

Bombay mix

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"I was a begging boy on the streets of Bombay. Shining shoes, stealing, wreck-picking, car-wiping, massage boy, drugs-pedlar, liquor-seller. I sold to the public in slums and dope to the tourists. I sold them shit, cow dung," says 28-year-old Mahindra, "street man" and sometime-interpreter, who works in the Salvation Army hostel in Colaba, downtown Bombay.

Bombay is a microcosm of India - underlying the glitz, away from the glare of the Bollywood film industry, is a city divided by contrasts and deep-rooted tensions. Life is fast for those in the rat-race; in the slums, it moves at the pace of an ox. There are beaches, but the sea is too filthy to swim in. You can get laser treatment for eyes as advanced as in the West, yet a rickshaw driver will have a cataract the size of a gob-stopper.

West overlays East and, for hip Bombayites, there is fusion - and confusion. Bollywood actresses sing in Hindi pop bands that are modelled on the Spice Girls, and "tablatronic" techno pounds inside the city's clubs.

On some levels, Bombay is changing so fast it feels out of control. Every day, new images of Western life are beamed in by satellite TV. The West says curves and cleavages, Muslim chic replies with elegant, tailored lines and soft silks covering the entire body. In India a glimpse of an ankle is erotic, and Miss Asia will only bare her midriff. Even the traffic signs give conflicting messages. One blue billboard advises motorists: "It helps to be spaced out while driving. Keep safe distance."

Britain's Channel 4 has chosen the grime and glamour of Bombay as the setting for a six-part police TV series to be shown here in the autumn. Donald Sumpter, from Hanif Kureshi's *Buddha of Suburbia*, and two relative newcomers, Glaswegian-born Shan Khan and Bombayite soap-opera star Shuli Subaya, are joined by a handful of Bollywood actors. The drama hopes to rival *Taggart* in its gritty realism, and *Hawaii Five-0* in kitsch humour and exotic location.

Bombay's Bollywood is the world's biggest film industry, churning out "masala" movies - candyfloss stories with jingly Hindi tunes - whose stars are revered by many Indians with a devotion akin to temple worship. The city is a cinematographer's dream, yet films are never made in the city, and whenever the crew for *Bombay Blue* set up a shoot - on the beach or at the city's morgue - an audience of hundreds, sometimes thousands, would gather. Indians love to stare, all hoping for a glimpse of a star.

The street life is a tragi-comedy, at times so extreme it teeters beyond rationale. Yet the spirit of the street kids is infectious, as are their smiles. They are open and, owning nothing, have nothing to hide.

Bombay is India's powerhouse of manufacturing - everything from bicycles to textiles and pharmaceuticals - and overseas trade. Arabs come to buy gold and designer shoes. Anything can be bought and sold - even kidneys, with a quarter of the fee going to the original owner, the rest to the middle man. There is even a season for child slaves sold for prostitution - the monsoon season, from June to September, when life in the villages gets desperate.

Lakshmi, Goddess of Wealth, is the city's emblem - her temple stands, appropriately, in the frenzied silver market. Every day, 3,000 Indians arrive in the city hoping to escape rural poverty. "Villagers have a dream," says Mahindra, "They hear people telling nice things about Bombay and like to jump in next train. And somehow make their fortune."

The city has the highest-priced real estate in the world, higher than Tokyo and Hong Kong, but half of its 15 million inhabitants live in "slum city" on the mainland. Once malarial flats, Bombay is now a peninsula and the slums are like a jigsaw of Indian communities. There is an entire tribal community from Sholapur in the neighbouring state of Karnataka. Orthodox Hindu families from Bihar live on top of Muslims from Punjab. Humanity is thrown together, making a living, getting by.

There are 650 million Hindus and 120 million Muslims in India, but before the 1992-93 city's sectarian riots and consequent bombings, Bombay had not suffered from communal violence - Bombayites thought they were too cosmopolitan for such things. But more than 500 were killed and 40,000 Muslims fled the city.

