

## After the Deluge

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**On 26 July 2005**, the rain gods attacked Mumbai with relentless intensity.

Nearly 30 inches of monsoon rain lashed the city within a 24-hour period. Water flooded many neighbourhoods, and clogged the city's drains, roadways, and suburban rail network. Transportation came to a standstill, flights were cancelled, the stock exchange closed, schools and colleges shut down, and people waded or swam to safety.

In hindsight, the devastation was modest in comparison to what New Orleans endured just about a month later. But arriving in the city five days after the deluge, I could easily identify the deep impression that the flood had left on the city's surface and psyche. The water had retreated, but the craters it had carved on the streets seemed to carry a warning ; the next time the city may not be so lucky. The ground was still wet, and the streets, usually choked with traffic and people, appeared less than packed. This was no doubt due to the fact that the downpour on the previous two days had panicked the administration into urging people to stay indoors. The streets were desultory and the city appeared shabbier than usual.

When I asked the taxi driver in the western suburb of Bandra to take me to Kalina, one of the worst-affected neighbourhoods, at first he stared blankly. But recovering quickly, he said that it was safe to go there now. Once at the wheel, he made up for his earlier momentary loss of words, and talked incessantly and excitedly about the experience of the flooded city. He painted a picture of the city with images of stalled cars, taxis, auto-rickshaws, and buses that littered the streets, and of people wading through neck-high water in search of dry ground. He related his own experience of being trapped. When water rose above the seat of his cab, he had to abandon it and take shelter in a nearby high-rise

building. He was trapped all night, pacing restlessly, longing to return to his taxi and head home. He wondered about his family and friends, concerned that their shacks might have been washed away. Was this the end?

When we reached Kalina, his attention turned from himself to the neighbourhood. He pointed to the watermarks ten feet high on the wall. The lanes were still slushy, and cars and motorcycles stood forlornly, covered in mud. A sense of the wet, mildewed aftermath hung in the air. The brightly-lit shops on the main street could fool you into believing that nothing had happened. Although the flood had not spared commercial establishments, they were now swept clean of any signs of water damage, transacting business as usual. But the garbage piled right outside on the sidewalk broke this air of eerie normality. Mumbai's streets are not clean at the best of times. But this was not the usual litter and trash; it was heaps of household garbage and commercial merchandise covered in a rotting, deep-black sludge. It was as if the water had forced the city to bring its innards out in the open, exposing its decaying, putrid secrets.

Driving away from this scene of devastation and decay, we passed by tarpaulin-covered hutments standing along giant water pipes. The electric-blue tarpaulin roofs of the shanties shone brightly and defiantly in the rain. When I remarked that it was extraordinary that the poor had bounced back so quickly when they must have borne the brunt of the devastation, the taxi driver shook his head. It did not matter whether you were rich or poor, he said. Water washed away all differences, bringing the whole city to its knees. As it turns out, the flood did not devastate the entire city; South Bombay, the old core of the city, escaped largely unscathed. Nor is it the case that the rich and the poor suffered equally. Yet the taxi driver was not alone in his belief that the experience of wreckage was that of the city as a whole. This discourse was pervasive. It was widely recognised that certain areas and groups had suffered more than others, but the deluge was seen to have threatened Mumbai itself.

The flood evoked a primeval image. The idea of a city under water is the stuff of myths. It was nature biting back, punishing humans, its fury levelling their prized creation; the city. The urban government and infrastructure had proved defenceless against the wrath of celestial powers. Just a few months earlier, the business and political elites had been retailing dreams of turning Mumbai into a world-class city, of transforming it into another Shanghai. But those dreams had literally gone down the clogged drains. People recalled the experience with a shudder. They spoke of the torrential rain as a sudden and uncontrollable force that brought fears of immediate and unexpected death. It was not just the thought of one's own death but also the threatening prospect of the city going under that shook the nerves. Monsoon waterlogging was commonplace, but this was a frighteningly different sight; this was the city itself sinking, inch by inch. It produced a sense of being choked and trapped.

Many spoke about walking for hours in water with floating garbage, debris and animal carcasses, to reach their homes only to find them inaccessible. Others recounted being stuck in their marooned office buildings, and frantically calling their relatives to reassure them and to inquire about their well-being. Phones went dead and the mobile network was

jammed. There were numerous stories of parents anxiously seeking information about their children who could not return home from school, and of old people who could not get help and were trapped inside their apartments, without food and medicine.

The city's confidence was shattered. Each time it rained over the next few days, you could detect anxious looks. Was it ever going to stop? And then, a sense of relief when it did. This was unusual, for the monsoon is always greeted with happiness in India. In the countryside, a timely monsoon augurs a good crop, while in the cities it spells relief from the searing summer heat. The experience of that wet Tuesday had changed Mumbai's disposition. Stalled traffic, marooned buildings and neighbourhoods, stranded families, and a powerless administration conjured up a frightening image of chaos and dysfunction. When the flood arrested the normal motion in the city, it spilled into people's nerves and drove them into frenzy. Their psyche was shattered. Mumbai appeared imperilled; it was an urban dystopia, not a dream city but a nightmare.

