The solution to the city's problems lies in reducing the number of its inhabitants

Bye-bye, Bombay



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DEAR Bombay, after a stay of two hundred months I am leaving you. These two 'centuries' have brought me many moments of joy and happiness that I would like to relive just as they brought me occasions of unhappiness that I am trying to forget. But the sum total of these is positive, distinctly so, and for this let me say thank you.

It was in Cambridge, England, during the late sixties that I went through the decision making process that worries an expatriate Indian at least once in his life — whether to stay or to return. Rightly or wrongly I decided to return, provided I could find a suitable niche where I could do science to my satisfaction. "How about Bombay?" asked my wife who had been brought up there. "Never! Not in that steaming city with its teeming millions," I had replied. The quiet and contemplative life I was accustomed to in Cambridge seemed a far cry from the typical life of a commuter in Bombay.

But, dear Bombay, I finally cast my lot with you. For, incredible though it may seem, I did find a quiet part of you that housed an institute which, so far as I could see, maintained an international standard, and where the door to door commuting time on foot was less than ten minutes. These positives outweighed your other negatives. When I announced my decision an Indian friend advised me to follow two don'ts. Of course, we Indians are always liberal with advice, whether solicited or otherwise. Over the years I have learnt to ignore most of it and follow my own counsel. Nevertheless, these two don'ts have turned out to be useful during my stay here.

The first was: Never converse in Hindi with a Bombayite. George Bernard Shaw's Professor Higgins bemoaned 'the cold-blooded murder of the English tongue'. Dear Bombay, chaste Hindi cannot survive within your precincts! Over the years you have evolved your own language, the celebrated 'Bombay Hindi' that assimilates all languages just as you coolly assimilate people coming in from all over the nation.

This advice was specially meant for me because I had been brought up and educated in that citadel of chaste Hindi — Varanasi. I followed the advice. I write and lecture in Hindi but refrain from speaking it except in an emergency. Call me a snob if you will, but I have never appreciated the version of Hindi that you have nurtured in your bosom.

The second piece of advice that I am glad to follow was: Don't drive in Bombay. You have the mistaken view that driving here is very disciplined. 'Look at Delhi', you say, 'where anything goes' Or 'Look at Calcutta, where nothing goes because the traffic is eternally jammed' In relative terms, yes, your traffic is more disciplined than elsewhere in the country. But this is like a third class student boasting in front of those who failed. Have you ever bothered about the number of accidents that occur on your streets every day? The horrifying figure used to appear on a billboard at the foot of the Malabar Hill. It doesn't any more, probably because you have become immune to it, as you have to many other horrifying facts.

I do not know why people go through the trouble of painting zebra crossings on your streets. At a zebra crossing without traffic lights the pedestrian has the right of way. Yet, which Bombay motorist has ever given way to a pedestrian? Once, just to make the point, I took my life in my hands and stepped onto the zebra crossing near the Regal roundabout. A speeding motorist screeched to a stop. I prepared myself to give him a lecture (or, hear one from him). But, lo and behold, he himself apologised. I then discovered that he was a foreigner in a car with 'CD' licence plates. Had he been a native I would not be alive to write this letter.

I seriously doubt whether even ten per cent of those who drive cars and taxis on your streets would pass a driving test in a western country. The standard answer to this criticism from the native is, 'If you follow the rules and discipline of driving common in the West, you will not be able to make your way in our traffic'. Rather than pick up bad habits I have decided to follow my friend's advice and drive only when I go abroad — where rules are meant to be obeyed.

But driving is only one symptom of a general malaise that is slowly but surely gripping you. The malaise that is called lack of discipline. In the mid-forties I recall being pulled up by my father when I tossed a groundnut shell out of our taxi onto Marine Drive. "In Bombay, roads are not littered like this," he told me. Of course, as an eight-year-old my recollection of the Marine Drive of those days may be unreliable. But I do recall that your streets were cleaner then.

Slogans like 'Cleaner Bombay' or 'Greener Bombay' do have a role to play in motivating people. But slogans are not everything. If I want to dispose of my litter where is the trash can? If there is one, is it being emptied frequently enough to be useful? And most importantly do I have the will to walk with the litter in my hand to the nearest trash can even if it exists in good condition only fifty metres away?

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It all boils down to discipline, dear Bombay! Discipline at the personal as well as the collective level. Where are those queues at bus stops for which you were once justly famous? How safe is it for me to walk down one of your streets at midnight? Only last month a taxi driver from the queue at Santacruz airport demanded Rs 175 to take me to Navy Nagar, when the standard fare does not exceed Rs 80. With incidents like these, I fear, my dear Bombay, you are losing your grip.

My first visit to Singapore was a revelation that brought mixed feelings. That Easterners could run a city so efficiently became something to be proud of. 'Discipline', 'awareness of public duties' etc. need not be the prerogatives of the 'White Man of the West', after all. But then why can't we give you, Bombay, the same face-lift that was given to Singapore? I don't know the answer. Imposing a Rs 500 fine on those who throw litter on the streets is not going to work — you know it as well as I do. But I do feel that you deserve a much better deal from your inhabitants than what they have given you in recent years.

I think the main trouble lies in the number of those inhabitants. The realistic slogan for you should be 'Leaner Bombay'. Human beings are told that there is an optimum weight beyond which it is wise not to grow. Even stars explode if they are too massive. Shouldn't those who run cities realise that there are limits beyond which cities should not grow? Howsoever one may stretch that limit in your case, I am afraid, dear Bombay, that you have long ago overshot it. What you need is severe dieting to reduce your population by at least fifty per cent.

As a city you have so much to offer in the fields of literature, drama, and films, in the arts and architecture, in science and technology you can boast of the best. But all of it lies buried under your vast size and the problems that come with it. All one is conscious of is people, people and more people, the vast majority of which lives, commutes and works in substandard conditions. Come to think of it, your condition twenty years ago (which I had found so depressing then) was much better than it is today.

I was amused when I read that an important newspaper organised a seminar to discuss your future in the next century-and-a-half. What future does a middle-aged man have who is double the optimum weight, who has diabetes and cardiac trouble but who insists on overeating, smoking and drinking? The solution to your problems lies, therefore, in reducing the number of your inhabitants. This is even more difficult than keeping your population constant which itself calls for strong political will. To this unenviable but necessary task I make my own modest contribution. I am leaving you on June 1, 1989.

Bye-bye, Bombay and good luck to you!