnight's Children* (1981) evocatively captured the rhythms and flows of the city of his birth. Subsequently, in his infamous *Satanic Verses* (1988), Bombay's film world was immortalized. Published nearly a quarter century after *Midnight's Children* *Maximum City: Bombay Lost & Found*, by New York-based writer Suketu Mehta recaptures a global stage for Bombay in much the same, powerful way as the former work. But works are literary events, which perform the task of locating a particular city on the world map in two historically distinct moments. If Rushdie's book is an artifact of the post-colonial moment in world cultural history, Mehta's *Maximum City*, appears in a global moment. This is a moment characterized by a great deal of uncertainty, especially regarding borders and the functions they perform in differentiating citizens and others in a world of multiple and fractured identities. Yet, as Chris Anderson, editor of the popular technology magazine *Wired* writes in his blog, although Bombay has become an obligatory stop on the itinerary of global CEOs, it is also the place that the foreign correspondent can still experience a foreign. For Anderson, as for many others, *Maximum City* serves as an evocative gateway to understanding the foreignness of Bombay.

The book chronicles, in three parts (respectively titled “Power”, “Pleasure” and “Passages”), the writer’s journey back to the city in which he grew up as a child before his family migrated to the US. It identifies a whole set of ‘Bombay types,’ characters associated in a special way with the world of Bombay through literature, journalism and especially cinema. Mehta spent several years meeting, interviewing and befriending these characters as part of his research for the book which is an arrangement of their stories into a powerful and evocative meta-narrative of how the city got to its present condition. The film directors, actors, hit-men, cops, dancing girls, small time thugs, slum-dwellers, diamond merchants and newly minted home owners whose stories are vividly recounted by Mehta all constitute, in some sense, the stereotypical characters that make up the city’s imaginary architecture. Their stories recount the contemporary history of the city, in particular its journey from ‘Bombay’ to ‘Mumbai’, the city’s official name since 1996. The name ‘Mumbai’ was bestowed upon the city as an act of regionalist and exclusionary assertion by a local political party, the Shiva Sena, during the period that it governed the state of Maharashtra.

This nomenclatural transformation happens during a particularly anxious period of the nation’s and the city’s history, during a phase of economic and cultural liberalization. The remaining of Bombay has become an almost conventional trope for thinking through particular issues such as violence, decosmopolitanization, and new formations of the public and new civic arrangements. This is, *Wages of Violence: Naming and Identity in Post-Colonial Bombay* (Hansen, 2002). The journey from “Bombay” to “Mumbai” is a central theme in recent writings on Bombay and should be read as shorthand for a search to find an appropriate set of conceptual categories to describe the city. In a sense, Bombay emerges as a real subject of research only after the particularly bloody period in its recent history in which the city was the stage for some of the worst communal riots in post- independence India. These riots form the backdrop of *Maximum*

*City* and permeate its exploration of criminality and violence as the dominant tropes for understanding the masculine cultures of the city.

Before the global success of *Maximum City*, these questions would have been, in some sense, limited to specialists and experts. Although the book is classified as ‘travel writing’, the ethnographic atmosphere it creates are important reasons to take it at least as a point of departure for raising the sorts of questions that Bombay-Mumbai prompts us to ask as an anthropologist. These questions have to do with the limits of generalization when speaking from a particular location, and with what lends a location its particularity.

The book begins with Mehta's longing to rediscover his lost ‘personal geography’. He returns to Bombay after about twenty years to trace the changes in the city he has left behind. And the changes are truly sweeping. The changes which seem to be sweeping seem to one to be so when one view them after many years. Yet one barely seems to notice it when it happens around us, as part of one’s daily life. It can be testified to this from personal experience, having lived in Malleshwaram for more than twenty-five years and now located twenty-five kilometers away from it. Each time one visit Malleshwaran – once a month – one sees a new change, which seems striking. Mehta is more shocked, nay *angered* by the changes that have taken place: his anger is rooted in the cultural, racial and political aspects of the change. The ‘ghatis’ – a derogatory term applied to the local Maharashtrians – in his view, have taken over the cultured neighborhoods in which he and people of his standing have lived.

In this book, the author is not a distant spectator, but gets involved with the characters in the book. He gets involved with the characters in the book and becomes a character himself. One can imagine how difficult it must have been for him to write his book. When one keeps meeting characters as varied as prostitutes, beer bar girls, and hardcore gangsters, day in and day out, the encounters don't fail to play emotional havoc

with you. As an instance you may end up empathizing and sharing for example, a murder's conviction. This reminds me of Nietzsche who said, "When fighting with monsters, take care lest you end up becoming a monster yourself" (Sandeep, 2005).

The book is divided into several major sections, each focusing on distinct and unique aspects of Bombay: Shiva Sena, Bollywood, the Mumbai police, the underworld, prostitution and spirituality. These exist in any big city but what distinguishes them from other cities is their uniqueness found only in Bombay. Suketu Mehta confirms certain widely – held myths and shatters certain other. For example, one didn't know that one of the major contributing factors to Bombay's urban crowdedness in the result of the misdeeds of a handful of powerful builders – the Rahejas are just one of them – who thwarted a well-thought plan to improve Bombay by expanding housing settlements to the West. Also the fact that several "sharp shooters" of the underworld often change allegiances from this don to that only for cash, and not out of loyalty or conviction. Or the fact Sanjay Dutt's character comes across as nothing more than a frightened school boy who likes to identify with the "tough guys" in the hope that they'll protect him from other tough guys/bullies. Mehta traces this attribute to Dutt's experiences as a school going boy who used to routinely get beaten by teachers and bullies by his classmates. Hence his fascination with the dons, his passions for guns and his obsession with bodybuilding, as the author remarks, Sanjay "was built like a brontosaurus" (Sandeep, 2005).

A considerable part of the book is spent on the life of the people living in slums where the most basic amenities are considered as luxuries. He realizes that the outdated Bombay Rent Act and a complete lack of political will to be the biggest reasons for the permanent existence of the slums. In those slums he meets with a lot of interesting characters like the Shiva Sainik who admits to have passionately killed Muslims during

the 1992 riots himself at the order of his bosses but is still roaming free and runs a hugely profitable business and by the help of whom he goes on to meet Bal Thackeray, who the author terms as "the one man mostly directly responsible for ruining the city I grew up in" (MC, 105). Then there are some Muslim youth who joined the underworld after the riots and are employed by the dons to perform extortions and murders which the boys carry out remorselessly. Their bosses are the same people who plotted the serial blasts that rocked the city in 1992 and which was touted as a revenge on the Hindus by the Muslim dons. Suketu even has a conversation with Chhota Shakeel on the phone where Shakeel becomes astonishingly patriotic and tells him "I always wanted to do something good for my country" (MC, 263) Then he meets a hard working and upcoming software engineer who despite sharing his single bedroom house with five other adult family members works hard and aspires to make a career for himself in the US.





He dedicates a lot of time on the Bombay Police which is called "Second only to the Scotland Yard" and chronicles the life of an honest IPS officer who despite facing threats and obstacles on a daily basis goes about his job commendably well. The most interesting part of the story though is where the nightlife of Bombay brought alive by numerous Dance bars is depicted. The author comes across a top notch bar dancer barely out of her teens yet with more than a couple of suicide attempts to her credit. Then there is another dancer who is actually a man but every evening dresses up as a woman with help from (believe it or not) his own wife. Then there are the people who frequent these

bars with ages ranging from the early twenties to late fifties and who spend exorbitant amount of money on these dancing girls.



The Bollywood angle is present as well where Suketu Mehta ends up working with Vidhu Vinod Chopra on the script of his movie *Mission Kashmir* and gets to know the trials and tribulations of being a movie producer. Then there is the proverbial struggler, a guy who left behind his well settled family and business in Dubai to come there with dreams of becoming a star in Bollywood. The most heart wrenching story though is of an upcoming Hindi poet in his late teens who has taken to the footpaths of the city as his *Karmabhumi* despite belonging to a well to do family residing in Bihar.



*Maximum City* does not immediately divulge the grandness of its scope. It starts as a personal journey – Mehta, a Bombay boy who left his home town for New York as a teenager returns twenty-one years later to see if he can make a life for himself and his family in the city he still thinks of as "the place I'm from." But Bombay has in those twenty-one years, changed almost as much as he has and so the 'return home' becomes a process of learning how to live in "the country of No" (MC, 18). One of the first things

he learns is the uses of anger: "It is the only way to get things done; people respond to anger, are afraid of it. In the absence of money or connections, anger will do" (MC, 33). The anger Mehta experiences on a personal level he also sees reflected – and magnified – all around him. Bombay is a city enmeshed in communal violence, gang activity and police brutality. One of the more remarkable features of *Maximum City* is Mehta's ability to gain access to people deeply involved in all these overlapping centers of anger and power. Members of extremist political parties, gang members, police officers – Mehta doesn't merely interview them, he virtually becomes part of their lives for months on end, developing relationships with them that extend beyond that of interviewer and subject. The section "Power" which details Mehta's interactions with those different groups is nothing short of spellbinding. Although his writing is utterly located in Bombay, he is also embarking on a profound, abstract look at the nature of violence and how it intersects with power and powerlessness. "What does it feel like to take a human life?" (MC, 535), he asks, over and over, of people on both sides of the law. This could easily become voyeurism – and he is intelligent enough not to deny that he is drawn into these lives fascinated by them in a way that is hardly distanced – but it never does. His purpose is something far deeper than titillation: "There is a gulf between the human heart and murder, and I was intent to seeing the bridges men build for themselves over that gulf"(Shamsie, 2006), he explains.