A few months later I came upon a music video CD, titled *Museebat mein Mumbai*.<sup>1</sup> Containing Bhojpuri ballads that are accompanied by images of the flood, the music video introduces Mumbai in Distress with:

*Kahal ja la Mumbai kabo sute la nahin  
Kabo ruke la nahin  
Kabo thake la nahin...*

It is said that Mumbai never sleeps  
Never stops  
Never tires...

Then, cutting to the sounds and images of cars and trains screeching to a halt, a voice intones:

*Lekin ai bhaiyya  
Chhabis July din mangalwaar ko  
Mumbai ruk bhi gayil  
Mumbai thak bhi gayil ...*

But O my brother  
On Tuesday 26 July  
Mumbai stopped  
Mumbai tired...

And then a little later, accompanied by images of people repeatedly trying their dead mobile phones:

*Band hoi gayile sabke phonwa mobile  
Mumbai pe jaise baadalwa tooti aayee  
Bijli katal tab le bhayil ba andheriya...*

Phones and mobiles went dead  
As clouds burst on Mumbai  
Lightning struck, lights went out  
And darkness descended...

As the ballad narrates the sudden collapse of the city, it locates the catastrophe in the complete paralysis of communication caused by the flood. Stalled cars, trains, and planes, mobile and landline phone networks thrown out of gear, and a city enveloped in darkness due to power failure, conjure up an image of urban paralysis. Itself a product of modern media and technology, the Bhojpuri music video portrays the destroyed lives and the shattered dreams of immigrants in the picture of the abrupt failure of the machinic city.

One would think that the experience of floods and their destructive force would not be unfamiliar to Bihari immigrants. After all, almost every year the monsoon routinely submerges rural roads and villages in Bihar. But Mumbai? How could anyone imagine a flood here? A metropolis of 14 million, it is the *ur*-modern city in India. Of course, Kolkata and Chennai are also major metropolises. But, unlike them, Mumbai occupies its regional geography contentiously. The map locates it in Maharashtra ; the cartographic fact being the product of a political agitation in the 1950s ; but the Island City appears to inhabit another space, one that connects as much to its hinterland in Maharashtra as to other parts of India and the world. It is the space of capital. For long a vital hub of overseas trade and commerce, and the nursery of indigenous mercantile and industrial capital, it serves as the headquarters of major Indian corporations, and as an entry point for global conglomerates. Home to the enormously influential Hindi film industry and the centre of advertising and media corporations, the city projects cultural modernity.

So what had brought a major metropolis of modernity to its knees? Debates raged in the media. The government pointed fingers at the unusually heavy rain, pleading that no city could have coped with the scale and intensity of the downpour.

Activists and citizens blamed the authorities for allowing development that flouted all environmental norms and safeguards, and that was responsible for clogging drains and the river that drained the rain water to the sea. Some blamed New Delhi, asserting that the city of Mumbai received only a tiny portion of its huge tax contribution to the central exchequer; some raised the taboo topic of turning Mumbai into a city-state. Others heaped blame on the state government and the municipal authorities for ignoring, and contributing to, the dangers of an urban catastrophe that had been building for years. The air was thick with accusations and explanations.

Undoubtedly, the beating the city had taken brought on this mood of despair. But this dark sentiment also tapped into an existing discourse that portrayed the great city in ruins.

For some time now, scholars, writers, and journalists have been mourning the loss of the city of promise. Mumbai has never been an ordinary city, but a place of opportunities and dynamic energy. But the city's very dynamism, according to the commentators, was also its curse. Runaway growth had throttled old Mumbai. Post-industrial growth and expansion had seized hold of the scruff of Mumbai's neck with such remorseless force as to choke its life as a city. Where once textile mills and docks had hummed Mumbai's siren song, there was now the cacophony of the post-industrial megalopolis. Its streets, pavements and open spaces were under siege of armies of poor migrants, slum dwellers, hawkers and petty entrepreneurs. Bombay's legendary housing scarcity had reached an epic scale, and ; characteristically for the city ; provided opportunities to builders, politicians, and underworld dons to make a killing. Civic services were bursting at the seams. Nativist passions, communal riots and the nexus between corrupt politicians and greedy businessmen had destroyed civic consciousness and wrecked the city as a coherent space. Like many other Third World megacities, Mumbai appeared as a runaway metropolis, exploding out of its inherited shell, hurtling out of control, and racing towards dysfunction and disaster. The human bodies, animal carcasses, and garbage floating in the water had only brought to surface the malaise set deep in the city's body.

Identifiable in this scene of ruin and destruction are the outlines of a remembered city. Urban theorists speak of the city as a thing of the past, its identity overrun and scrambled by explosive urbanisation. But the rise of vast urban networks does not erase the idea of cities as particular places, each defined by its distinctive constellation of social space, history, and memory. It may be the case that the production of space ; binding centre and periphery, city and the countryside ; has superseded the city, but these do not determine the lived experience. Though cast off as history, the city does not vanish. In Mumbai, its shape peers through the images of the derelict environment, the corroded institutions, overrun infrastructure, and ethnic eruptions on the city's cosmopolitan skin. The unleashing of nature's wrath only sharpened the consciousness of the city as 'second nature'. In a flash, people became aware that Mumbai was a product of human artifice, an expression of the dreams and delusions of bending nature to culture.

