

## The Smell of Bombay

by Smita RK

Smells, like music, hold memories. She breathed deep, and bottled it up for posterity. The smells of Bombay were as famous as the city. Oppressive, humid, saturated with the smell of sea water which spread its long fingers into Bombay through its creeks. Bombay smelled of many things besides the all pervading stale sea smell. It was made up of immigrants from all corners of the country with their food stalls, their ways of doing things, their different languages. Success stories were few but enough to tempt people into Bombay's capacious folds, at times to be lost there.

Bombay opens out into the Arabian Sea which touches the shores of the African continent at the other end. Its waters seem to come back and lap at Bombay's long shore, rush into its backwaters and creeks, winding their way through the city, giving it its peculiar rotting smell.

As you come into Bombay from the hills of the Sahyadris, you begin to smell the creeks. The first of them called Thane creek wades out into the Sea till the horizon. Some mud flats can be seen, closer to land. A lone fisherman on a little boat sits quietly, fishing in those creek waters, his ragged clothes telling the story of his life here. From here, one winds one's way to Shivaji Park, old and settled among Bombay's districts. It is here that Sachin Tendulkar played cricket as a boy.

In a plush apartment, Jyoti sat cleaning the coriander leaves. She picked the jobs that allowed her to be in the kitchen long enough to have a quick chat with the maids. Each maid went to several homes and there was gossip to be had. She had two maids doing different chores. One was cleaning the floors and the other was cleaning the fish, making it ready for lunch. The guts had to be removed, the scales brushed off and the marinade applied. Then it would wait for the master of the house, Dr. Deepak, to come home before it sizzled on the pan. The maid would make chapattis, all warm and fresh for the family. Deepak would have seen many patients that morning. His clinic was in the centre of Shivaji Park and he ran it after his father had established a good reputation there. Soon his son would take over.

Even before he reached his clinic, patients would be lined outside the door. They looked expectantly at him, with relief. Having waited for more than an hour, he was here. If there were too many, he would call five of the women in and line them up. No time for confidentiality. Each had to give a quick summary of their problems-ongoing or new.

The women did not seem bothered by this lack of confidentiality. It had a community feel and some of them walked out having made new acquaintances, discussing remedies. He would have an extra minute for an old acquaintance or a pretty one. Then five of the men were called in. Again, there would be an extra minute for the ones he deemed worth chatting to. In about two hours, the queue outside the clinic would be shortened and the consulting room clean, the fan whirring away in the silence. He would relax on the short walk back home, anticipating lunch. The privilege of his life were these short walks to and fro from work in a city where people commuted for hours.

The smell of the frying fish in his apartment contrasted with the festering smell outside the building. Jyoti joined him at the table for lunch. A young man appeared at the door. Jyoti told him to wait outside. Deepak raised his brows, not particularly interested and Jyoti replied, 'he's Maharashtrian. (Deepak nodded approvingly, they did not trust immigrants from other states for domestic help). He will water the pots.' Five pots waited on the little balcony of the apartment awaiting their water. Jyoti had become selective about the things she wanted to do as she grew older. She might do a bonsai but not watering every day. So, one maid for cleaning, the other for cooking and the young man for watering the plants and cleaning the car.

Jyoti was a placid woman who did not compete with her husband. She had no exciting stories to tell and she would not have told them if she had them. She had no interest in being the soul of the party. This was the secret to their long marriage. He was the wandering hero, saving lives and she was the nest keeper. He met new people, garnered awe and respect and everyone wanted a piece of him. She liked her kitchen and her household. She avoided having a piece of him if it was possible.

Into this settled domestic scene Simi entered, catching Deepak's approving eye. They talked and laughed though it was brief. The couple were interested in Simi's stories of distant lands but since she gushed, they could not take all of it in. Gushing is different from telling stories. Also, one can take only so much criticism of one's land.

Simi had some of the fish, remarking on its freshness and took leave of them, feigning the touching of the feet. If you lived in a building full of your relatives, you could fill your stomach by visiting them at lunch time. She would tell herself that the exercise of touching the feet of elders who she did not respect but generally liked, was at least good exercise. She was going back to Singapore the next day.

Singapore was surrounded by the sea but it did not have an oppressive rotting sea smell. It was shiny and new, unlike Bombay which you could trace to the Stone Age. You could not move into Singapore without a graduate degree. You could move into Bombay with the clothes on your back. In Bombay you could bribe the authorities, in Singapore, you obeyed them.

As she drove to the airport, Simi opened the window for some air and closed it hurriedly. The smell was bad in tight traffic and a beggar had tried to sell something as soon as she had opened her window. Yes, she was leaving this behind, running from it. She closed the window quickly. She wanted to be in a cleaner place, free of corruption and civic failures. By the age of twenty-six, she had concluded that she could do nothing to stem the issues she did not like in her home country. Instead of complaining, she decided to look outwards. Robert Frost had once said, 'home is a place you haven't to deserve'. For many years she had kept his quote close to her heart but now, she questioned it.

She wanted to be among those who tried hard to 'deserve' the home around them. At the very least, it would be an experience and at the most, she would become a citizen of a better world. Once a bird learns to fly in an open sky, you cannot put it back into a cage, even if the cage smells like home.