After scripting the lives of the law's upholders, the author moves on to the other side of the fence and gives the reader a close look in the lives of the law breakers – the criminals and people from the Mumbai's notorious underworld called '*bhais*' (meaning big brother). The chapter has some gory parts, but is enjoyable like a gangster movie. Then the author takes a short detour and acquaints the reader with famous food joints of Mumbai – not the swankiest, but the one loved by its people. And then he moves on to detailing more voyeuristic pleasures the India's city of sin has to offer the dance bars and

its girls. The author details the life journey of some of the top bar dancers he met in an interesting way, sharing the sad and joyous parts of their lives, making them human and understandable.

Then the curtain unveils from the most glorious part of Mumbai - the part which forces thousands of people to run away from their homes, their jobs to Mumbai to be a part of its Film city fondly called Bollywood. The reader is taken through the film world by the eyes of the stars that make it shine- successful actors, directors, their dreams, fears and frustrations. And another view of the same world is presented by wannabe actors, aptly called strugglers. The Author takes care to cover a story of a family living in the slums of the city and of a youth who has run away from his home and come to Mumbai to complete the kaleidoscope. He ends the books with a story of a Jain family renouncing the world and becoming monks, their thoughts and reaction of the society and their extended family.

Given his occasionally uncomfortable position as neither as insider nor a true outsider, Mehta is nonetheless capable of offering a unique perspective on the city. There is a real poignancy and distress to his exploration of Bombay's underbelly, as he accompanies a tough local cop as he investigates the simmering tension between rival Hindu and Muslim gangs (as Mehta notes, the lack of governmental response to the riots led many Muslim teens to pursue gang life as a method of obtaining vigilante justice of a sort). He examines the city's sex industry and its thriving movie business (the latter is the subject of an extended diary style expose of the on-set antics of some aging stars). Mehta has won both an O. Henry Prize and a Whiting Award, and *Maximum City* was a finalist for the Pulitzer Prize. For someone like me, with both an interest in India and its culture but little real experience with much more than imported impression, one thought the book seemed to be a wonderful snapshot of a city and a society on the crossroads of the past

and the future, juxtaposing as it does the ancient with the contemporary. To Mehta, it seems that Bombay is embodied by contradictions, not the least of which is the city's name. Be is the corruption, the draconian rent laws, the ability of politicians to control the judicial process, the population density of the city (17,550 people per square mile, compared to 1,130 per square mile in a city such as Berlin, or-even more amazingly – the one million people per square mile in Central Bombay), the 60% of the city's population who are homeless, or the fact that Indian filmmakers produce more than twice as many films a year than Hollywood studios against the backdrop of such social tension, there is simply a dizzying array of fascinating insight found in Mehta's book.

After a brief introductory personal geography of what it meant to be in Bombay again Mehta is struck by the vast change that has come to be. It is no longer just a state in India but a nation state in all its diversified reality. It has a socio-cultural emphasis of its own which is being a place of 'no':

"Can I get a gas connection?" 'No' 'Can I get a phone?' 'No' 'Can I get a school for my child?"

"I'm afraid it is not possible.'

'Have my parcels arrived from America?"

'I don't know?

'Can you find out?'

'No.'

'Can I get a railway reservation?'

'No' (MC, 18-19)

In this country of No nothing is fixed for the first time round.

You don't just call a repair man; you begin a relationship with him. You can't bring to his attention too aggressively the fact that he is incompetent or crooked, because you will need him to set right what he has broken the first time around. Indians are craftsmen of genius, but mass production, with its attendant

standardization, is not for them. All things modern in Bombay fail regularly: plumbing, telephones, the movement of huge blocks of traffic. Bombay is not the ancient Indian idea of a city. It is an imitation of a Western city, may be Chicago in the 1920s. And, like all other imitations of the West here – the Hindi pop songs, the appliances, the accents people put on, the parties the rich throw – this imitation, too, is neither here nor there (MC, 26).

Splendid and splendorous it is a city with a negative undercurrent where money made through scams is more respected than that made through hard work which is aptly stated on the back of trucks.

*Sau me ek sau ek beimaan. Phir Bhi Mera Bharat Mahaan.*

101 out of 100 are dishonest. Still my India is the best (MC, 32).

This Mehta explores through multiple pictures of those that make up the city. In chapter two, Mehta starts with the Shiva Sena party. In a way it was responsible for the emerging new face of Bombay, prophesying its theory of anti-communism, Fascism, Socialism, anti immigrant, anti-Muslim, and Pro-Hindu praxis. Its chief, Thackeray had ruled the passions during the 1992-93 riots but in the ever changing mindset of the city the worst that partisan strongholds could do was to shatter the public confidence in justice and excite a formless free floating urban anger in the young man. Characteristically Mehta identifies this kind of an ideology with men without faith. And what brings about faithfulness is to be rooted in traditions and conventions. How can this ever be possible when people are "...in transit within their own city, within their individually multiple selves" (MC, 121). The city they live in thrives on rental residences which are hard to get even if one barter the human self. Thus, there are also 400,000 empty residences in the city, empty because the owners are afraid of losing them to tenants if they rent them out. Assuming each apartment can house a family of five people, on average, that's two million people – one-fourth of the homeless – who could immediately find shelter if the laws were to be amended. This of course is the origin of the slums in Bombay, where the population doubles every ten years. The result of the

Indian Rent Act leads to this peculiar, cancerous outgrowth in Bombay. Added to this is the 'paying guest factor'. The paradoxes that the Act was an 'institutionalized expropriation' of 'private properties', where someone can rent a flat for a year and stay for the rest of his and his progenies life and still have the law behind him.

The city is full of people claiming what's not theirs. Tenants claim ownership by virtue of having squatted on the property. Mill workers demand mills be kept at a loss to provide them with employment. Slum dwellers demand water and power connections for illegal constructions on public land. Government employees demand the right to keep working long past when they're needed, at taxpayer expense. Commuters demand further subsidies for train fares, which are already the lowest in the world. Moviegoers demand that the government freeze ticket prices. The Indian Government has long believed in the unreality of supply and demand; what you pay for an item, for a food or for a service, has no relation to what it costs the producer (MC, 128).

Such is the ground reality of the city. A ground that was 'reclaimed from the sea' and therefore the history of the city consists of a struggle against the sea. The sea continuously challenges the validity of the claim.

Water takes its revenge on our buildings; it corrodes the exteriors, makes the potato chips and the papads soggy, enters our walls, and leaks through our ceilings. Every monsoon is an assault on Bombay. The furious rain is a severe, pitiless arbiter of basic engineering principles. What the municipality can't do, the rain does: It demolishes unsound structures. The sea and the rain are joined by the sewage, human waste, all around us.

There is water everywhere, except in my taps (MC, 133).

Mehta suggests that as in Bombay so to in all urban spaces there are but two ways for crowded cities to sustain themselves: by creating new land or by thinking up new uses of the existing land; either the agricultural land can be reappropriated or the floors of the existing tenements increased. As it is in this era of upward mobility this has become a pre requisite. The sprawling city that ones were is now no more. Moreover the change has had other consequences as well. Since Machines have taken over the working of hands the brain has become more fertile. It is ideas, data and dreams that have taken over the

physical realities and this is a fact that cannot be wished away. And the mind is not always a saintly recluse, it festers with hellish conceptions alike. The missionary zeal having been rendered ineffectual, hell reigns supreme. Thus, even in Bombay there is the *upar* Bombay and the *niche* Bombay the underworld, as fretting and fomenting as the Dharavi slums. Mehta has researched well into the 1993 Bomb blasts and its subsequent aftermaths.

The most fascinating of the men who deal in violence is the policeman, Ajaylal. His humiliation at the hands of his own department- transfers, inquiries etc is the price he pays for his honesty.

‘In eighteen years of service I haven't taken a glass of water from anybody’, he declares. He had long ago made a career decision. ‘In the long run, it pays to be clean’. His money comes from college friends who, he says, have invested wisely on his behalf. But there are people in the police force out to get him. They plant stories about him. ‘Only Ritu and my mother and my sister have stood by me’. Ajay and his family have just come out of departmental inquiry instigated against him on allegations of corruption that dragged on for four years. Ritu had to account for every rupee she spent during those years, down to where she got the money for the washing machine. Finally he was cleared of all charges (MC, 193).

In a city reeking of corruption, he is the incorruptible man dogged in his pursuit of the murderers and gang members who rule Bombay."...Until 1998, when the authorities decided that the nuisance of Ajay's incorruptibility was outweighed by his expertise in fighting the gang war, and brought him back into the city police" (MC, 167).

He is also a torturer because how else is he to get the information he needs from criminals who have judges in their pockets and witnesses intimidated or shot into silence? Ajay instructs in methods of police interrogation. First of all, he points out, it is not always done in the police station. During his investigation of the bomb blasts of 1993, the interrogation was carried out in the compound of the special reserve force. Sometimes, lacking a safe house, he has to conduct the interrogation in a moving car with darkened

windows, barking questions from the front seat as his men slap the suspect around in the back.

If Ajay has the time, the suspect is deprived of sleep for a whole week. Usually, neither party has such luxury. So another method is to take two ends of an old style telephone wire and apply it to the arms or the genitals; a portable dynamo is whirled, and a powerful electric current is generated. Sometimes, he takes the suspect to a creek and ties a heavy stone to his legs. Then one of his men gets behind, put his arms under the suspect's and takes him into the water, where the weight of the stone pulls him downward. All that's keeping him up is the cop; the cop is his savior, his last hope. The suspect is dunked a few times in the water; gasping, screaming, he comes up out of the water and tells Ajay what he wants to know.