If modernity is a Faustian bargain to unleash human potential and subdue nature to culture, then modern cities are its most forceful and enduring expressions.<sup>2</sup> The breathless intensity and the awesome power of modern life have made and remade cities across the world ; London and Paris, Shanghai and Hong Kong, Tokyo and Mumbai, New York and Mexico City. But if all modern cities represent the conquests of culture over nature, Mumbai's foundation is doubly parasitical. Built not only on lands stolen from the sea, it was also founded and developed to advance European trade and conquest; the term 'colonial' applies here in both these senses. This may not be immediately evident because of the unrelenting attempts to erase the colonial genealogy of the city, the most visible expression of which is the ubiquitous presence of Shivaji, the 17<sup>th</sup>-century warrior and a regional cultural icon. Public buildings named after him, and statues of him, abound, none more prominently than the striking representation of the warrior near the Gateway of India, mounted on his

horse, sword in hand. No longer does he have to share the city with King Edward VII, whose bronze statue astride a horse once stood nearby. According to a legend, the Maratha warrior and the English emperor dismounted nightly and battled each other while the city slept. Shivaji did not vanquish King Edward in their nightly duels, but the political activists did. In 1965, they defaced and then removed the statue. Today, a parking lot occupies the site, which is still known by the name of the absent statue, *Kala Ghoda* (Black Horse). With King Edward dispatched to the museum, further erasure of colonial history followed. The European names of streets, squares, and public buildings were replaced with Maharashtrian and nationalist ones.

Bombay is now officially Mumbai. The colonial era is abolished, dismissed as history. *Kala Ghoda*, which once signified imperial mastery, stands emptied of its colonial halo. The postcolonial present summons Shivaji, Gandhi, Bhagat Singh, Dadabhai Naoroji and other regional and national icons to provide another cultural significance to the urban space. To this we can add recent efforts at re-branding the city with images and forms supplied by globalisation. The flood levelled all these efforts to infuse metropolitan life with new dreamscapes. The Island City was reduced to what it almost was in the 16<sup>th</sup> century: islets on the Arabian Sea. If the postcolonial present had turned the colonial past to rubble, the flood had flattened the city itself. Commentators had long spoken of Mumbai as a dying city, suggesting a protracted, stretched-out descent into complete dysfunction. But the deluge came with a sudden force. History was speeded up. The mythic force of nature felled the myth of culture with one sharp blow.

When the water retreated and Mumbai re-emerged, there was debris all around. Amidst it was the aspiration of the city as modern society. It was roughed up and tattered, but miraculously it still breathed. The streets lurched back to life, buses, trains and taxis began moving again, shops reopened for business, the stock exchange and offices resumed operation, students returned to schools and colleges, cameras rolled in film studios, and the air was filled with a vigorous conversation about the city's future and celebrations of the "Mumbai spirit".

The dialectic of spectacle and ruin is common to all cities, but its unique intensity in Mumbai is evident even in the best of times; the contrast and the co-existence of the shining and the shabby in the Island City are legendary. But the deluge shook the dialectic with a volatile force. The Island City had died and sprung back to life so suddenly, the darkness and glow of urban experience had come together in a single frame in such rapid succession, that something more elemental came into view; the city's history as a catastrophe. Suddenly, its origins as a colonial project, the violence of the dream of mastery, came to the fore. What ordinarily appeared as the other side of progress, as the darkness that would eventually be lit bright by development, leapt into sight as the truth of its history. The much greater and enduring devastation in New Orleans provoked a discourse about race and social justice, overwhelming the voices that had raised concerns about the vulnerability of a city located below the sea level. In Mumbai, on the other hand, the flood put modernity itself into question. Even as Mumbai slowly rose above the water

again, the dankness in the air could not but remind us of its perilous basis, the quicksand upon which its promise rested.

The last word must go to the balladeer, who escalates the remembrance of an urban disaster into a dark warning about the nightmare of modern technological mastery:

*Aadmi aaj chaand par bhi safar kar rahaa  
Maut par jor lekin kisi ka nahin  
Nazar jo aa rahaa kal ki ye jhaanki hai  
Namuna hai abhi ye aage bahut baaki hai  
Khada hai aaj vishwa chunauti ke muhaane pe  
Tula hai insaan hi insaaniiyat mitaane par  
Bana ke bamb yahan kuchch log bahut phool rahen  
Prakriti ke shakti ko sab log jaise bhool rahen...*

Man can travel to the moon  
But no one controls death  
What appears today is a glimpse of tomorrow  
Only a taste of what is to come  
The world teeters on the precipice  
Humans seem bent on killing humanity  
Bombs fill some with pride  
But we forget the power of nature...

## NOTES

1. *Museebat mein Mumbai* (Mumbai in Distress). Krunal Music Company, 2005, Mumbai.
2. Marshall Berman. *All That is Solid Melts into Air* (Penguin Books, 1988, New York).