The Muslim community has still not recovered, and the Muslim mafiosi have lost their iron grip over the underworld. Tensions are strained, exacerbated by the partisanship of the militantly Hindu Shiv Sena government and the predominantly Hindi police. The situation is volatile, and the middle classes are becoming fearful. Over delicate spiced rice and glasses of champagne, film-makers bemoan the state of their city. Crime is rising. Politics has become more polarised and corruption remains unchecked. Everyone pays baksheesh - even the street boys pay to avoid police beatings.

Government money is provided for the poor, for elementary education and basic medical treatment, but so much trickles away. White-collared officials are also struggling to maintain their lower- middle-class lifestyle, and in Bombay there is a Kafka-esque fear of slipping down a rung. "All poor people want to become little bit medium class and medium class wish to become first class," says Mahindra.

The rigid caste system which has held the country in check for centuries is being challenged. For the first time in Indian history, an "untouchable", Kocheeril Raman Narayanan, has become prime minister. But the corridors of power are a world away

tracks. When Mahindra was nine, he worked as a coolie boy on long-distance trains and "many times saw someone put their neck under the train. There are so many problems," he sighs. "Many people in India are still committing suicide. Setting fire on themselves."

Dilip, 11, from Allahabad, had been hit by a train a week before and there was a large lump with ragged stitches on his head. His parents died two years ago in a fire and he lives outside, wreck-picking. The glow of his sad eyes lingered, but I felt awed by his resilience in coping alone on the streets. Although the boys look out for each other, each is vulnerable to daily police intimidation. And, says Mahindra, to paedophiles "asking a boy to make him happy for short time. But Indian men usually don't pay, or maybe 10 or 20 rups" (20 to 40 pence).

There is no interface between the lives of the different classes. The occupants of middle-class apartments no longer register the existence of the people who live in slumland. Mahindra and I were standing on a railway footbridge with a view of the slums and a playing field marking the divide between the middle class and the poor. Two young girls in ripped dresses with ribbons in their hair were "joy-riding" - one sitting on a piece of broken wood attached to a rope and the other pulling, in between the railway tracks, dodging the trains.

Mahindra had taken me to meet an old begging friend, Narayan, 28. He has lived in "Railway Shack", five metres from the tracks, for 13 years. Life's prospects may be bleak for Narayan, who lives in one room with his family of four. No electricity or running water. The railway line serves as the toilet. But he's resigned himself to it and says he has no dreams. "It's OK. Nothing, just like this."

I found the street people's degree of resigned acceptance to life's injustices astonishing. Mahindra suggests it is their faith in the goddess, but the general attitude is that it is simply their lot - shit happens. Daily life revolves around getting water and food, washing clothes and waiting. Their needs are few and, unlike Westerners who are afraid of boredom, they can spend a lot of time squatting by the pavement with towels on their heads, simply letting time pass.

Fifty years after Indian independence and Bombay's city planners are busy erasing memories of the Raj, pulling down buildings, re-naming streets. But its conservative mentality is not so easily erased. The fear between rich and poor is like that of Victorian Britain. Slum residents are shunned by "decent" society.

Mahindra says he is proud to be a poor man, proud he has survived the streets. He doesn't want pity or kind words, just the right to exist. "I like to tell other people outside Bombay," he says, "because, here, people don't tell, they shy, they are middle class, first class. Many time, I notice people don't like to tell the worst part about the poor people. The poor are proud, because they have big family and see children as their wealth. The more children, the more happy."

Dusk was falling as we drove back through the slums. A Kashmiri heroin dealer loitered. Hindi music floated lazily through the thick air - a mixture of exhaust fumes, sewage and rotting fruit. Women in saris were selling a few chillies or some oranges. A big-bellied child was shitting in the gutter.

We arrived in Breach Candy, the rich part of town, and where I was staying. A park overlooks the sea and young lovers were shyly holding hands. By the road, on three-foot square of pavement, a family with two children and a six-month-old baby had set up home. Stepping out of the cab, I nearly stepped on the baby spread-eagled in the shadows. His father looked up sharply, and his stare stays with me. He was cooking a chicken over a naked flame, his family huddled around. During the day, the daughters are flower girls at the road junction, selling red roses by the dozen. The next morning, I saw one of the girls at the traffic lights - a careless driver brushed too close and two bunches of roses scattered. She shook her fist and then turned in despair. The traffic sped past. Nobody stops for nobody in Bombay.