'Fear of death is the most effective. During the bomb blasts I just took a few of the suspects to Borivali National Park and fired a few bullets past their ears.' But with many of these suspects, ordinary violence wouldn't work. There had to be special methods. 'Those who have no fear of death also have no fear of physical pain. For them we threaten their family. I tell them I'll plant some evidence on their mother or their brother and arrest them. That usually works'. When Ajay's boys make an arrest, they tell him, 'sa'ab, we would like you to frighten him a little'. So as they are bringing the prisoner into Ajay's imposing office, they say, 'The Sa'ab will finish you: it is not in our hands now. You are a dead duck.' It would be best, they suggest to the suspect, if they intercede on his behalf, make a good report to the sa'ab, so that he is spared the very worst of the torments ahead of him in the long night. In short, summarizes Ajay, 'that very old technique: the hard and soft approach'. One last method: give the suspect one kilo of jalebis. Then you don't give him water this sounds like an unusually enticing form of torture, I say.

'Have you ever had sweets and not had water? If you have a kilo of sweets you must have water'. A man will do anything for water after so many sweets" (MC, 143-4).

Mehta also bonds with and eats sweetmeats with Inspector Vijay Salaskar, Bombay's most celebrated specialist in 'encounter' killings, where gangsters are bumped off in setups – the police department's casual circumvention of an inept judiciary.

'The criminal justice system has totally collapsed', says Ajay. 'This is the reason why the underworld thrives. A dispute over a flat, which takes twenty years in court, is taken care of in a week or a month by the underworld. You work out the economics...The culture of the gang war is intrinsic to the culture of the city. Madanpura, Nagpada, Agripada, Byculla, Dongri, Bhendi Bazar, Dagdi Chawl: the heart of Bombay is the heart of the gang war (MC, 156).

But Ajay also sees the reasons why encounters are so prevalent 'The judicial system is so tilted in favor of the accused that he is not at all afraid. It's very frustrating for the police. Someone is arrested in a murder case, the case comes up in four years, the witness is threatened and turns hostile, and you know the man is going back to kill again. He is operating with absolute impunity, and the courts are giving him bail.' This agreed with my own experience. All the hit men I had spoken to, men, who had murdered many people, had been in and out of jail on murder charges. The only fear they had been of the encounter (MC, 189).

Mehta also exposes the murky details of 'criminals in uniform' aka cops who went on a shooting spree, killing even innocent people merely on unfounded grounds of suspicion, shakes us. Overall, the picture one get is that the efficiency shakes us. Overall, the picture one get is that the efficiency of Bombay cops is top class given the severe constraints under which they are forced to work. And yes, he, too, has, killed, but when a policeman turns executioner there is no outcry from the public. "When you live in a world of fear, you give unlimited power to the state" (MC, 211).

What is in dispute is the extent to which he will torture people. What would be reassuring to believe is that he will beat only men whom he knows are criminals, and that he will beat them with only a strap or have his men given them electric shocks pain that will not permanently harm them but will act as that necessary spur, in the absence of a functioning judiciary, for them to give out information that will save lives, information that will prevent bombs from being planted that will blow up completely innocent people not connected to the gangway in any way. It is evident that Ajay does not enjoy the torture part of his work. I have never seen him physically hit anyone; only direct others to do so. He is also unaffiliated with any political party, gang or religion; I have never heard Ajay mention god, not once...In the sliding scale of the Bombay police, Ajay Lal is a

good cop. Ajay will not shoot people wholesale. He hates the 'exterminators' like Salaskar and Sharma and Sawant, not because death is a violation of human rights but rather, bad police work" (MC, 198).

He wants his son to get an MBA or to become a doctor. He wouldn't mind if he went into the civil services or the Foreign Service, but not the IPS. 'I know what price I have had to pay. If I could do it again', says the winner of the President's Medal for meritorious service for his work in detecting the Bombay blasts, 'I would have called in sick on the day they assigned me the bomb-blasts case [...] If you ask me, I don't think I can do anything else but this, I can't do anything else but be a cop (MC, 200).

Mehta creates a dream cop Ajay Lal who is besotted with 'micturition' "I would go to police headquarters and stand in front of it and abuse all my corrupt seniors, reveal everything. Then, I would pee in their direction and turn around and leave the force" (MC, 142). He thinks that this would be a sensational ending, a cathartic ending, a blockbuster ending to his career.

It is in this context that Mehta presents his very well researched analysis of the beginning of gang war which has resulted in organized crime in the city of Bombay. This is controlled by two exiles,

One is in Karachi and one in Malaysia – or Bangkok, or Luxemburg, depending on which night you ask. The gang war is the fallout from the bomb blasts of 1993, during which a series of bombs planted by the Muslim criminal syndicate headed by Dawood Ibrahim – the D-Company – killed 317 people in the city, in revenge for the anti-Muslim programs of a few months earlier. After the blasts, Dawood's main lieutenant, a Hindu named Chotta Rajan, broke with him and formed his own gang, the Nana Company, so called because Rajan is nana, elder brother, to his troops. He swore to eliminate all those involved in the bombings. The two dons control their organizations from outside the country, and they have been at war ever since (MC, 144).

The insights that he draws and the descriptions that he gives of Dawood and Chotta Shakeel are indeed illuminating and to make his narrative more cohesive Ajay Lal is given that charge of investigation of the chain blasts in which 257 people died and 713

were injured in one day. It is this kind of a dialectics that gives the Twenty First Century Indian novel its identifying difference. Whereas earlier novelists were more concerned with social polemics – issues of untouchability, women reforms, the urban-rural divide etc, now the underworld predominates. Suketu Mehta's *Maximum City* is in this sense not very different from Vikram Chandra's *Sacred Games* where the Bombay underworld meticulously described. This underworld and the ruling Mafias are not a world apart but impinge on the way the city works. The revenue to feed the gangs comes from extortion, money laundering, gambling, boot legging, film financing, upscale prostitution and drugs and the common man has to suffer the pinch and so the corruption seeps into every walk of life. It is very true to say that because of this the criminal justice system has totally collapsed and the culture of the gang war has become the intrinsic culture in the city.

What Mehta gives us as the prevailing condition in Bombay is unique to this city alone, different from the metropolis Delhi. This is because Delhi has a more upscale political population and the wars there are party wars not gang wars. But the police everywhere are a part of a non-profit institution. In the age of the market economy, globalization and multinationals, no one puts money into this institution. Therefore, they use other means to keep themselves going. This reality of the institution which is the protector of law and order comes in for harsh criticism in most twenty first century writing. Another parallel organization which is unique to the urban, cosmopolitan cities, so meticulously narrated by creative writers is the night life. It is true that

Cities like Bombay live at night. The day is a gathering-up of forces for the night. The city unfurls itself, luxuriously, after the sun sets, in the receptions, premiers, parties and dinners of the night; in the beer bars, hotels, dance clubs, warehouses and alleyways. The night has no time; it is freed from the corporate rigor of the day. And the night contains sexual possibility: that man so fine in his jacket, that woman across the room lighting a cigarette (MC, 285).

‘Women came and go, speaking of Michael Angelo.’

The city wakes up in the beer bars or dance bars. Undoubtedly it is the money from X means which is pumped in to inflate these bars. The customers literally blow money on the dancers. They will walk up to the dance floor and stand with a stack of notes over the head of the favored dancer. The notes, in an expert hand, traverse the distance between customer and dancer on air and fluff out, forming a halo or fan around the girl, enveloping her in the supreme grace of currency, its wealth adding immeasurably to the radiance of her face exalting her in this most commercial of cities, until the floor is littered with rupee notes and the male attendants scurry around to collect them and deposit them in the dancer's account (MC 291). Of course it is money that the dancing girls aspire for and they feed the imaginations of those who have the money but not the beauty that ignites their imagination. The rich traders and merchants who are surrounded by men during day and by their fat wives in the evening this might be the only place in their lives where they can look directly at beautiful young girls, young enough to be their daughters. The moment the customer walks in, he's the star in his own custom – made Hindi movie song. No matter how old or ugly or fat he is, for the two hours he's in the bar, he's a movie star (MC, 292-93).

The most enchanting of Mehta's stories come from his encounters with what he refers to as "the lower humanity", in the beer bars of Bombay - an inebriating space full with liquor intoxication, bright lights, and beautiful dancers. The world of the beer bar is unique to Bombay, Mehta writes, "and for me it is the intersection of everything that makes the city fascinating: money, sex, love, death and show business" (MC, 285). A paradise for meager mechanics, rash *tapories*, rich traders and affluent merchants alike; these dance bars are a space that realizes the 'Bollywoodised idealization of love' for its countless guests. Mehta develops an honest and heart rending friendship with Monalisa, the most dazzling bar dancer at Bombay's famous dance bar *Sapphire*. "Since Monalisa would never get married, she would be put into the bar line. She was seventeen years old" (MC, 309).

The stories that she reveals to him confirm the struggle for life and dignity in the modest lives that embellish the filthy core of the city. "Behind every earner there are fifty eaters" (MC, 297). These damsels, much like Bombay's hit men, disclose it all to him, and in large chunks - Mehta possesses the most intimate details of their lives; he knows when they are sad, suicidal, vicious or exuberant. "Every man wants me", Monalisa tells

Mehta - The world may endlessly desire these beautiful notch girls but it is Mehta who spins and twirls them under the confetti of his words, making them more real, and more alluring than the people they are in flesh and blood.

Mehta writes that he was puzzled by the beer bars and couldn't understand why men spent such large amounts of money there: "On a good night a dancer in a Bombay bar can make twice as much as a high class stripper in a New York bar. The difference is that the dancer in Bombay doesn't have to sleep with the customers, is forbidden to touch them in the bar, and wears more clothes on her body than the average Bombay secretary does on the broad public street" (MC, 290). Monalisa provides an answer to that puzzle, and much besides. She draws him into her world telling him of her failed tryst with the son of a Bombay don "Samar was the grandson of a man named Karim Lala, who in the 1970s had been the biggest don in Bombay" (MC, 312) and explaining the tattoo of slash marks on her wrist. "The top model in India and the top bar dancer in Bombay have this in common: Their arms are marked with their anguish, like gang tattoos"(MC, 305).

She is faithful to Bombay. She flourishes in the city, as she could not in Delhi, as she would not in New York. Unlike the girls of Malabar Hill, where I grew up, Monalisa has no desire to go to America. *Bombay sahi hai*. In ten years, she says, India will be as free as America. Monalisa likes as the freedom money gives her. She bought a Maruti 800, banged it up, and upgraded to Maruti Esteem, she loves to go shopping. After she finishes work in *Sapphire*, Monalisa roams the discos of the city often just by her. 'I do everything. I drink, I go to discos, and I play pool. Everything happens in Bombay, I can wear any kind of clothes freely. How free is life in Bombay!' (MC, 300-01)

Monalisa has two lives. One is her life in the bar and the time she spends with her customers. Then there is the other life: her time in the discos, watching TV, sleeping all day. She never goes to bed before six in the morning [...] A man comes into a bar when he is tired of his family, of taking care of his wife and children, and tired of the office. The dancers are buying the *armaan* of the customers. That is a very bad thing. Why can't we save our money? Why do we have bad luck? Because we buy their difficulties (MC, 317).

Mehta becomes very close to Monalisa. It's a testament to Mehta's intimacy with his subjects that he felt compelled to justify his relationship with her in an interview promoting the book as such:

I became involved with her in a way that was more intimate than sex. I never did sleep with her. I realized if I had slept with her, all the stories would have been cuts off. Then I would have been just another customer. I was at once a Vaguer and her best friend (Blogging the book shelf, 2005).

While his relationship with Monalisa was probably closer than his relationship with any of his other subjects, the level of intimacy described above is fairly representative of the access he had to each of his subjects.

Talking about the food, Monalisa switches to Gujarati, the only time she uses the language common to us. Her Gujarati has a strong Kathiawari accent, but she is self conscious about it. She prefers Hindi: Bambahiyya Hindi, filmi Hindi, *tapori* Hindi. Gujarati is the first language, the core language, and it is too intimate to be used between us, narrator and chronicler (MC, 322).

Once Monalisa brings Mehta along for a reunion with the father she has not seen for ten years. "We all stare at it (TV) in relief; the long lost father, the mother who sold her daughter, the brother who recently tried to kill him, and me. When they ask me, 'What is your business?' I reply, 'I'm a writer' It is an effective conversation stopper (MC, 333). Monalisa once says her dream is to win the Miss India pageant, so she can make a speech with millions of people watching. The speech would be in English, a language that she is working hard to acquire. She is going to say to the respectable audience, "I am a girl from the bar line. Now you can take back all your prizes, all your money, but I wanted to prove that I could get to this point. That we in the bar line are also part of society" (MC, 372). At the end of Mehta's finely fleshed portrait of the dancer Monalisa, he writes

[W]hat I am adoring, what I am obsessed with, is a girl beyond (Monalisa), larger than herself in the mirror beyond her... it is her that I'm getting to spin and twirl

under the confetti of my words. The more I write, the faster my Monalisa dances (D' Souza, 2004).

As much as the beer bar on any night in Bombay, *Maximum City* is full of stories of desire and vast wealth, sweat as well as liquor, beautiful bodies, scarred bodies, excitement and bright lights, and of course, immense filth. The likes of Monalisa sin people around their little fingers and the moneymakers who have to kill their fancies in their day-to-day dealings are willing to spin out money for these dancing girls. This sexual hunger is not confined to the higher ups alone. As a matter of fact the city of Bombay exudes a sexual energy just as it exudes heat.

The womanless rickshaw-wallahs, the Bollywood wannabes, the fashion models, and the sailors from many countries – all in search of some heat, a hurried furtive fuck in whatever hidden corner the world will permit them. They do it in trains, railway stations, the backs of taxis, parks, urinals. The rocks by the sea are a favorite. Along Carter Road in Bandra, at Scandal Point in Malabar Hill, rows of couples are wrapped in each other on the rocks, all facing the sea. It is no matter that the thousands of people walking by can see them, because they can only see their backs, not their faces, and the lovers to the left and the right of them are all busy with each other, kissing, and feeling. Anonymity is erotic. That woman hanging out clothes on her balcony, with the hair long and wet around her shoulders from her bath, the crows of girls in short skirts outside the catholic college. 'The whole city is a bedroom' (MC, 341-42).

It is not only the men who want such fulfillment but even the so called elite women desire much the same satisfaction.

In China Garden, at the Oberoi, groups of society women discuss their lovers over lunch. The young blades of walkeshwar watch the painted women of the West gyrate on the music videos and download hard-core pornography on the Internet and can't get a peck on the cheek from the good girls of their social circle. In the five-star hotels, young male models pray to their gods before beauty contests while ageing Parsi queens cruise them in the toilets, trying to look at their dicks. An industrialist's wife is caught on tape with one of the contestants. Women are held and held back; in the streets, in the skyscrapers, in the beer bars, in the chawls (MC, 342).

The bar girls, just like the other women, feel that are doing nothing wrong and earning but dancing is just another way of earning money. Coming to the film industry,

Mehta gives a detailed comparison between Hollywood and Bollywood. Accounting for the superiority of Bollywood he says that it has got to be bigger because it is supplying dream material for over a billion people. In a way it has become the means of taking revenge on the western mind, a veritable cultural aggression of the twenty first century. Writing in 2004 Mehta sums up its impact thus

The thousand feature films and forty thousand hours of TV programming and five thousand music titles that the country produces are exported to seventy countries. Every day, fourteen million Indian see a movie in one of thirteen thousand theatres; worldwide, a billion more people a year buy tickets to Indian movies than to Hollywood ones. TV is galloping in; the country has sixty million homes with TV of which twenty-eight million are cabled, bringing to city and hamlet alike a choice of around a hundred channels (MC, 376).

This is the most prompt and generous way of the suspension of disbelief. Mehta's pages go further to sketch out the big, multifaceted world of Bombay filmdom - What is typically known to the world as Bollywood. In a close friendship with Indian filmmaker Vidhu Vinod Chopra, Suketu Co-writes the script for *Mission Kashmir* and reveals details of the entire filmmaking process in niceties that are sometimes funny, sometimes tragic, and sometimes buoyant. The author steals a look at the private lives of mega celebrities such as Sanjay Dutt, Amitabh Bachchan, Hritik Roshan and Mahesh Bhatt. After the release of the book, the ostensibly unedited, honest representation of private lives got the writer into trouble with Vidhu Vinod Chopra, who felt he had been defamed with the account of his three wives, "I have specifically written he has one current wife, and two ex-wives. But when you write non-fiction you cannot hold yourself back over who you think you're going to affect (with your writing). I thought I had painted Vinod in completely human terms." (Samakshi, 2009) was Suketu's response to the filmmaker's agitated reaction to the book. We have all grown up watching Bollywood movies have captured the eccentricity of Mumbai; the riches of Malabar Hills and Colaba to the slums of Dharavi, the Mafia, Underworld the Bombay riots, the 'chawls' the north Indian

immigrant or the Mumbai dance bars. Movies like *Satya*, *Black Friday* and *Company* have all touched upon some nerves of Mumbai; Even a literary masterpiece like *Shantaram* (2003) has had Mumbai depicted in a similar fashion. But, if one think that *Maximum City* is just another compendium on the history of Mumbai, then one is wrong. It is a unique narrative told in such a fast paced action that the book is just irresistible. The events and political as well as historical blunders that make Mumbai as it is today has been uniquely told by an author who once belonged to that place but now is seen as an 'outsider': someone who does not understand how Mumbai works.

Towards the end of the book the writer came to show the extremes of spirit in the *Maximum City*. He delivers a vivid account of a Jain family that lies in the other extreme from henchmen like Satish and his ilk. While on side of Bombay's intoxicated continuum has men who sleep tranquilly after taking human life, the other end of the insatiable city accommodates Sevantibhai's family that thinks it is sinful to end the life of even minute water organisms, by stepping into a puddle of water. Sevantibhai's family, as Mehta informs, has decided to dramatically reject the city of movie stars, murderers, and cops, painted women, and businessmen by denying themselves of everything family, possessions and pleasure. The family is determined to take on the utter final simplicity of life no violence, no untruth, no stealing, no sex, and no attachments. "We will live in a life completely without sin. We live in happiness" (MC, 559). Rakshaben, Sevantibhai's wife tells the writer. It is somewhere around this point that Mehta's affair with the robust, unapologetic city comes to an end. Mehta ends his realist thriller by giving startling digits to prove that Bombay itself is reaching its farthest point; twenty three million people by 2015. The city's population that should halve actually doubles. But Bombay, the city of dreams continues to thrive on the dreams of every individual.

Mehta's *Maximum City* thrives on the heteroglossia and the carnivalesque that cities like Bombay have to offer. Despite the infighting, the gang wars and the sexual decadence, the city is alive and thriving. However 'sickly' the pursuits of its people are, the melody is not terminal, 'a killing city' it might be but it is not a dying city; though its people may be morally compromised each one is shaped by the exigencies of living. As Mehta, himself, points out

Most of us live guarded lives and resist any pull that takes us too far towards this extremity. We watch other people push the limits, follow them up to a point, but are then pulled back, by fear, by family. In Bombay, I met people who lived closer to their seductive extremities than anyone I had ever known. Shouted lives. Ajay and Satish and Sunil live on the extreme of violence; Monalisa and Vinod live on the extreme of spectacle; Honey is on the extreme of gender; the Jains go beyond the extreme of abandonment. These are not normal people. They live out the fantasies of normal people. And the kind of work they do affects all other spheres of their lives, until there is no separation between the work and the life (MC, 579). And even though Bombay itself is reaching its own extremity it will not be washed away. "The Battle of Bombay is the battle of the self against the crowd. In a city of fourteen million people, how much value is associated with the number one? The battle is man against the Metropolis; which is only the infinitive extension of many and the Demon against which he must constantly strive to establish himself or be annihilated. A city is an agglomeration of individual dreams, a mass dream of the crowd. In order for the dream life of a city to stay vital, each individual dream has to stay vital (MC, 280).

It is the vitality that the people of Bombay get by being individually multiple and severally alone that makes the city live on.

Mehta's book has the silent intrusiveness, the busyness and ubiquity, the voraciousness of a book of pictures as well as the largesse that prose gives. We are in a new world with *Maximum City*: the book is a giant embrace not only of a city but of hope – and its more complex, earthly, incarnation desire – in the age of the free market. It performs this embrace brilliantly and passionately. It is not, really, a nostalgic book, in spite of all it says about loss, displacement and the act of returning: its elegiac notes are its most restrained. It has the hard-headed exuberance of a nineteenth century novel a

fascination with the spirit of compromise and with survival skills, a complete understanding of the importance of the mercantile and the pecuniary. All this it engages with not by examining the lives of major industrialists, as it might have, but by looking at low-life the dancing girls in bars, the whores and transsexuals, the hit men, the lowly cadres in political parties who do the dirty works during riots like the elephant headed Ganesha, who transcribed *The Mahabharata* as the sage composed it aloud, Mehta sits uncomfortably, close to garrulous hit men, typing their memories and impressions of murder into his laptop.

To quote Rao again cities such as Bombay become the monographic subjects because they capture the urban ethos of a nation completely and also because they stand at a juncture balancing both the singularization and universalization of the conditions of today. Moreover, they are symbolic simultaneously of the apocalyptic and the dysfunctional attributes of modernity, the global wealth and the local poverty coexisting side by side. Perhaps what characterizes Bombay as the local of modernity is sense of urgent crisis as seen in terms of the governance and the breakdown of the historicity of the past. As sociologist Sujata Patel writes, “Though colonial capitalism fostered dependent economic development and unevenness in urban growth, Bombay represented for many commentators what is possible *despite* these odds” (Patel, 2004). She writes that Bombay “symbolized the paradigm associated with achievements of colonial and post-colonial India both in its economic sphere and in its cultural sphere” (Patel). Within a less regionally invested literature on urbanization, these dystopic conditions are increasingly beginning to attract attention but largely as contemporary exemplars of the “pasts” of western metropolises like Paris and London. Geographer Michael Watts, for example, recently observed that “the Parisian slum...figured centrally in Baudelaire’s poetry. And it is the slum that constitutes the defining feature of contemporary African metropolises” (Watts, 2005). Watts sees hyper cities such as Mumbai as the most “stunning

morphological and sociological” expressions of global society in the twenty first century (Watts).

Along with Suketu Mehta Altaf Tyrewala is another that represents Bombay though another dimension of it. Thirty year old Altaf Tyrewala wrote his debut novel *No God in Sight* in 2005. Just 170 pages in length, the slender novel is a slap in the face of the tradition of the ‘Great Indian Novel’, the favored form of Anglo-Indian literature. Within its restricted dimensions and in a language that is as plainspoken as it is condensed Tyrewala succeeds in capturing the psychic inner life of Mumbai, India's most frequently portrayed city. Tyrewala himself was born in Mumbai in 1977, where he continues to make his home, having made a guest appearance in New York City. For, as he says himself, he needs the city in order to write: "It's incredibly important for me to live with my own culture, in the location I'm writing about. I can't imagine living abroad and visiting my country once a year to stock up on material before returning to the comfortable First World, where I would live while writing about the Third" (Pereira, 2005).

By means of brief vignettes, he anatomizes the underside of the glittering capital, where ordinary – and at first glance inconspicuous – individuals move about in the shadows of brilliance and glamour. Above all, his Mumbai is a city of the Muslim middle classes, whose members (and here is the novel's un-stated framework) struggle for survival and dignity within a political landscape that has been radically transformed by the Hindu fundamentalist Shiva Sena (Army of Shiva) party.

Indirectly then, a novel such as *No God in Sight* gives voice to critical dissent in relation to the one-sided success story the country seeks to narrate about itself in campaigns such as "India Shining" or "India on the rise". Such counter images are frequently found in the works of this young generation of authors.

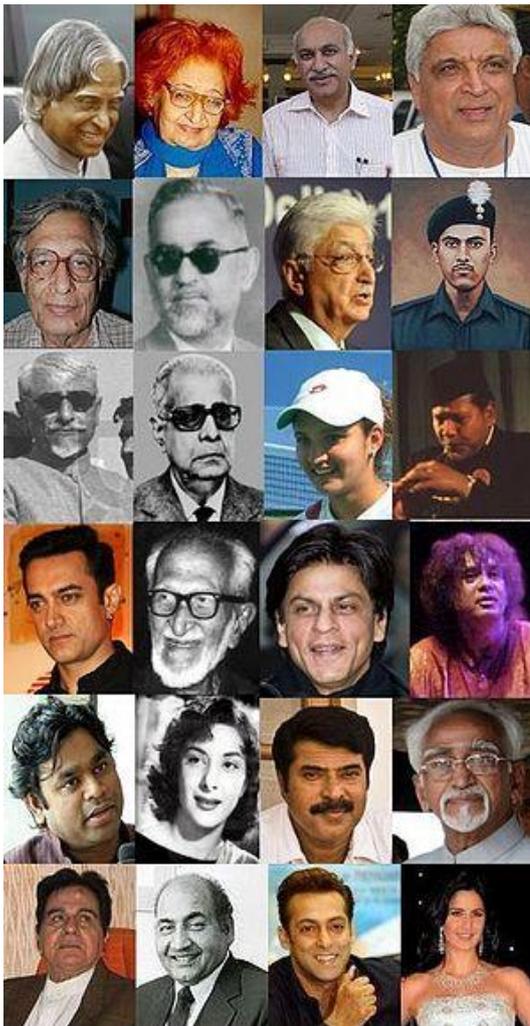
Of the nearly half a dozen novels set in Bombay by Indian writers in English Altaf Tyrewala's *No God in Sight* (2005) is yet another attempt to delineate the complexities of new millennium India through the eyes of its youth. The young generation writers coming from varied classes and creeds bring to their writing a critique of their times through a spacio-temporal interrogation. Bombay as a cosmopolitan metropolis with its struggles and strife is a favored locale to reflect on the loves and lives of new India. The multi layered conflicts present an insight into life itself. However, unlike Vikram Chandra's three novels – *Love and Longing in Bombay* (1997), *Red Earth and Pouring Rain* (1995) and *Sacred Games* (2006), and Suketu Mehta's *Maximum City: Bombay Lost and Found* (2004), *No God in Sight* shifts its focus to religious extremism, a theme so integral to our ethos and yet kept at bay with a pair of tongs. Altaf Tyrewala coming from a liberal middle class Muslim family, though not himself actually a victim of communalism or religious discrimination, picks up certain nuances of the daily interaction between Hindus and Muslims that become eye openers of how religious affinities can viciate into paranoia.



Haji Ali



Sunni **Muslims** pray in memory of the victims of November 26th **Mumbai** terror ...



An image of most famous Indian **Muslims**



Muslim Women Voting



**Mumbai.** 2006. On Dharavi's Main Road, **Muslims** gather for Friday prayers

Altaf Tyrewala was there when the religious riots took place in 1992-93 and left at least 1400 people dead. Of course there had been sectarian riots in Bombay earlier but 1992 was different for there was a lot of venom and vehemence towards each other which became more pronounced as one went down to the lower level of the economic strata. Moreover it was in 1992 that the lines were drawn more cuttingly between the majority and the minority communities and it was an unequal fight. Altaf Tyrewala makes an attempt here, as a Muslim himself to capture the angst and the restlessness, the prejudices and the inherited beliefs of his own community and makes an attempt to humanize the milieu and thus present a different picture of Bombay, more detailed and real, more bifocal.

From the stories of about two dozen characters, nameless, faceless, Tyrewala culls out a whole graphics of the Muslim community. An abortionist, a small shoe shop owner, a riot escapee, a convert, a seventy year old unmarried woman, a disinherited salesman, a paralyzed young man, a gluttonous matchmaker, a chain smoker, a corrupt *Hawalदार*, a waiter in an Irani hotel, a *paanwala*, a good for nothing Urdu tutor, a butcher, an aspiring lawyer, a news channel correspondent, a bar dancer and a beggar comprise the motley. Through the voices of the array of characters, Altaf displays how widely the Muslim population has percolated in all layers of the Indian society and how most of them, if not all, still prefer living in Muslim colonies for the sake of safety or for plain brotherhood; how they *are* a part of this country and how they aren't; how they've become used to the subtle sorrows of the poverty in their lives and the constant fear of the fanatics.

And none of these weave in and out of each other's lives but perhaps connect in a linear line from one to the next. There is no interrelation but mere vignettes. Each of the fifty chapters are not more than two to five pages long but collectively comprise a kind of a central character, the citizen of Mumbai. There are no epiphenic movements, simply portrayals of the human condition. It begins with Mrs. Kwaja, a onetime poetess who has long exchanged her metaphors for a life of cooking. A woman silenced by 'the hum of air-conditioned rooms and twenty four hour TV'. From her voice, we move to that of her husband, Mr. Kwaja, a man who knows the poetry no longer exists. Their son Ubaid spends hours online, chatting with strangers, looking for a place to belong. Their daughter Minaz has other demons to fight. She's pregnant, and grappling with the idea of an abortion. Through these eyes, and with these thoughts, we take our first, hesitant steps into Altaf Tyrewala's Mumbai.

The first pages plunge one into what feels like a strange place. Our focus shifts constantly, forcibly, from Minaz to her abortionist. He runs a nursing home in a seedy by lane of Colaba and his badly spelt fliers get him a customer or two every day. It reads

Get rid of Unwanted Pregnancy in hour

Rupee 300 absolutely secretive

Shamma Nursing home

Opp. Janvi Manzil (Bahind Colaba Post Office) (NGS, 8)

He is happy because he thinks he spreads relief; he saves family lives and marriages. But he needs to be saved himself from all the unborn baby voices in his head. He yearns for children, several children who will hopefully drown out the unborn baby voices in his head. Moreover he is not qualified but of course very careful because that is his only qualification and to boot at all he is a Muslim whose mother had to pay the dues of his irreverence right there in Mecca for her Hajj. We move from him to his father, who works at a shoe store. Kaka believes that religion killed his wife that she was visited by paralyzing worries of sin and all other no-good dogmatic clap trap. He says

There is a no Allah, no heaven, no hell. No life after death. No sense in wasting precious hours of life inside mosques and temples and churches. When the stomach buckles and the skin sizzles, money is the only god who answers prayers. How to tell the idiots in the world this? How to have told the idiots in my family this? (NGS, 18)

His boss Amin Bhai wants to leave India forever and is lucky in juggling a Visa out of frustrated embassy personnel. It is Rukhshana's sympathy for the slavish and impudent behavior of his seniors that wins their day and he leaves the ungrateful city, the nation of his ancestors and fades away into the distance.

*It wasn't worth it, I will tell myself. And I will repeat, like a mantra, like a dua, it wasn't worth it, it wasn't worth it. And even then, if my idiot nostalgia refuses to die, I will remember the protection money demanded, the covert and blatant religious slurs, the riots, the aftermaths, the newborn niece named Nidhi, the rewritten history books, the harassment at the passport office. Wasn't it enough, wasn't it enough that we lived in our ghettos and worked in our holes and paid our taxes and demanded nothing in return?*

The aircraft's projection screen will show a blue India, with our plane's route so far outlined in white like an anemic tapeworm in the belly of a diseased nation.

I will sit back in my seat and pretend to breathe easy. *Forget it, I will tell myself, let go. Let them have it, let them have what they have clergymen for, razed mosques for, driven out fellow Indians for. Let them have their Hindustan for Hindus*" (NGS, 28).

It is at this point when one realizes that it isn't a strange place at all. Its home, what we've all grown up with. Home turned inside out. Tyrewala is more than equipped to try and map out the consciousness of the city. He was born in January 1977 at Byculla's Masina Hospital, schooled at St. Mary's in Mazagaon, and studied commerce at HR College for three years before moving to New York in 1995 for a bachelor's in business administration. "I hardly had any interest in books before I went abroad," he tells me, by e-mail.

In NYC, homesickness turned me into a reader, especially of fiction from the subcontinent. Over the years, I became convinced, unfortunately, that I could 'do India' better than the Rushdies and Roys. I returned to Mumbai in 1999 and tinkered around as an instructional writer for a few years before taking the plunge into full time writing (Pereira, 2005).

It is a crisp, no-nonsense plunge. The novel moves from one first person account to the next, incorporating monologues, headlines, anecdotes, vignettes. The book's sleeve describes the cast of characters as unusual but, to be honest, they aren't. They are the kind of people you could meet on a walk down any street in Mumbai, were you to look carefully, and this is what gives the novel its honesty. With a new beginning there is the impotent Babua, who turns rabid fanatic in order to hide his impotence

*What should I do? Oh-rey, I cry to myself, What should I do? I want to be a man like my grandfather; a man like my father, whose rare words and ample riches make people tremble. I want be like the barber, doctor, bus driver, and even our orchard workers – they are all men, siring sons like rabbits, unmindful of their bodies (NGS, 35).*

But he remains half a man and thinks of nothing but his 'giraffe' that won't lift its neck: "Inside my wide chest is an ant's heart, and in this heart is immense regret for having a lineage that, by giving me everything, has left me with nothing better to do than contemplate the catastrophe in my dhoti" (NGS, 36). It is ironical that a Mahant who visits his village calls everyone an eunuch and appeals to their manhood to throw out the outsiders from their house, their village and their country "Hindustan for Hindus! Hindustan for Hindus! Understand, donkey eunuchs? Not for outsiders, our Hindustan! Who? Who will correct history, who will avenge the past and drive the outsiders out...?"(NGS, 37)

It is Babua who takes up the challenge and is thumped on his shoulders for his national fervor. Prowling he nozzles Zail Singh, the scape goat out and is dragged to the Mahant's feet victoriously but he turns out to be not an outsider although Zail Singh insists that he is a Sikh not a Hindu. Even the Mahant turns out to be a hyper enthusiast who did not know how to define 'an outsider'. Sulaiman like many others has to leave Barauli because of the outrage created by the Mahant. Coming to his grandfather in Naamnagar he expresses his intention to go to Bombay and live like the other refugees. But before he goes he must understand "I must know so I can endure. Only you can tell me because *you, you* served us

from who we were *you* turned us into outsiders to be driven out of villages... what mischief made you become a bloody Muslim?" (NGS, 45)

In the next chapters characters are piled up, all from the lower class Muslim society who lives on the periphery of the great thronging city. As a novel about Bombay the story does not map the central contours but dwells on the collective psychologies of the books narrators. Everyone is a type and infuses a complexity of people plagued by the faith they belong to. Whosoever's voice Tyrewala uses, the nauseated matchmaker or the obese runaway daughter, the person who has dialed a wrong number, Tyrewala seems to become vulnerable to examination because of his own familiarity with the woes of his innumerable protagonists. No God seems to extend any joy or relief to these destined to live life on the fringes of existence. What is remarkable that Tyrewala opens our eyes to people whom we take for granted and not even lend them a flicker of a question as to why they are there and how to they survive – The *asli Kasaai*, the oblivious beggar, the immigrant slum dweller or even the convert who quietly dies with a Hey Ram, Ram Ram on his lips. Tyrewala's half-baked personalities however are capable of throwing up burning questions that unsettle the mind and after even sixty pages of reading open unknown windows in the far from comfortable shanties in Mumbai's slum.

Far from the madding crowd of Cuff Parade, Marine Drive and Nariman Point, a continuous discomfort besets the reader as he ventures deeper into the heart of darkness. These often nameless, faceless protagonists remind one of the hordes of moving ends who play God knows what business and are crushed by giant feet into insignificance. This other side of the picture, the irony of megacities, is the inevitable outcome of the process of globalization. Whenever, one tries to draw a circle on a square or rectangle sheet of paper there are scraps that fall a sunder because the axis has its limitations of holding things together, the center can only hold a certain amount and what it cannot falls apart. The rich and

the beautiful, the educated and the employed, the mainstream religions all survive, rise, ascend to a needed importance while the other half of humanity is distorted, disintegrated into nothingness, it continues to live the flesh out meaninglessly. Tyrewala's array of protagonists more than amplifies the non-existent existence of this other half of humanity. Most fiction of the recent times, in one way or the other, try to throw up into sharp relief, this adverse grayness that has gotten out of focus when the camera zooms in on India shining.

All the lives that Tyrewala has captured are disparate; the only thread that binds them together is of tension. Tension is the running theme of how these non-descript eek their lives in a Hindu dominated world. Here to be a convert, a pervert, a subvert, a nincumpoop '*sab chalta hai*' as a matter of fact only these can survive for the righteous and the well-meaning can never withhold, it is the survival of the fittest and only the 'fallen angels' can withstand the fires of hell. Hamida for example who had set her herat at being Rafiq's fourth wife even compromises to marrying a rich cripple and divorcing him to take his money and come back to be Rafiq's fourth wife. And Nawaz, the self-proclaimed poet who in order to look one dresses up in a baggy sherwani, bunching pajamas and a dark brown embroidered skull cap with a pile of faded books and leaves in his arms. And guess who he gets for a patron, the *paanwala* and for a student Abhay who believes his Guru when he says that "Urdu poetry is to be secreted like a silk' and basking in its beauty one must allow it to invade one like a tan. The irony was that Nawaz was as ignorant as his student and when pressed into answers all he could do was to escape "I crumpled my face. 'I cannot do this!' I stood up. 'Sorry, the mood is gone. I cannot teach poetry today.' I shivered my hand over my skull. 'I feel frazzled!' I stormed out the door, ran down the stairs, and cycled like a maniac all the way home" (NGS, 94).

Abhay is unfortunate that his attempts to imbibe some culture to impress his girlfriend attend in a failure because of Nawaz, his teacher. But what emerges as an important

facet of this interlude is how incompetent and in proficient is a lot of the lower class Muslims who are willing to sell their culture to earn a petty living.

Abhay also comes in handy to bring up another dialectics, that of inter marriage between Muslims and non-Muslims. Abhay's sister Avantika is married to a Muslim Sohail Tambawala who is missing as the story about him unfolds. Avantika as a wife has full faith in her husband but others take his disappearance has doubly significant – the second for his being a Muslim. The knowledge of such second grade treatment is quite obvious to Avantika who knows that families like hers suffer, tolerate, mediate, pay anti-social men to settle sticky deadlocks, but they can't go to the police who would harass them instead of assisting them. Avantika tries to masquerade as a Hindu wife with a borrowed *bindi*, *mangal sutra* and tandoori masala from the kitchen shelf vermilion in her parting but to no avail as the police take no cognizance and despite her raving attempts they laugh her plea away. Then when her tears do bring about a change she has to face further ignominy.

'Now tell me, what happened? House burgled, chain snatched, underworld called, what?' She tells me. My jaw drops. What? All this hassle for a runaway husband? Has she not seen herself in the mirror? 'You have his photo?' She stops crying; smiles a little. She removes the photo from her purse and shows me. Aaho, now I understand how the two got together. 'Good', I say, 'What's his name?' 'Tambawala', she says. Yes, but that's a surname. What's her husband's name? 'S', she says. Is this any time to be coy? S? What S? Suraj, Sumit, Sudanshu, what, 'Sohail...' what? Sohail? Like Sohail Khan, the actor?' She nods, and then she says, 'But my name is Avantika.' 'You have some ID card or something?' She looks more scared now. She tries to take back her husband's photo. *No, no* I shake my head, *ID card first*. 'Show whatever you have. Bank card, ration card, anything.' She brings out something from her handbag. 'My railway ID'. She gives it to me. It's true: Name: Avantika Joshi. 'Why still Joshi?' I ask. 'My husband did not insist on a name change. He is very open minded, very liberal. He even lets me wear sindoor and mangal sutra.' I look closely at her head and neck. 'And he lets you go for puja also? To the temple?' 'yes, yes, of course'" (NGS, 110-11).

The report is filed but Avantika has to leave knowing that nothing will come of it because "Arrey aye, madam, enough! If you do not like it here, take your miya-ji husband and go to Pakistan" (NGS, 112). And this is the parting advice. And lo and behold what really

happens next that the police have an encounter with some terrorists who are shot dead and in order to passify the uncomfortable questions of some troublesome activists a terrorist is named Sohail Tambawala. The news unsettles many who share the name. For one Sohail Tambawala, 57, "the death of a namesake is startling, like fate urging one to take note of a life, and death, that could have been one's own. And while one is incapable of empathy for anybody, leave alone antinationals, one finds oneself, in spite of oneself, reciting Surah Fatiyah for what could have been the soul of oneself" (NGS, 122).

Another Sohail Tambawala, 13, Tambi is a runaway small town boy who works at the light of Asia Restaurant. The news excites him and he whispers to himself "You're famous, I whispered, striking a parate-chop pose on the rat infested landing" (NGS, 123). The third Sohail Tambawala, 42, is an elite cosmopolitan who is embarrassed by the slugs of his own community and is happy that one of them is dead – "I think all those lower class butchers and *bhais* and stinking bearded bastards must be shot dead for giving the community a bad name" (NGS, 124).

Sohail Tambawala 29 lies in a hospital bed with his smoker's lungs festering with cancer and a wife and family and re-united in laws holding him back with their love – "you're too young to go, Avantika says; but one is never old enough to suffer like this. I say – I read the papers and watch the news and wonder, will I be next? In the grand sweepstakes of death, will all Sohail Tambawalas be unlucky?" (NGS, 124) Another Sohail Tambawala, 20, is very unnerved because he wants to become a barrister but it dawns on him that

...today it is a terrorist. Tomorrow it will be some enemy country's dictator. In the future, when a 'Sohail dada' makes headlines, where will I hide my barrister face? Who would have imagined a man's name to be his biggest enemy? Fed up, that's what I am. I want to do more in life than stand up for 'Sohail Tambawala' and the cultural maelstrom it implies" (NGS, 126).

He decides to change his name to Jiten Mehra. Now, with a new identity he will travel around the country freely; he will check into obscure hotels and not lie that he is Jayesh

or Nimesh. One day, when he has become rich, he will move out of Yasin Baag to a cosmopolitan area. He will not see eyebrows rising (at police stations) or lips pursing (at railway counters) at the mention of his name. And when the electricity fails, Jiten Mehra will not wonder whether it's because of who he is or where he lives. The very next moment sanity dawns on him. "What am I doing? At least some things in life must remain inviolate. I am a coward. I am being wise. I must stand by my roots. Must I sacrifice myself for my roots? And if 'Jiten Mehra' becomes a liability, will I obliterate him too?" (NGS, 128)

When the Muslim God seems nowhere in sight to deliver His believers, He must go with such frustration asks Tyrewala how can the community hold together. With every day the good name of the community being 'butchered', Amzad, the slayer of lesser life forms cannot but question his own com. He muses over the damage done due to excessive inbreeding, due to excessive poverty, due to excessive rigidity of religion. He believes that things have come to such a sorry pass that Muslims wish that they weren't Muslims. Like hungry beggars there is only concern is with money and food as they very sagacious beggar himself says

*Please friend, money, food, hungry, God* – these are the only words you need as a beggar; to charm the tourists, you learn to render these words in every tongue spoken under the sun. *Please, friend, money, food, hungry, God* soon, these are the only concepts you know, the only objects you recognize. You start to believe that the solicitous is the only tone in which to address you fellow humans; that if you call people 'friend' they will be kind to you. You cannot think beyond the loose change in people's pockets. You cannot imagine being satiated by anything finer than food and sex. And God? Ha! That's just something you say to vex the indifferent fuckers (NGS, 158-59).

This then is the truth about the other Bombay, the Bombay that does not throng coffee houses and clubs, that does not live in penthouses with air conditioning, the Bombay of incalculable bliss but a Bombay that is being 'aborted' day and night with infidelity and demise, where the Azan rings out loud and clear but where the heads that bow do not bow in faith but in hunger and want and pain.

In the literature that seeks to diagnose global conditions by generalizing from particular urban dilemmas, a city like Bombay is an exemplar of a “perverse” sort of urbanism (urbanism without economic growth). Bombay is not *at* risk but also constitutes a risk in and of itself to ideas and forms of global justice, equity and conviviality. In the interpretation of scholars who write from within a national paradigm, however, Bombay appears as the subject of the construction of the national modern. Its cosmopolitan culture and artistic productions are seen as products and symbols of the “achievements of colonial and post-colonial India.” (Patel 2004, 328) The nomenclatural transformation of this national symbolic terrain and therefore constitutes a risk of national self-understanding, especially one that values a secular and ecumenical style of convivial relations amongst various groups.

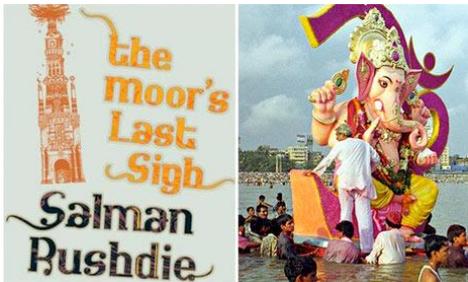
But both these positions, which involve specific interpretations of what constitutes risk, are tied to particular moral and political projects that animate their readings of the city and an interpretation of its malaise. Within the particular moral-theoretic terrains of such generalizations, the specificity and material qualities of city life often seem to disappear. When they do appear, they do so under the sign of new political frameworks of ‘resistance’ largely having to do with a new intersection between politics and religion” (Patel, 2004, 330). Connecting these various literatures, however, is an underlying sense of the shift from the city *of* risk, which causes the city to appear as a different sort of a theoretical subject. This is perhaps the most general answer that can be provided for why particular, singular and excessive urban conditions have historically been the focus of modern social and cultural theory from Walter Benjamin to Mike Davis.

To conclude it can be said that work such as *Maximum City* and *No God in Sight* capture the two apparently contradictory movements of today’s world- singularization on the one hand and the phenomenology of the global on the other. As Rao so neatly put it:

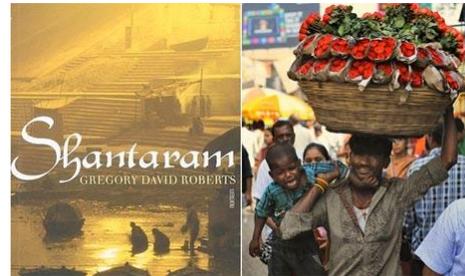
The moments that are centralized as moments of crisis in the context of Bombay (and other cities like it) are thus no longer merely tied to any local story as such nor can they stand in as teleological proxies for the conditions of modernity. Rather they serve as platforms for the sorts of intersections that reveal the fundamentally elusive nature of global flows (Rao, 2005).

## Some Good Readings on Mumbai

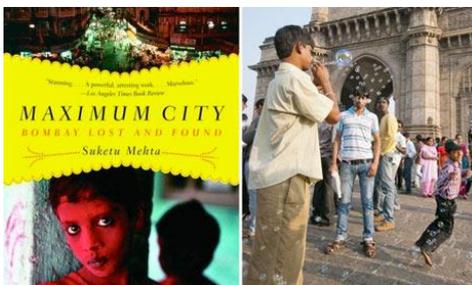
Salman Rushdie, *The Moor's Last Sigh*, 1995



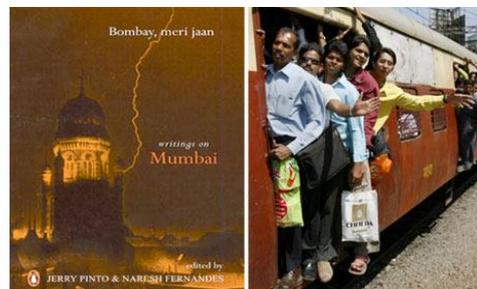
Gregory David Roberts, *Shantaram*, 2003



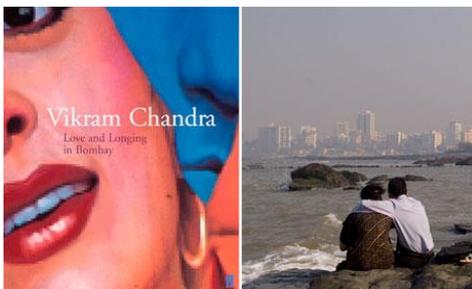
Suketu Mehta, *Maximum City: Bombay Lost and Found*, 2004



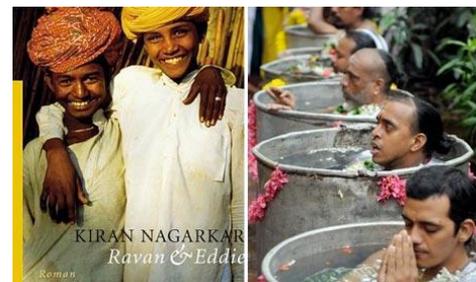
Jerry Pinto and Naresh Fernandes (eds.), *Bombay, Meri Jaan*, 2003



Vikram Chandra, *Love and Longing in Bombay*, 1997

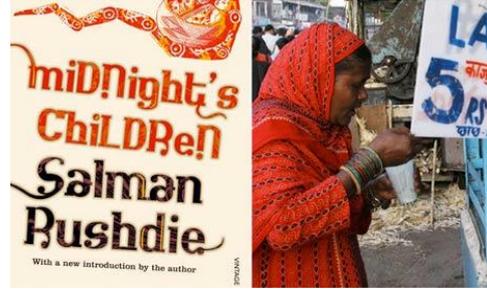
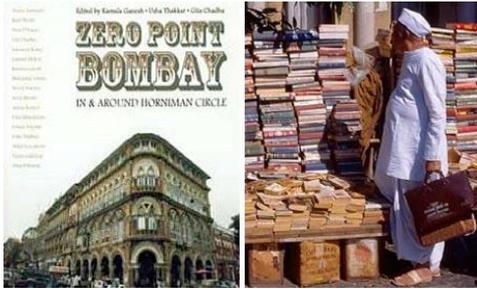


Kiran Nagarkar, *Ravan & Eddie*, 1994



Kamala Ganesh, et al, *Zero Point Bombay: In and Around Horniman Circle*, 2004

Salman Rushdie, *Midnight's Children*, 1981



### Some Recent Bollywood Movies Set on Mumbai



Once Upon a Time in Mumbaai (2010)



Slumdog Millionaire (2008)



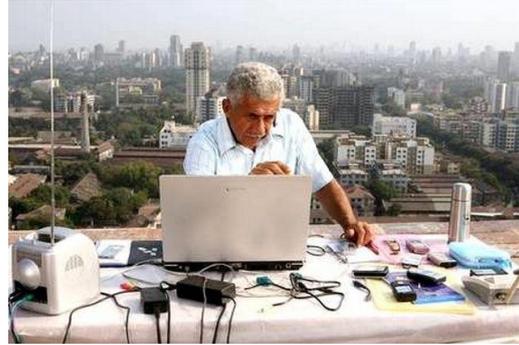
Salaam Bombay! (1988)



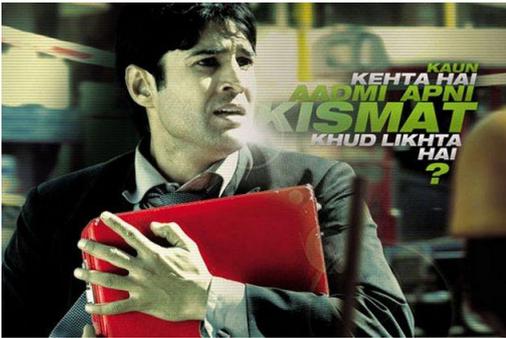
Mumbai Meri Jaan (2008)



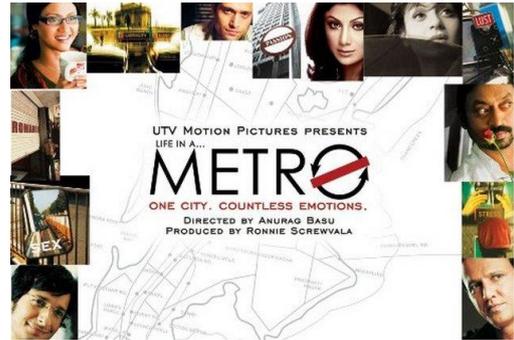
**Tum Mile (2009)**



**A Wednesday (2008)**



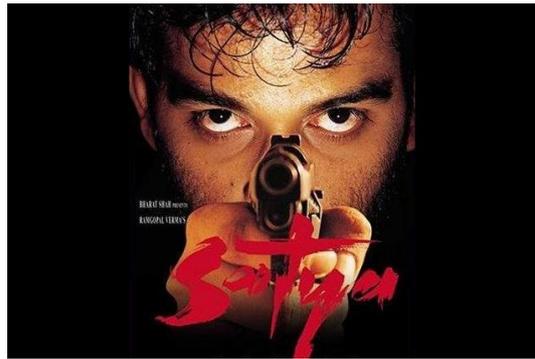
**Aamir (2008)**



**Life in a...Metro (2007)**



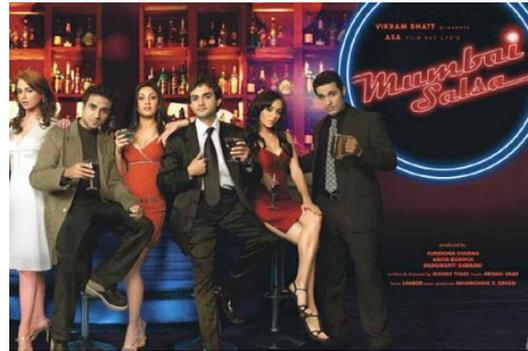
**Black Friday (2004)**



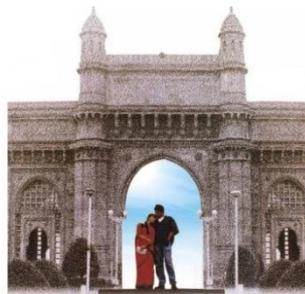
**Satya (1998)**



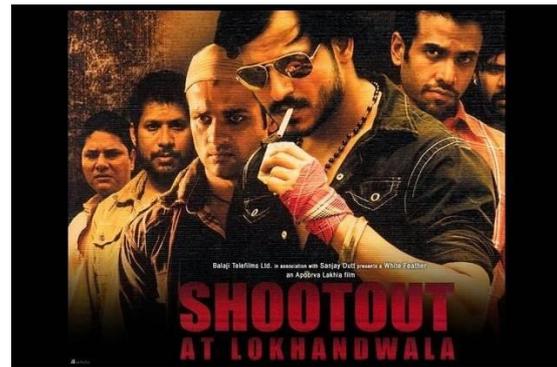
City of Gold (2010)



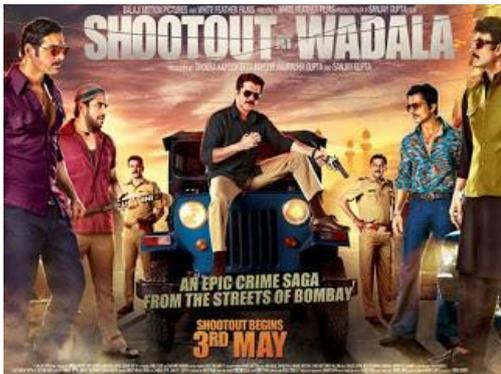
Mumbai Salsa (2007)



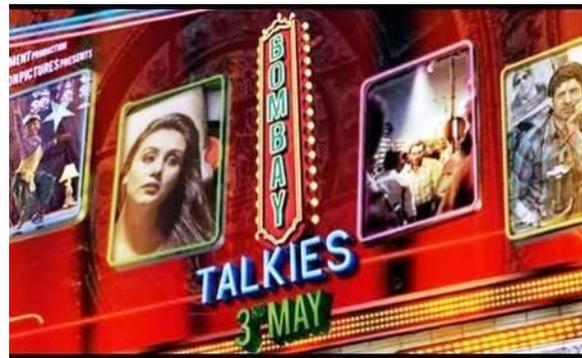
Mani Ratnam's  
**BOMBAY**  
Bombay (1995)



Shootout at Lokhandwala (2007)



Shootout at Wadala (2013)



Bombay Talkies (2013)

